



A Hopeless Business

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Category: Historical

Description: It is time you take a husband. You have had more opportunities than any four women together can boast—proposals from two men of fortunes or income and whom you should not refuse, but have.

ELIZABETH BENNET HAS RECEIVED more offers of marriage than any lady in Meryton, which makes her increasingly unpopular both in town and at Longbourn. Her refusal of an eligible suitor—coming hard on the heels of an incident that found her trapped with Mr William Collins and Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy—frustrates her mother and father, and makes her sisters anxious for their own futures. At last Mr Bennet has no choice but to give Elizabeth an ultimatum. She will be forced to marry the next man who asks for her hand.

WHILE MERYTON AND GRACECHURCH STREET harbour the recollection of unpleasant marital prospects, in Kent Elizabeth feels certain she will be safe from the advances of unwanted suitors. Alas, when Mr Darcy and his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam arrive, gentlemanly honour and Lady Catherine de Bourgh get in the way of everyone's happiness.

A Hopeless Business is a novel length variation of Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice.

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CHAPTER ONE

The second time Elizabeth Bennet refused Mr Collins's offer of marriage was more exasperating than the morning's previous attempt. Somehow, in mere hours, he had become persuaded that if he could not win her affections through unctuous charm, shaming her into an attachment would compel them.

"No," she said, more emphatically than she had ever voiced the word to anyone save her youngest sisters. But this was not merely the unwelcome borrowing of a bonnet or the pilfering of the last slice of cake. Those were an annoyance; this was persecution. It was bad enough that a man could refuse to take no for an answer the first time, but to be pursued a second time—hunted and hounded while on a walk? The only thing that could have worsened an already miserable situation was if anyone outside of Longbourn witnessed it.

And that, of course, was when Mr Darcy came upon them.

Mr Collins was in the middle of explaining his importance in the world and the benefits she could accrue as the wife of Longbourn's heir when Mr Darcy's deep voice broke through the cacophony.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth, Mr Collins. Am I interrupting anything?"

Caught between relief at the interruption and mortification at the man providing it, Elizabeth pulled her glare from one man to the other. Mr Darcy stood a few feet away, tall and grave in his fine boots and coat, his proud brow furrowed in amusement at the tableau before him. There was Mr Collins, his own gravity having

given way to the urgency of his pleadings to her—and as for herself, she was certain she looked quite wild, in expression if not muddied boots and lopsided bonnet.

“I am escorting Miss Elizabeth on a walk, sir. She is advising me on Longbourn’s lands, for as the future squire of this glorious estate, I wish to have a full understanding of its foliage.”

A prevaricating vicar! Was it not enough he was overly verbose and falsely pious?

Mr Darcy looked at her intently as if he required her confirmation. Wishing only to thwart his scorn for behaviour he already thought inelegant, she nodded. He stepped closer—too close, she thought—and lifted a hand towards her bonnet.

“May I?”

A moment later, before she could step away or demand he do so, Mr Darcy displayed to her a reddish oval leaf. “I believe this is from a Wych elm, Mr Collins, as you note its pointed tip, sharp edges, and furred sides. I am certain Miss Elizabeth has given you all the particulars on the tree. Perhaps you could show me the location of this tree stand?”

Elizabeth’s astonishment was nothing to that of Mr Collins, who stood wide-eyed, clearly grasping for a response to a question he never expected. Suddenly she felt Mr Darcy’s warm breath near her ear, quietly asking, “Is all well here?”

He took a step back. She turned and met his gaze—there was neither amusement nor curiosity in it, only what appeared to be concern. She again nodded, but whether it was the pause she took or the expression she wore, his next words showed Mr Darcy understood her discomfort in Mr Collins’s company.

“Mr Collins, perhaps another day for that tour of the oaks? I believe a storm is due

our way, and Miss Elizabeth should return to Longbourn.” Without waiting for any reply, he offered his arm to her. “May I escort you?”

Clearly there was no escape from either man, nor any possibility of continuing the solitary ramble she had begun shortly after noon. Elizabeth straightened her shoulders, adjusted her bonnet, and put her hand on the arm of the man who thought her intolerable, impertinent, and ill-mannered. It was infuriating, that he, of all people in Hertfordshire, was to be the rescuer she did not want but perhaps needed, for not only was he here, but he was the man most able to frighten off Mr Collins, in name, character, and she could easily admit, appearance. She had walked arm-in-arm with her father and uncle and with neighbours on the assembly floor, but none had offered her such a firm arm in so fine a coat—or had required her arm to lift as much as Mr Darcy’s. The man was certainly tall, which she had felt the evening before when they danced.

“I was not certain of your comfort with Mr Collins, and whether you felt yourself in some danger from him,” he said quietly.

“Danger?” She wished she could laugh but the threat of her cousin’s misguided yet insistent affections remained. “My heart is fully safe from him, but I fear he and my mother cannot understand that neither my affections nor my hand can ever be his. Until he accepts my refusal, I am not safe in his company.”

“Was he forcing his affections on you?”

“No, he wished to force mine, with his ridiculous paeans to his glorious self and all that he offers as heir to Longbourn and vicar to your aunt, Lady Catherine.”

“A heady offering indeed,” he said drily before a chuckle slipped out. “Forgive my amusement, but I can well imagine what you would have said to that.”

“You seem unsurprised by my refusal. Some would have considered it my duty,” Elizabeth replied with some amazement.

“I admire your understanding and your courage,” Mr Darcy said. “Familial duty is important but there are other considerations, including a duty to oneself.”

Keeping her eyes on the path, she said quietly, “You may leave me just ahead, near that small rise, past that stand of trees. From there, I can outpace Mr Collins and return to Longbourn.”

“Outpace? Do you mean you would run?”

His mocking tone confirmed Elizabeth’s suspicions that Mr Darcy had seen her previously on her daily excursions. She glared at him. “You have met my cousin, sir. A brisk walking pace will suffice. Besides, there are paths he does not know.”

“It is no trouble to return you to your home. Truly, I fear a storm is imminent and?—”

“Cousin Elizabeth! Wait for me! I insist we finish our conversation!”

“Walk faster,” she urged Mr Darcy when the sound of rapid, heavy steps reached their ears. He steered her to the left of the path, closer to the stream, and behind a dense copse. They were just in time, as Mr Collins appeared, spinning around as he ran. “Cousin Elizabeth, I command you— oomph!”

A loud thump was followed by the unmistakable sound of a large body falling to the ground, and, if she was not mistaken, tumbling down the embankment.

Mr Darcy peered out onto the path. “Devil take it.” He turned quickly to her, looking more vexed than chagrined. “Pardon me.”

Alarmed, Elizabeth stepped out from behind him. A few feet below, Mr Collins lay sprawled on his back, covered in muddy leaves, and moaning. She and Mr Darcy made their way down to him and knelt, searching for any injury. His forehead bore a red mark, but there was no sign of blood.

“Mr Collins, are you badly hurt?”

He whimpered more loudly. “My head. A large rock fell upon it.”

“A tree branch, more likely,” said Mr Darcy. He held up a limb of around three feet in length and gestured at a wizened oak. “It is dead, and dropped a limb. Your cousin has quite a hard head, I must say. ”

“It is fortunate, I suppose, that it was so yielding. He is not bleeding.”

“Come, Collins. We must get you on your feet.” Mr Darcy leant over and extended a hand to him.

Mr Collins quickly protested of dizziness; the confused look he shot at Elizabeth proved he was unhappy. “I could not find you.”

Any remorse she felt for having run off and caused his injury fled when he reached towards her face. “You must not play coy with me.”

She stood quickly and moved away from the odious man just as a cool wind swept through, stirring the dry leaves around them. Elizabeth felt a raindrop hit her cheek a moment before a crack of thunder ripped the air.

“Of course,” muttered Mr Darcy. “Come, now. Before we all are caught in the rain.” He bent down behind the cleric, awkwardly lifting him to his feet. Mr Collins swayed; his gaze was as unfocused as his feet were unsteady. “Now, we must walk.”

Mr Collins cried out, “My leg! I cannot walk! I have hurt my knee!”

Elizabeth groaned and looked at Mr Darcy; as he struggled to keep Mr Collins upright, his expression grew more troubled.

“He cannot support any weight on his leg, and he is too heavy for me to carry any great distance.”

