

CHAPTER 6

Lucy Steele

Mrs Jennings' other daughter, Charlotte Palmer, was now visiting Barton Park with her husband. Sir John invited the Dashwoods for dinner. Like her mother, Charlotte had a happy manner and always had a lot to say. Elinor discovered that the Palmers lived in Somerset. They were only a few miles from Willoughby's estate in Combe Magna.

'Do you know Mr Willoughby well?' she asked.

'Oh yes,' Charlotte answered. 'He is not at Combe very much, but I see him in London.' She moved closer to Elinor and said quietly, 'I know why you ask. Your sister and he will get married.'

Elinor did not answer. 'Do people in Somerset have a good opinion of Mr Willoughby?' she asked.

'Oh yes, nobody is liked more. Your sister is very lucky. He is lucky, too, of course,' Charlotte continued, quickly. 'Marianne is very handsome.'

Charlotte's information about Willoughby was not very useful. But at least it was not bad.

As soon as the Palmers went back to Somerset, two new guests arrived. They were sisters, and cousins of Mrs Jennings. Their names were Anne and Lucy Steele. Sir John invited Elinor and Marianne to Barton Park to meet them. Marianne was not pleased.

'Must we go to dinner every time Sir John has visitors?' she complained.

They found Anne boring. Lucy – the younger sister – was prettier and cleverer, but thought only of herself. It seemed the sisters knew everything about Elinor and Marianne already.

'I hear your sister has met a fine young man,' Anne said to Elinor. 'They will be married, I understand. I hope *you* will have luck soon. Perhaps you have met someone already?'

'Now the conversation will turn to Edward,' Elinor thought. She did not welcome this. The letter 'F' was now a popular joke at Barton Park. She was sure the Steeles knew all about it.

'His name is Ferrars,' Sir John said.

'Ferrars!' cried Anne. 'Oh, but we know him well.'

'Anne!' Lucy cried. 'How can you say that? We have seen him at our uncle's, that is all.'

Elinor was surprised. Who was this uncle? How did Edward know the Steeles? Elinor was too polite to ask more. And for once, Mrs Jennings did not ask her usual questions. But Elinor soon found out everything.

Lucy offered to walk to Barton Cottage with Elinor. 'I know you will think this a strange question,' Lucy said as soon as they were alone. 'But do you know Mrs Ferrars?'

'No. Why do you ask?'

A strange smile crossed Lucy's face. 'I have not known you long, Miss Dashwood, but I need a friend. I have not met Mrs Ferrars, but I will soon know her very well. You see, I am very close to one of her sons' She stopped and looked down.

'Really?' said Elinor. 'Do you mean you are engaged to Mr Robert Ferrars?'

'No,' said Lucy, looking up quickly. 'Not to Robert, but to his older brother, Edward.'

'Edward?' thought Elinor. 'How is this possible?' At first, the information did not worry her. She could not believe it. Edward could not possibly be in love with a woman like Lucy.