“I will run to Longbourn for assistance. I am quite quick.”

If Mr Darcy took note of her impertinent tone, he made no sign of it. “I am certain you are, but even you cannot outrun this storm and return help to us.”

His comments were punctuated by another rumble from above. Elizabeth joined him in glancing up through the trees to the darkening sky. Much as she disliked agreeing with him, he was correct.

“We must be more than half a mile from Longbourn and twice that from Netherfield,” he said. “If we cannot get to either, we must shelter someplace. What is nearest? A cottage? A folly?”

She was too stricken to admit Longbourn lacked a folly nearby and that Netherfield’s closest one was at least a mile east, and across the stream. The stream! Of course!

“There is a boat-house just down the way,” Elizabeth cried, pointing in its general direction. “We must follow the stream.”

Unlike the grand edifice at Haye-Park, Longbourn’s boat-house was little more than its name. The small stone structure had been built decades ago, when her grandfather had been a young man. It had never held more than one rowboat, large enough for two men—or for Mr Bennet and two of his young daughters—to traverse the wide

stream that ran through Meryton, and formed Longbourn's boundaries with Netherfield, Lucas Lodge, and the Oldham farm.

She could recall little else beyond it having a stone floor and smelling of fish. But it was sturdily built and the thatched roof had been maintained, at least while she and her sisters had used it as a hiding place.

Mr Darcy nodded and began moving forward, struggling to pull Mr Collins with him. Recognising the futility of his efforts, Elizabeth positioned herself on the other side of her cousin and took his arm in hers. They began an uneven but steady pace towards the stream's edge. Within a few minutes she could see the boat-house and they made a slow descent to the embankment. The rain that had been spitting only moments ago was coming in a steady downpour by the time she pushed in the wooden door. Leaves blew past her as she stepped inside, abandoning Mr Darcy to manoeuvre her cousin over the threshold as she held open the door. The light inside was dim and the leaves underfoot crunched under her boots. Elizabeth kicked at them—following their father's advice, she and her sisters had been vigilant about rats—and led the men inside.

On one side of the interior the rowboat floated in its small quay. The other half of the building consisted of a narrow floor, much of it taken up by a long bench; a pair of oars hung above it, a pail, a broom, and an old pair of boots sat underneath. Uncertain whether Mr Collins could support himself on the bench, or they could get past him to seat themselves, Mr Darcy gently rolled the man into the boat. It dipped dangerously for a moment, and then Mr Collins gave a great sigh, curled up and laid his head back against the wooden planks; the moans that had accompanied them on every step of their journey promptly ceased as the gentle rocking of the boat apparently lulled him promptly into the arms of Morpheus.

"I failed to ask whether it was sea-worthy, but it appears able to hold him if he remains still," Mr Darcy said. He crouched awkwardly, ensuring the boat was firmly

tied up before looking about the confines and, she thought, likely regretting walking out and getting caught up in this situation. A man of his station, trapped in a ramshackle boat-house with a woman he scarcely found passable and her obsequious cousin and newly rejected suitor. It was as unpleasant a prospect for him as it was for her.

“I do not think Mr Collins has much familiarity with the water,” he said, “but the boat does allow him more comfort than the hard ground.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy. She could scarcely not glance at him, cramped as they were. The boat-house was small and serviceable—not a place meant for company and conviviality. She took a seat close to the door, away from the open end of the boat-house, where the rain made a steady patter on the stream. Mr Darcy’s hat had fallen off when they entered, and he was brushing it off and staring out at the water.

“This place does not allow for the propriety of hats, sir. You, I fear, are blessed with the kind of height that requires you to stoop, even without the accessory.”

“Indeed.” He turned to her, seeming to remember her presence, before shrugging off his greatcoat and offering it to her with a simple, “Please, you are shivering.” Elizabeth paused only a moment, struck by the gentleman’s behaviour, so entirely different from the haughty manners he had displayed the prior evening.

“Thank you.” She settled the heavy coat around herself, feeling instantly warmer, and repeated her thanks.

Mr Darcy sat down a few feet from her and lay his hat between them on the bench, almost as if to denote a line of propriety between them. “I have never regretted my height and shall not do so now. No matter its limitations, this building is fortuitously placed as a haven for?—”

Whatever he planned to say next was swallowed by a flash of bright lightning in the sky outside and the roar of thunder that followed. And then the rain truly began.

CHAPTER TWO

Darcy crumpled up the half-written—badly written—letter on the desk and tossed it towards the fire. His mind was too full, his body too exhausted to write out the questions he needed answered.

Bingley is an idiot.

How many times had Darcy told him to take care around young ladies and card players, and how many times had Bingley assured him he would, and then forgot or drank too much to keep his guard?

Now he was close to falling in love, again, although at least this time it was with a mild-mannered lady—of neither connexions nor fortune, it was true, but Miss Jane Bennet appeared, at the very least, to be of gentle birth and have a good heart. Worse than any romantic entanglements, Bingley had talked too much while playing cards with new acquaintances in town, and managed to sink far too much money into a dubious investment scheme. He had confessed it to Darcy only hours before Netherfield filled with revellers for the ball he had foolishly promised to the youngest Bennet girls, and then—his worries off his chest—had proceeded to dance and laugh and make merry with his guests.

If Darcy had felt it unjust that his friend could enjoy himself after settling his concerns onto the one man who could likely address them, it hardly mattered—his spirits were already uneasy. He had dreaded the evening that lay ahead with a houseful of country folk nattering about his income, his height, his need for a wife. It was bad enough in town, but this visit to the country had been planned as a respite

from social obligation and the grasping mothers and inquisitive neighbours that always accompanied his appearance. Was it not enough he had to withstand Miss Bingley's daily onslaught of flattery and sharp-witted asides? Numerous as her complaints were about the ball, she would have much more to say in coming days about her guests' deportment, fashions, manners, and dancing skills—none of it complimentary, he was certain, as she despised everyone in the neighbourhood. He was in near agreement, having been in Hertfordshire for more than six weeks and finding its walking paths and variety of fish and birds more impressive than its inhabitants.

Except for one. Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

She was singular in company, a lady with whom he argued and flirted, who drew his attention in any room or conversation she entered. With whom he had danced last night, after spending much of the evening trying to focus his thoughts on Bingley's bungling of his fortune and the desperate entreaties from Lady Catherine demanding he come and address some difficulties at Rosings. Problem solving had been a lost pursuit, for when Miss Elizabeth walked through Netherfield's doors wearing a demure ivory gown, green and blue ribbons woven into her dark hair, he lost all rational thought. Darcy had known she was pretty, in an uncommon, natural way that would not appeal to him if not set off by luminous eyes and a smile that held more delight and secret amusement than any he had ever seen. But last evening, her effect on him was unsettling and her display of vibrant wit and beauty had shaken him to the core. God only knew how he had managed to get through a set with her, oddly combative as she was in probing his character. He was overset by her touch, her light perfume, her sparkling eyes—narrowed when teasing, widened when laughing, but always attentive. Although, when he thought of it, she had seemed somewhat distracted, as if she sensed his own distraction. Could it be?—

Why am I staring at the wall, thinking of Elizabeth Bennet?

Truly, he needed to get away from her. From here.

He stood up and strode across his sitting room. The tea had gone tepid, but he swallowed the last of it regardless before stepping to the window and staring out at the morning sky. I could leave today. I should leave today.

Rather than add at least two more letters to the pile he must write, enquiring of his friends as to Bingley's questionable investment and enlisting his solicitor to investigate, he would pursue his answers in town before departing for Kent. It would be far quicker.

Besides, it was not only Elizabeth Bennet he wished to escape; a reprieve from Netherfield's close company would be welcome. Who holds a ball at a country estate and invites no one from town? Miss Bingley, of course— a lady too ashamed of her rustic neighbours and too angry at her brother's enthusiasm for them, leaving herself only more room for future complaints about the behaviours and social boorishness she had anticipated in her leased ballroom.

She had pulled him aside after the last of the ball-goers—the Bennets, of course—had straggled home, and urged him to take Bingley to town when he left for Rosings. Darcy was not having it. Bingley had yet to establish himself, and expected to soon welcome Hurst's sister and cousins to Netherfield. A gentleman, or one aspiring to such status, would never abandon a leasehold so abruptly and abandon those he had invited to it. But he had no such obligations. Bingley would understand his exit, and moreover, beg his pardon for adding his own woes to Darcy's always overfull business responsibilities.

His aunt showed no such humility in demanding his assistance, or likely, in pretending her ailments. He doubted she was on her death bed; death beds were often occupied by the two ladies de Bourgh, yet always they proved themselves resilient enough when he or his uncle went to visit. He would go to Kent and discuss whatever

business his aunt required—gaining himself a reprieve from this company only to suffer in the feeble society at Rosings—and if Bingley remained here, he would return. Perhaps.

A fortnight away might be all I require to shake off this fascination with Elizabeth Bennet.

Now determined of his goal, Darcy went downstairs and dined gratefully alone in the breakfast room with yesterday's newspaper. Three-quarters of an hour and two cups of coffee later, he was still feeling the effects of too little sleep. A walk, perhaps towards Longbourn on that path along the stream, would do him well before he rode to town this afternoon. And if he happened onto a young lady eager to walk off the drowsiness of a late night—which was certainly not what he wished for, of course—then he could try to hold a conversation with her that might end more pleasantly than the one they both had bungled the night before.

If Bingley was a fool, Collins was the greatest nincompoop on all of Earth. How did the man think he could convince Elizabeth Bennet to be his wife?

He glanced at her, swaddled within his greatcoat, a smear of mud on her cheek. Even in the gloom of this neglected boat-house, he could see her brow wrinkled, perhaps as deep in contemplation of their situation as he. Twenty minutes earlier, he had been winding his way down the path closest to Longbourn, heading towards the small footbridge where he and Bingley had twice encountered Miss Elizabeth with one or two of her sisters. As he neared it, a cold breeze blew. Steadying his hat, Darcy felt a familiar ache in his arm. A glance skywards told him he should begin turning around and return to Netherfield. Rain is approaching. If Elizabeth is out walking, I should caution her of the weather. Thus decided, he crossed the bridge and walked up the embankment where the view was more expansive. And then he heard voices. Her voice. And that of a man. He hastened towards them, slowing only when he could hear the ridiculous words being spoken.

“—and every window presents a view such as you have never seen, and will only see when you are mistress of Hunsford Parsonage?—”

Dear lord, not that dunderhead.

“Sir, whatever glorious windows and chimneys you might offer, I shall meet your fervent entreaties with violent refusals. Please, leave me be!”

Alarmed, Darcy pushed through the shrubbery.

“Good morning, Miss Elizabeth, Mr Collins. Am I interrupting anything?”

The surprise in their expressions was matched equally by the relief in hers, and frustration in the vicar’s. Darcy did not believe a word the man issued about the reasons for such a spirited conversation, nay soliloquy, before noon on the morning after a ball. No one was yet awake at Netherfield, and he would wager Elizabeth was the only female Bennet who had stirred at Longbourn. Yet here was Mr Collins, a man eager to speak and eat and impose himself, claiming a tour of his future estate, on the arm of his clearly reluctant cousin? No. He was not having it.

Within moments Darcy was steering the lady away from her cousin, and hardly had they gone fifteen yards before she was asking to be released and make her own way home. To run, if necessary! And then, they were hiding together in a manner he had not done since playing Sardines at his very first house party and being caught behind the heavy drapery with the very much engaged yet daringly forward Miss Letitia Stuart. He, unlike, Bingley, had learnt his lessons and remembered them. And in spite of that one regrettable encounter, he was a gentleman.

There was something so daring in Elizabeth’s manner, but she was an innocent—one determined to keep her innocence from Collins, at any rate. He did as she requested, darting to hide in the shrubbery, and would have ensured her safe return to

Longbourn but for the tree branch that brained the clumsy cleric.

Now they sat, damp and muddied, trying to converse mere feet away from the only mildly sentient cause of their situation.

“I am certain rescuing fallen vicars from the mud is not the way you planned to spend the day after attending a ball,” she said.

“No, such altruism is reserved for only the second Tuesday of the month.”

He heard her laugh. “Oh, now I am all anticipation for whatever is planned for next week.”

He would not be here next week. Would her cousin still be at Longbourn?

Collins is a fool.

“Yes, he is.”

Darcy turned to her, suddenly aware he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

Quietly, she said, “My cousin would have you think his sharing every thought and unlearned opinion to be a display of intelligence, but I am impatient for there to be an actual point to every thought and opinion.”

“I can claim to be an impatient sort as well, but my particular insult is in reference to his determination that you be his bride.”

Even in the dim light afforded them, Darcy could see her astonishment. “You are surprised he, or any man, would propose to me?”

“No,” he whispered loudly, hoping the sounds of the storm would deafen Collins’s hearing. “Rather, I am surprised by his surety that you understand him as a prize and would wish to marry him.”

“I blame my mother.” She sighed. “You are seeing all of my faults, sir. I am impatient, freely shower others with incivility, accuse my mother of poor faith, and refuse foolish gentlemen who mistake my disgust for charm.”

“These are grave faults indeed.”

CHAPTER THREE

Elizabeth had been staring mindlessly for some five minutes before the sound of Mr Collins' snoring cut through the numbing sound of steady rain. Had her family noticed she and Mr Collins were both absent from Longbourn? Certainly Mrs Hill would know. If her father was alerted to the situation, he might be tempted to ride out and lead the search, or at least send Silas or Jimmy to find her.

No, Papa is not reckless, and he knows how well I know the paths. And Mama would happily protest that I was safe with Mr Collins.

"Miss Elizabeth, I cannot go for help and leave you here, with him. When the rain relents a bit, I shall escort you to Longbourn. I promise, here and always, that you are safe from both of us."

Elizabeth turned to find Mr Darcy looking at her intently. "Thank you." She could have added more—that she knew already she was safe from his overtures and admiration—but refrained. He once again filled the awkward silence.

"Meryton has been dry these past weeks. The farms will welcome the rain."

"Yes, it is much-needed."

"But not too much. The ground is dry and hardened, and cannot absorb it all; in a short time there will be danger of flood."

She nodded. He was correct, of course, but did they not have enough to worry about,

sheltering in a cramped boat-house with a lamed imbecile?

“Perhaps we should join Mr Collins in the boat, and await the flood that is certain to follow?”

Even in the dim light of their confines, she could see Mr Darcy’s lips twitch. She felt a small sliver of victory for having nearly made the man laugh. Not since she had complimented Miss Bingley on the fine quality of Netherfield’s book bindings had she seen him repress a smile.

“Indeed, we are fortunate to have an ark. Perhaps even more so that it appears suitable for only two people.” He frowned, and in a quieter voice, leant his head towards hers. “I am sorry for not asking before—you are well? Unhurt?”

“Only my pride is damaged. I regret you were witness to my vexation, but I must thank you for your fortuitous appearance. Of course,” she glanced at his mud-splattered boots, “your valet may hold a different view.”

Mr Darcy shrugged. “He is unhappily inured to the dust and mud I encounter while riding. Is your maid equally accustomed to the aftermath of your walks?”

“Accustomed to my skirts being six inches deep in mud?” She smirked. “Of course, as well as leaves in my bonnet, biscuit crumbs in my pockets, and pebbles in my boots.”

She thought she saw his lips twitch again but rather than parry her humour, his response was grave. “In a storm such as this, your absence will worry your family.”

Not my mother, Elizabeth thought. She likely drew a map of Longbourn’s paths and sent Mr Collins after me.

“Was no one else walking with you and your cousin?”

“If your point is that he is a poor chaperon—and an undesirable one—I must agree. I had wished to do as I often do—walk alone, thinking my thoughts—and then he appeared, plaguing me yet again...”

“Again? This is not the first time your cousin has importuned you?”

Stupid girl, now you have given him more reason to be appalled by you.

“In spite of my efforts to present myself as an uninterested and, frankly, disgusted object of desire, my cousin finds me more than tolerable.” She glanced at Mr Darcy, anticipating he would blanch at the reminder of his insult to her. Instead he looked bemused.

“Such efforts would be wasted on many men. Few would not claim you as tolerable.”

“You did.”

His expression turned to shock. “Pardon? I would not?—”

“Tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.”

His face drained of colour, but even in the dim light, she could see his cheeks flush.

“I said that, aloud? About you?”

Seeing his mortification, Elizabeth regretted her impertinence in mentioning what now seemed to be a careless comment rather than an intentional insult. I wound him as thanks for his chivalry? “I do not know whether your thoughts went further, but you did say it rather clearly after a brief glance in my direction.”

“I apologise. It was an appalling outburst of a man unhappy to be at a public gathering and made unhappier still by the importuning of my friends to smile at, or dance with, or mock the locals.”

“Mr Bingley could be blamed for the smiling and dancing, but I shall only guess at the ‘friend’ who urged you to mock your neighbours.”

He smiled faintly, shaking his head slowly. “You are one of the cleverest people of my acquaintance, so I do not doubt the accuracy of your guess.” He looked away and began tugging at the thumb of his left glove. “My insult was wholly inaccurate. I regret the expression of such an untruth and that you overheard it.”

His obvious remorse, combined with the debt she owed him for his impromptu rescue, prompted her smiling reply. “In light of your heroic arrival on the scene and your rescue of Mr Collins, I shall forgive your prevarication. I trust it shall be the only one you utter.”

Mr Darcy ceased tormenting his glove and returned her grin. “An easy promise, indeed.”

“Your spirits seemed little better at last evening’s ball. Are you truly so displeased by dancing or is it the society you find here?”

He looked surprised by her shift from teasing to such a direct question. “Any society will have those with whom I am displeased. Unlike Bingley, I do not like everyone .”

“I have noticed.” She almost laughed; the imperious Mr Darcy sounded like a stubborn little boy with such a declaration.

“I danced with you, as you are agreeable company, as are others I have met in Meryton. The bookseller—Mr Pruitt, is it? Your father and eldest sister, Sir William

Lucas, Mr Goulding, Robert Heston...”

Elizabeth sped past her thoughts on the specifics of those he could like and thought only of the name so obviously omitted. “You do not like Mr Wickham, with whom you have a long acquaintance.”

There was a long pause before he spoke with more urgency than she had ever heard from him. “No, I do not, nor would I trust him in my home, near my wallet, or in proximity to any innocent woman. I know you are his defender, but I beg you question how openly he speaks of private affairs and disparagingly of others to those of new acquaintance. I would wish that the time you have spent in company with myself and Bingley would allow you a more detailed sketch of our characters than you have had time to do with Mr Wickham.”

Never had Elizabeth heard such a speech from anyone, but to hear so many words from Mr Darcy—particularly when in such close company—was shocking. She tried to form a reply, to defend herself and Mr Wickham, but found it difficult.

“Till I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose him.”

Mr Wickham had spoken freely of grievances while avowing he could never abuse any Darcy, yet in impugning the younger man, he did just that. No matter what his history with the Darcy family, he could not be trusted with her confidence. Taken in by a handsome face and charming conversation . Poorly done, Elizabeth!

She nodded. “I understand. I beg you not to think me as foolish as my cousin.”

“That is hardly possible?—”

“Lord, what pain... What has happened?”

Mr Collins's keening moans startled them both. Elizabeth groaned quietly, having hoped her cousin would remain asleep and subdued for however long they were trapped here. Her conversation with Mr Darcy had grown quite intriguing.

"Mr Collins, are you well? We were caught in the rain, and you were felled by an angry oak."

"Miss Elizabeth! Where have you taken me? It is quite damp—" He sat up quickly, too quickly, rocking the boat. "Dear heavens, is this a boat? Are we in a boat?"

"We are in Longbourn's boat-house, sheltering from the rain. It came upon us suddenly, and this was the nearest shelter."

"Ah yes, I recall now, leading you here through the rain, in spite of some injury to myself. As was my duty to you."

She had nearly felt sorry for his panic over the boat but this? The man's conceit was insupportable. "I believe it was you who were led, sir. Due to your injury. How is your leg?"

He moaned softly. "It is sore, and I feel a painful lump on my head."

Elizabeth coughed rather than laugh at his dramatics. "You are not bleeding. Your leg will be tended to when we return to Longbourn."

"You are most attentive, Cousin Elizabeth. What an affectionate and amusing first chapter in the story of our courtship."

"Our what?"

"Well, you led me here. We are alone together."

“You and Miss Elizabeth are not alone, Mr Collins.”

“Mr Darcy! You are here as well?” The shock in the vicar’s voice was matched by the relief felt by Elizabeth. Mr Darcy’s silence had been curious, but the sudden deep tones of his voice had effectively sobered Mr Collins.

“Mr Darcy, sir,” he said, breathing heavily, “I trust you are uninjured and have not allowed my cousin to impose on you in any manner.”

“She has not, nor should you speak of her in such a way. It is Miss Elizabeth who has been imposed upon, and has ensured our safety within this boat-house, which was as unknown to me as it was to you.”

“As I had accompanied the lady on her walk, I am certain I ensured her safety. Miss Elizabeth, you understand, is under my care as?—”

“Mr Collins,” cried Elizabeth, “I am responsible for leading you here, but it is Mr Darcy you must thank for carrying you to safety.”

“Oh, sir! A most honourable deed! I must thank you for your kindness as it exemplifies all that your aunt, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, has said of you and the estimable legacy of the Darcy name.” Mr Collins shifted as if to stand and teetered precariously as the boat shifted wildly underneath him.

Mr Darcy spoke sharply. “Mind yourself and sit down, Collins! You are in a boat. There is little room within this shelter and the boat provides the only place for you to lie down. You must stay seated, else you are in danger of falling into the water.”

The vicar lowered himself carefully. “I have never been in a boat. Must it move as it does?”

“If you remain still and quiet, the water will calm.”

Mr Darcy’s gentle admonition made Elizabeth laugh. “Oh, be wary of calm waters,” she said quietly so only he could hear, “for they are more dangerous than turbulent ones, oft full of unforeseen surprises suddenly altering the course of life.”

“Do not tell him that,” he whispered in return.

“It is so gloomy in here,” Mr Collins said. “I do not like it.” The darkness and the sounds of the wild storm outside had no success in silencing him, and his wheedling continued. “Miss Elizabeth and I had been in conversation about our betrothal when you came upon us.”

“Mr Collins! That is not what occurred.” Elizabeth turned to Mr Darcy and shook her head.

Mr Collins was not to be silenced. “As you see, Mr Darcy, there is an agreeable connexion between us. Your aunt will be pleased?—”

“Quite the opposite,” said Mr Darcy. “Lady Catherine would be displeased by the lack of formality and propriety in what you see as a betrothal. No, Mr Collins, my aunt believes in courtships and decries compromise and cunning.” His voice deepened. “No gentleman could claim an attachment to a lady without her expressly stated wish for the same. I do not believe Miss Elizabeth shares your wish.”

“No, I do not.”

“But— ”

“As you have been told, sir, you were struck in the head by a branch. Your memory is fogged. You are distressing the lady with your conjectures, and must stop. Miss

Elizabeth already suffers from the worry she knows is felt at Longbourn.”

Mr Collins gasped. “Oh, we must send word. I would, of course, volunteer to go but for my injuries.”

“You are unable to walk and I am unable to trust Miss Elizabeth’s reputation alone in your company. When the storm subsides, the capable Miss Elizabeth and I shall walk to Longbourn and return with men to assist your safe return as well.” Mr Darcy gave her an almost reassuring look. “If that would be agreeable to you, of course?”

Before she could answer or Mr Collins could begin his protest, the boat-house door burst open.

“Begone, witch! It is I!”

CHAPTER FOUR

The alarm such a proclamation had on the two men in her company could not have been more different. Mr Collins shrieked and scrabbled about as if to hide himself within the rowboat. Mr Darcy, however, stood and moved swiftly between her and the intruder.

“No witches lurk here, only crows and dragons, Mr Goulding,” Elizabeth called out to the tall dripping figure. “But do shut the door before a bedraggled enchantress can slip in.”

“Lizzy Bennet?”

Mr Henry Goulding followed her instructions, closing the door firmly behind him, shaking the rain off of his hat, and joining her and Mr Darcy on the bench. She was pleased to see him, as he was among the friendliest of her neighbours. She introduced him as best she could to Mr Darcy and Mr Collins, and explained the secret childhood greeting they had shared with his brother and the Lucas children when playing in the neighbourhood’s outbuildings. “Our castles and pirate hideaways,” she said, laughing.

Although Mr Collins was appalled at the notion of children speaking of such evils, Mr Darcy approved. “It is the way of children. My cousins and I had similar nonsensical passwords and vows.”

“It is the way of Miss Elizabeth,” said Mr Goulding. “She invented many of our games.”

She felt Mr Darcy's scrutiny, and turned the conversation back to her friend. "How is it you are here, on Longbourn's borders?"

Mr Goulding explained he had been cutting across a field on his way from Haye-Park to visit his betrothed at Purvis Lodge when the rain left him uncertain of his whereabouts. "I thought I was nearer Netherfield and able to duck into one of the follies, but I knew the direction to the boat-house and that your father always left it unlocked."

"That is because the key rests somewhere below us, in the water, where it was dropped by one of my sisters."

"In a fit of pique, as I recall, over another sister losing her favourite bonnet while out in the boat."

"An unchristian act," mumbled Mr Collins.

"What is the distance between Purvis Lodge and Haye-Park?" Mr Darcy enquired.

"Six miles by road, but only four if I take the shortcut."

"Too far when one is in love," said Elizabeth. "Mr Goulding is to marry Miss Welby, the eldest daughter at Purvis Lodge."

Mr Goulding chuckled. "I am pleased she accepted me. Miss Elizabeth turned down my proposal, made some ten or twelve years ago, when we were children. I was certain our shared affinity for skipping stones and catching frogs meant true love."

Elizabeth could feel Mr Darcy inhale sharply but dared not glance to see whether he was amused or offended. Mr Goulding continued elaborating on her youthful follies.

“John Lucas was equally misguided and proposed when she was sixteen and him scarcely three years older,” he said, chuckling. “Mr Bennet said she was too young and Lucas too green and advised him to return to school. He’s got over it, spending his time now in London.”

Mr Darcy looked at her in wonder. “Two proposals?”

“Three,” said Mr Collins. Abhorrence was clear in his voice. “I, too, have offered my hand to Miss Elizabeth Bennet, an offer that now bears further rumination and prayerful reflection as I am shocked to learn of her forward behaviour.”

“Sir, you have twice importuned me, and my answer remains as it was the first time.” Elizabeth made a face at Mr Goulding. “I am certain you wonder at our presence here. Mr Darcy came upon us as I refused my cousin a second time. It began to rain, Mr Collins fell and injured himself, and we sought shelter here.”

Mr Goulding chuckled. “Lizzy Bennet, breaker of hearts and hope. Yet another would-be husband you have not given the answer he seeks.”

“No,” she said, shrugging before glaring towards her cousin, “but he persists.”

“Persistence is the mark of a stoic soul!”

“Or a man who cannot accept that a woman does not wish to be his wife,” said Mr Darcy in a stern voice. “You must stand down.”

“I am sitting, as you said!” Mr Collins made an odd sound. “I feel rather sick.”

“Mr Bennet would have your hide if he knew you behaved ill towards Miss Elizabeth.” Mr Goulding rested his boot on the boat’s edge; the side—was it aft or stern or starboard, Elizabeth could not recall—dipped lower.

“I do not like the boat,” whined Mr Collins.

“Would that his injury had been one that rendered him unconscious,” Mr Darcy muttered. Then, his voice louder, he said, “Mr Collins, you are welcome to join us here on the bench, where there is little room, and unlike the boat, sits on dirt and stone. Thus our company likely includes spiders, worms, termites, and frogs.”

“And rats,” offered Elizabeth.

Mr Goulding’s loud guffaw almost drowned out Mr Collins’ sharp intake of air and his quavering reply. “I shall remain in the boat. I could not allow myself to endanger my cousin or discomfort her by removing to such a crowded area. I thank you for your foresight in ensuring Miss Elizabeth’s safety and comfort there and trust that she remains content and secure from any close proximity to you or Mr Goulding. In the gloom, I find it difficult to discern her figure.”

“You should not be trying to discern her figure , Mr Collins, but I assure you she is well.”

The sternness with which Mr Darcy spoke to her cousin was gratifying; the gravity and force in his voice was more suitable for a battlefield than a boat-house. He was a man accustomed to commanding others; Mr Collins was used to following orders. With Mr Darcy at her side, she need not fear any further distressing words from her cousin.

“I apologise for speaking on your behalf. I hope you are well?”

Mr Darcy’s quietly voiced enquiry startled her from her musings. He had leant close to ask, so discomposing her with the nearness of his mouth to her ear that her assurances were only partly true.

A cold wet wind blew in through the open water, taking attention away from Mr Collins's continued moans and sending a shiver through them all. Mr Darcy reached in the pocket of the greatcoat covering her, pulled out a small flask, and offered it to her.

"Brandy."

She took a small sip and felt its warmth flood through her. "Ah, thank you."

Mr Darcy took the next sip before leaning past her to offer it to Mr Goulding. After offering Elizabeth another sip, which she declined, Mr Darcy took another, then leant forward and thrust the flask at her cousin. "Drink it, man. It will lessen your pain."

"And ours," she whispered, pleased to hear Mr Darcy and Mr Goulding chuckle.

With some assistance from Mr Darcy, Mr Collins drank deeply, coughing and sputtering after he swallowed. Within moments, he was slumped and snoring.

"You, Mr Darcy, are heaven sent."

It was not too much later that the cacophony of rain on the boat-house roof diminished and the sky over the trees brightened. Mr Goulding opened the door and surveyed outside; the soft nicker of his horse greeted him.

"Poor girl, I must get a blanket on you when we reach home. But first," he said, giving Elizabeth a serious look, "can I take you to Longbourn?"

His offer was in no way proper but she understood he wished to show every consideration for her welfare. "I am able to walk, thank you, but Mr Collins cannot. Please, tell my family I am well and ask my father to send Jimmy with the pony cart for my cousin."

Mr Darcy followed Mr Goulding through the door and stood on the entry stone, inspecting the state of the muddy path. Elizabeth leant against the doorjamb, watching one man ride off and the other standing about, likely wishing he too had a horse. She tilted her face towards the sun and breathed in deeply. After so much time sitting in the damp, musty boat-house, the fresh air was sharp and crisp; still, she was glad to remain warm and dry underneath Mr Darcy's heavy coat.

He tapped his foot on the rock, shaking a chunk of mud from his boot, before stepping towards her, indicating his intent to return to the relative warmth of the boat-house. She moved inside, glanced at the sleeping lump that was Mr Collins, and sat down. Rather than follow her, Mr Darcy remained standing by the open door, sunlight flooding in behind him, clearly ensuring some proper distance between them before their rescuers arrived.

Disappointed by his distance—admittedly only a few feet—yet understanding it, she asked him the time.

He pulled out his pocket watch. "It is just past two o'clock."

"I have been gone two hours." Incredible.

"Your family will be much relieved."

"Yes, those that are not displeased by the condition of my skirts and the result of Mr Collins's unwanted proposals." She scolded herself for these revelations. Perhaps she truly was too forward with her thoughts and opinions. Mr Collins lacked sense and intelligence and was entirely unsuitable as a husband for her, but he was her relation and Longbourn's future master. She should not disparage him to others—especially to the nephew of her cousin's patroness. Rather than apologise and bring further attention to her transgression, she opted for a neutral topic: the weather.

“The skies were blue when I first left Longbourn. Not a dark cloud in the sky, nor even the smell of rain. How did you know for certain a storm was approaching?”

Mr Darcy lifted his left arm. “I fell from a tree when I was just turned nine years, and broke the long bone in my arm. I was an active boy and not inclined to hold it as still in its bindings as instructed, but it did heal. Yet ever since, when a storm is near, I feel some ache in it, here.” He lay his right hand just below his left elbow. “It is only a twinge. My grandfather felt similar aches in all his joints, but his were from age rather than injury.”

Elizabeth laughed. “My grandmother as well. It is an ailment my mother will be reluctant to admit to, if it indicates she is growing old.”

He gave her a small, and most becoming, smile. “I have my grandfather’s height but not his temperament so I will perhaps not become a crotchety old man grouching about my aches and pains.”

“Heaven forfend,” she murmured, knowing she should laugh but overly focused on the thought of Mr Darcy decades in the future. His hair may turn white but will his eyes retain their dark depths ?

“Nor will I boast of my triumphs in predicting the weather.”

Elizabeth’s smile faltered. “Knowing a storm was imminent, you wandered off—on foot—onto an estate with which you are not fully familiar. Why would you not choose to stay within the comforts of Netherfield, with a book?”

She knew he would not confess to a means of escaping Miss Bingley’s company but his answer surprised her more.

“I suspected you would walk out, and thought to ensure you did not get caught in the

storm.”

Oh. She had no ready quip or answer to that.

“I should not have admitted my motivations,” he said quickly. “I was to leave today for London—I have business there with my solicitor and... You have enjoyed the company at Netherfield, and perhaps you, more than anyone I know, understand my desire to be out of doors.”

There was no need for brandy when such compliments could warm her. “You did not fear the damage to your fine hat and coat? I have muddied the hem of it quite badly.”

His shrug was all the reminder she needed of his wealth. He would simply purchase a new one. “Now you must visit your tailor as well.”

He shrugged again, and she fell silent, chastened that their interval of friendship would end with their rescue. She drew his coat around her shoulders. It felt far colder now.

CHAPTER FIVE

Darcy put off explaining his damp, bedraggled appearance to Bingley in favour of a warm bath and hot tea. His man, Parsons, though less voluble than Bingley, was predictably chagrined at the state of his clothing—and the lack of it.

“Your great coat, sir, and your hat. The former is missing and the latter is rather unspeakably bent and sodden.”

Ah yes, his coat had been wrapped round Elizabeth when last he saw her climbing into Longbourn’s pony cart. He had refused it, claiming its retrieval as opportunity to visit Longbourn and see to her health and that of Mr Collins the following day.

“But you will walk to Netherfield without it? No.” She had begun shrugging it off her shoulders before climbing into the cart.

“Yes—after the cramped hours in there,” he had said, nodding towards the boat-house, “a brisk walk of a mile or so would do me well.”

Besides, the pony cart had been exactly that—a conveyance meant for children and small animals. Elizabeth was perched, barely, on the seat beside Longbourn’s groom and Mr Collins was sprawled in the wagon, muttering loudly about the indignity of having fallen half in the water as Darcy and Goulding struggled to pull him out of the boat.

He had best forget how much he had wished his coat returned, not for any protection from the cold but for a taste of Elizabeth’s warmth and scent. He shook his head,

hoping to clear it of such foolishness. It had been a strange few hours in a close, damp place and he knew he would be met with frantic questions and raised eyebrows upon his return to Netherfield.

He would give them a curated version of his morning, and say nothing that would impugn Elizabeth. He hoped Collins and Goulding were as circumspect. She had done nothing wrong, had not behaved poorly or taken advantage of his proximity to create expectations. Far from it. In fact, until she had revealed his insult and gained his mortified apology, she seemed irritated by his very presence. As if she did not like me. Understandable, given the insult he had stupidly made the first time they met. He had been completely unaware of it—unaware of her—but he had offended her, and Wickham's spiteful words had poured salt in the wound, made clear by her cool manner when they had danced. Today, it seemed they had cleared the air, and thanks to their shared annoyance of her insipid cousin, they had, if not forged a friendship, at least established a truce.

Truce? Hardly so. Half a dozen times he had fought off the urge to enfold her in his arms and comfort her, warm her, protect her.

In the dreariest, most unpleasant of places, full of mud and spiders, he had wanted to kiss her. A mad gesture, one that laid his character beneath that even of Collins. The poor girl had been assailed by two men—three, even, if one counted Goulding's teasing—and upheld her honour, patience, and humour.

And I wished to trespass on that honour, even after learning of her dislike. I am an ogre.

Yet shortly after earning her esteem, he confessed that he had walked out purposely, thinking he might encounter her. As dangerous as his confession, his impulse to find her had been equally so, and he could only be thankful for doing that rare thing—acting outside his own deeply engrained behaviours to walk into the woods

and come upon the scene he had. Yet I was little better than Mr Collins, stalking her .

His intentions were honourable, at least. He sought only conversation, for where they had left off at the ball had left him unsatisfied. His own thoughts were jumbled. Disgust for Collins, respect for Elizabeth's steadfastness against his pursuit, unease at what would come next for her at Longbourn. She was an enigma in some ways—amiable yet guarded, clever yet vulnerable.

Not vulnerable to me, as I am to her, he thought, realising he was thinking of her by her Christian name alone. Yes, it was best he get himself to London.

Darcy rose from the cooling bath water and slipped into his robe. Parsons remained fretful over the state of his hat but wisely said nothing more of it as he assisted him in dressing. Darcy was too lost in thought to notice. No one in town would be alarmed by a day's delay in his arrival; he was spared from penning any letters announcing it. The worst that could occur would be anyone forming the impression he was too enthralled with Miss Bingley to leave her brother's leased estate.

But certain as he was he must leave—he did have business with his solicitor—he was equally reluctant to go without knowing the resolution of affairs between Mr Collins and Elizabeth. She had refused the man twice. He was repulsive and obsequious, stupid and clumsy—everything opposite to the lady he sought to marry. What made him think he had a right to marry her ?

“Longbourn is entailed,” Bingley reminded him at dinner when Darcy told a much-abbreviated version of his adventure. “My understanding is that Mr Collins is here to visit his future estate and his relations there. It would be ideal for the Bennets to marry one of the daughters to him, but...” He cleared his throat. Unlike his sisters, Bingley was not a man given to insult or scorn, and he was clearly searching for a way to say Collins was too repugnant to consider the eldest Bennet girls as keen prospects.

Miss Bingley did not share his hesitation. “Jane is a sweet girl and deserves far better than life as Mrs Collins, but he would do well with any of the others. Life as a cleric’s wife would restrain Miss Elizabeth’s impertinence and provide her some discipline.”

“You think her undisciplined? A lady who walked three miles to care for her ailing sister, parried her cousin’s insulting proposals politely so as not to damage his opinion of her family, and then brought him to shelter when he was injured? I call that discipline in mind, body, and spirit.” Darcy bit into a piece of cheese to keep himself from continuing his defence.

“Admirable indeed,” agreed Bingley. “She is indefatigable, and would make a worthy soldier had she, of course, the ability to join up and?—”

“Her tongue is undisciplined,” came his sister’s sharp retort. “She is impudence itself. And now, having taken shelter with two, nay three unmarried men? What is that to say of her reputation?”

“It enhances it, Miss Bingley.” Desiring discretion, Darcy nodded at the footman and waited for him to leave. “Had Mr Collins been less persistent and less prone to accidents, there would be no story to tell. But he pursued her, he was knocked down by a passing limb, and we carried him to shelter when the weather took a sudden turn. Never was she alone with him, or any man. Mr Goulding will attest to that.”

“It remains unseemly.”

“Unseemly behaviour for a man of the church,” he countered. Some would say it of my own .

“But the pertinent question before us, and the Bennet family, is whether or not Miss Elizabeth Bennet will now marry Collins. She may have refused him, but circumstance and the needs of her family overcome any preference she may have for

a local farmer or officer.” She looked directly at Darcy.

He frowned; her meaning was clear. “As I said, she and Mr Collins were never alone, and he was unconscious much of the time.”

Immediately, even before Miss Bingley’s indrawn breath, he understood his mistake. If Collins had been insentient, he was all but declaring he and Elizabeth had been unchaperoned in the boat-house. “It is of little consequence. I am to town tomorrow.”

The shrill protests raised by Miss Bingley were nothing to the greeting made to him the following morning at Longbourn. Town had never held such appeal.

CHAPTER SIX

When all had been explained and all parties warm and dry, Elizabeth was sent to her bed. Mr Collins was put in the drawing room; the most comfortable chair and cushion-laden footstool were moved closer to the fire, where he sat nursing the injuries to his body and his pride.

“He looks quite ridiculous, Lizzy,” announced Lydia. “He is wearing Papa’s blue velvet robe and eating his second plate of biscuits and shortcake?—”

“And there are crumbs all over the satin lapels,” cried Kitty. “I dread Papa seeing the state of it.”

“I am pleased Mr Collins’s appetite has survived his collision with a tree limb.” Elizabeth, who had been given soup, bread, and a single cake, gave Jane an amused look. Her elder sister was curled up beside her on the bed, taking refuge with their youngest sisters from Mr Collins’s company. Mary, Mrs Bennet, and Lady Lucas provided him his necessary audience.

“We are happy you survived your encounter with Mr Collins!” Lydia laughed gleefully. “Imagine him as our brother and your husband? Only Mr Darcy might be worse, but he at least is clean and rich and rarely speaks.”

“And he is handsome,” ventured Kitty. Lydia’s astonishment led her to explain. “I saw him smile at Rufus when he was wagging his tail and jumping at Lizzy.”

Elizabeth lay back on the pillows. “I agree with you, Kitty, but do not let Mama hear

you compliment Mr Darcy or any other man, or she will write your wedding banns.”

“Perhaps I should speak more about Mr Wickham and his handsome charm, and she can engineer our nuptials,” said Lydia.

Jane shifted beside her. “You are but fifteen and far too young to consider marriage.”

“But I?—”

“Mr Wickham is likely twice your age, and you do not wish for a life in encampments.”

Lydia’s eyes narrowed at Elizabeth’s admonishment. “You spent time in conversation with Mr Darcy. Did he turn your thoughts against Mr Wickham, whom he has so viciously wronged?”

Elizabeth took a moment to reply. “We did speak of Mr Wickham today. We had exchanged words about him last evening, and I was struck by how one man can disparage another so openly while his target speaks carefully in warning.”

Her younger sisters appeared confused by her words so she began again. “Mr Darcy was kindly and gentlemanlike today, and made every effort to see to my comfort and my protection from Mr Collins. I cannot think ill of him, and can only question why Mr Wickham finds Mr Darcy’s family and his private affairs to be suitable for conversation at a party.”

“Men may gossip as much as women,” Lydia said, shrugging. “It is more entertaining than Fordyce.”

As she and Kitty dissolved in laughter, the door opened and Mary slipped inside, closing the door firmly behind her. She looked round at her sisters expectantly before

asking Elizabeth whether she was well.

Elizabeth raised her hands towards the crowded room. “Yes, in spite of my imprisonment and place of sisterly refuge. Have Mama and Cook’s biscuits mollified Mr Collins?”

Mary nodded solemnly. “He accepted her apologies and agreed that you are ‘a wilful sort of girl’. It was most uncharitable of Mama and Mr Collins,” she said to her amused sisters. “However, it appears Lady Lucas was more helpful in placating Mr Collins. He shall be moving to Lucas Lodge.”

Elizabeth ignored the happy whooping from Lydia and Kitty, straining to hear Jane’s earnest questioning of Mary. “Mr Collins has abandoned us? Why?”

“I believe he feels himself more welcome there.” Mary appeared disappointed.

“Lawds, you two!” cried Lydia. “Lizzy, do not pretend to be sad. It is a great relief to all of us, except Mama, of course.”

Kitty leant closer and busied herself tucking the counterpane around Elizabeth. “You should stay abed as long as possible to avoid her. She may scheme to bring him back here.”

They all froze at a knock at the door. Mr Bennet poked his head in. “I see you have all heard the dreadful news—dreadful to your mother, at least. It is true, your cousin has declared us inhospitable and will remove to Lucas Lodge with Lady Lucas. Until he claims Longbourn as his own, I believe we are free of him.”

He nodded at the mix of laughter and frowns which greeted him and turned to look at Elizabeth. “You are well, my dear?”

She nodded, and fought back a yawn.

“Pity you could not like him. He was a ridiculous fool but we have many of those in our family. Your sense could have balanced his stupidity—imagine the children you could have borne.” Chuckling, he turned and ordered everyone to leave Elizabeth to her rest.

Laying back on her pillow, her thoughts were not on Mr Collins but on the man who had shared her antipathy for her odious former suitor.

Mr Darcy will be amused, and relieved on my behalf. She hoped to see him again and enjoy his response to such news.

By the following day, the skies were clear and the storm had moved inside. Mrs Bennet was open and strident in her thoughts: Elizabeth had behaved stupidly in refusing Mr Collins, and now that Lady Lucas had stolen him, she had lost a golden opportunity to secure him and save her reputation.

“My reputation is not at risk. I was never alone with him.”

“Twice he proposed to you! After your first, thoughtless response, he was gentleman enough to walk with you and allow you a second chance. Can you not see the generosity of such a gesture?”

“He chased me, Mama.”

“Diligence is a virtue.”

“Following an unaccompanied young woman into the woods is not diligence. It is stalking, threatening, even.” Mr Darcy had done the same, and not revealed his intentions, but he was not unwelcome—particularly as his appearance thwarted Mr

Collins's proposal and whatever means he may have undertaken to ensure her acquiescence. Elizabeth shivered. "Mr Collins is an obsequious fool. I could not have such a husband."

"You will never have a husband with such an attitude. Three men, yet all of them lost to you. Of course, Henry Goulding is soon to be wed," she allowed, "but Mr Collins has fled Longbourn. Even snobbish Mr Darcy, the man we all hate, has left for town—likely desperate to separate himself from you lest you make a demand on him!"

He has left?

"Mr Darcy is gone from Netherfield?"

Jane smiled. "He came to Longbourn this morning on his way to town, wishing to ensure you were well. You were still asleep, but we assured him you were in good health and that Mr Collins is finding his relief at Lucas Lodge. He seemed pleased."

Of course he was. How she wished she could have seen him, and laughed at Mr Collins's fit of pique.

Her father turned away from Mrs Bennet. "Now Lizzy, you despise him as much as you do Mr Collins. But he at least, was interested enough in your welfare to stop here and enquire after you. Your cousin was heedless of your comfort."

"That is the only good thing to be said of Mr Darcy," grumbled her mother.

"Oh no, Mrs Bennet," he said, winking at Elizabeth. "Mr Darcy was just as concerned for our horse, and any strain it endured pulling the cart with Mr Collins through the mud. It was quite touching, for he must have known that while I have five daughters, I have but one horse."

And you likely told him that , she thought. She turned to Jane. “Did Mr Darcy retrieve his coat?”

Jane nodded. “He was in a hurry to get to town, and regretted your absence.”

“He likely regretted the entire situation in which you entangled him,” Mrs Bennet said. “Lydia tells us Mr Darcy already is engaged to his cousin, so he is safe from any gossip concerning your time in the boat-house. Your only protector is your cousin, whom you have cruelly spited.”

Having heard such complaints too often and in need of refreshment, Elizabeth excused herself and slipped into the kitchen. Jane was right behind her.

“Do not worry for Mama’s complaints. I am happy for you that Mr Collins is gone away. He created upset in everyone here.”

“I am happy as well, but I wish I had been able to thank Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth had failed to conceal the regret in her voice, and busied herself with a pitcher of water to avoid Jane’s intent stare. “I am glad you seem to like Mr Darcy more than you did two days ago, Lizzy. He seemed disappointed to miss you as well. Mama was unkind, telling him he interfered in your happiness and left your future uncertain.”

“Oh no.”

“I walked him out and told him he likely ensured your happiness and your freedom from marrying Mr Collins. He understood, and told me, ‘Miss Elizabeth said something similar’.”

Did he?

“He also gave his card to Papa, and asked him to write to him if he required a narrative of events to ensure your reputation remained unscathed. Mr Goulding’s words are likely enough.”

“Mr Darcy is very gracious.” Though not patient enough to wait till I stirred.

“He is indeed. A good friend to Mr Bingley and to our family.” Jane squeezed her arm and returned to their sisters.

Mr Darcy had done what a gentleman ought, and sat guard over her in the presence of her loathsome cousin. But he had turned away quickly when the arrival of others was imminent.

Of course he did. Mr Darcy is safe from me, but there is no reason he should not guard his own reputation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sun emerged the following afternoon, and desperate to escape Longbourn, Elizabeth put on boots, bonnet, and cloak and began walking towards Lucas Lodge. At least Charlotte would provide her with some sensible conversation, and laugh at what had gone on. She had missed her friend's company these past few trying days, but understood that Mrs Bennet's fury at Mr Collins's desertion likely had kept Charlotte from calling at Longbourn. Elizabeth had reached the point on the path where a turn left would take her to Lucas Lodge when she realised her own visit was just as impossible: Mr Collins was there, nursing his injuries. Of course, with Lady Lucas, Sir William, and Maria, he had an audience as prone to sympathy as to gossip. After two days listening to the odious man's complaints and his demands for sympathy, Charlotte was likely to have some of her own amusing stories to share.

Still, beyond tossing pebbles at a window in the hopes of catching only Charlotte's attention, Elizabeth had no recourse but to forgo her visit. Reluctant to return to Longbourn, she continued towards Meryton.

She nodded greetings to Mr Robinson, who carried his young granddaughter on his shoulders, and smiled at the old dog who followed them. When she turned the corner, her thoughts set on looking at shoe-roses at the milliner's shop, she encountered Mrs Goulding and Mrs Long. The former gazed at her with concern, while her companion's sour expression was unchanged. With such a mother, it had never surprised Elizabeth that all the Long children married and moved away from their home farm.

Mrs Goulding patted Elizabeth's arm. "Young lady, you have been quite the talk of

my dinner table. I understand from Henry that it was your quick thinking that allowed you to find shelter for poor Mr Collins during the storm.”

“Quick thinking overstates my part in it. Naturally, having spent my life at Longbourn, I was the only one aware of the boat-house, but Mr Darcy deserves much credit as well. He was instrumental in ensuring everyone’s safety and helping Mr Collins along the path after his um, encounter with the tree.”

Mrs Long raised her quizzing glass and peered at her closely. “Mr Darcy was the gentleman with you and Mr Collins? I must say, I am surprised to hear of his involvement.”

“Mr Darcy happened upon us while we walked.”

“But to remain with you, in such a place? It is not what one might expect from a man of his station.”

Mrs Long appeared more scandalised than horrified; Elizabeth bit back the temptation to tell her of the spiders and the brandy. “Is it not? He is a gentleman and would not leave me alone in company with Mr Collins, who was injured.”

“Hmph.”

What does she think occurred, to think so poorly of Mr Darcy? Have my comments about him after the assembly so damaged him in everyone’s eyes?

“Mr Darcy ably assisted Henry in lifting Mr Collins into the Bennets’ wagon to return him safely to Longbourn.” Mrs Goulding gave Elizabeth the sort of amused scolding look she remembered from childhood escapades with Henry and the Lucas boys. “Not every girl in Meryton could be alone in the company of three unmarried men and be credited with saving one, amusing another, and tolerating a third. Whatever

adventures shall befall you next, Miss Elizabeth?”

The two ladies said their farewells and went along, heads bent, as they spoke.

Elizabeth sighed. It is not enough to be the centre of my family’s discomposure and possible exile to the hedgerows, now I am the talk of the town.

Charlotte called the following day and they managed to escape Longbourn before Mrs Bennet could see the daughter of her enemy. They moved into the garden, where the only view was from her mother’s least favourite sitting room, brushed the leaves off of a bench and sat. Elizabeth was eager to know how Lucas Lodge fared with its newest guest but Charlotte—who had learnt the tale of the boat-house from Mr Collins—had questions of her own. Elizabeth provided her the story of her confinement. She was tired of recounting it, and gave an abbreviated version which, unsurprisingly, differed from that of Mr Collins.

“I thought he might have exaggerated his own heroics?—”

“There were none on his part, Charlotte. Only complaining, intransigence, and a bit of queasiness.”

“No, he has expressed his admiration for Noah and all those who braved the currents of the great flood. He will not willingly board a boat or ship again.” She gave Elizabeth an earnest look. “Was it necessary to place him in the boat?”

“I believe Mr Darcy thought only of his welfare. Mr Collins was unable to sit upon the bench with any steadiness and, if on the ground, he could have rolled into the water. I believe the rocking of the boat lulled him, as it would a baby.”

Charlotte looked somewhat unhappy with her reply but moved to a new topic. “I understand Mr Darcy called on you at Longbourn?”

“He did not call on me . He came to collect his coat and paid the courtesy of checking on me and Mr Collins, to ensure we had recovered from our ordeal.” Elizabeth would not, could not say more on her feelings about missing his call. She was expending too much energy trying not to think about it. “Not that it was an ordeal, for myself,” she added. “Mr Collins was injured, mildly, and it was cold and damp in the boat-house, but it was only an hour or so.”

“You do not need to defend yourself to me, Lizzy. Your reputation will not suffer. You are not known as a coquette and as a friend of long acquaintance, Mr Goulding would stand by you regardless of what might have occurred.”

“ What might have occurred, Charlotte?”

“I do not doubt your comportment or that of Mr Collins or Mr Darcy, but either one may have felt some obligation towards you afterwards—to protect you.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “You just assured me my reputation would not suffer, and now you state it needs saving?”

Charlotte gave her an arch look. “Do you not recognise your good fortune, being alone and endangered and protected by two eligible young men of promise and standing? You will scold me as acting like your mother, but I am surprised you did not act to secure one of them.”

“You are correct,” Elizabeth cried. “You are acting as my mother, who is, as you imagine, quite angry at my failure to secure Mr Collins. His removal to Lucas Lodge has only further upset her.”

Charlotte stood, walking away a few paces, before turning and delivering to Elizabeth news that first surprised and then disheartened her.

Marriage to Mr Collins?

“Oh Charlotte,” she said later, after her friend’s explanations and rationalisations had been combed over. “I shall leave the announcement of your engagement to your mother. I believe even the fearsome Lizzy Bennet must back down in fear of how this news will affect Mama.”

But I cannot be happy for you.

CHAPTER EIGHT

December 13, London

“Can you not stand one more dinner, one more card party before retreating north?”

The pout on his aunt’s face made Darcy smile. Her son, Colonel Fitzwilliam, had said much the same thing to him as soon as he had returned from Kent.

“I cannot. I have filled my calendar these past days in town.”

Lady Matlock eagerly pounced. “I understand you dined with the Chathams and the Hollingsworths. Four daughters between them, and at least one niece.”

“Yes, and a son and nephew with whom I attended university. We had a fascinating conversation on wheat prices and the odds of finding decent Cognac in the next year.”

“I doubt the young ladies found it interesting.”

“Had they been drinking brandy with us, I would agree. However, when we joined them afterwards, all four young ladies in attendance exhibited as their mothers directed. Two performed on the harp, one sang, and the last played the pianoforte.”

His aunt’s brow rose. “Were all delightfully talented?”

Darcy shrugged.

“And their accomplishments? Their beauty? Any further thoughts?”

“Two were scarcely older than Georgiana. All had excellent teeth.”

“Teeth?” She threw up her hands. “It is like pulling teeth to learn about an evening spent in society, with eligible young ladies. Did you like any of them particularly?”

He shrugged, kissed her cheek, and began his walk back to Darcy House.

He was an honest man, but Darcy knew when to hedge. He would not tell her that none played with Miss Bingley’s technical precision or spoke with the intelligence and wit of Elizabeth Bennet. One lady his aunt disliked, of the other she knew nothing. Only Richard had heard a word about his time spent at Netherfield, and when he finished the telling of it, and his cousin had finished laughing at the description of a mud-covered Collins, he had warned Darcy to take care.

“Three hours alone in her company. She is a rarity, capturing Fitzwilliam Darcy alone for so long.”

“Not quite two hours, and never alone. Her idiot cousin was there for the entirety, and her neighbour as well for an hour or so.” While Darcy would be pleased to never again think of Collins, he had liked Goulding, whose lively humour and protectiveness of Elizabeth had impressed him. Not that she had required such gallantry; she had had the situation well in hand.

“You say she did not play the simpering damsel in need of help or a proposal. What of her family?”

What could he say of the Bennets? Mr Bennet could not rouse himself to come to the boat-house, expressed more appreciation for the safe return of his horse than he did for his daughter, and dismissed any concern for her honour. He had been amused by

the entire incident. Mrs Bennet appeared to blame Elizabeth for all of it once she learnt her daughter had again vigorously refused her cousin's proposal.

"They understood the events as innocent, and the only stain to remain would be any river mud that would not wash out."

Richard snorted. "You are fortunate, then, that it happened in a backwater and others were present. Your reputation will not suffer. The lady, however, may need to reconsider her answer to her overly persistent suitor."

"Bingley assures me all is well."

And so he had, although the effort to understand his letters had taken much time. Bingley remained in Hertfordshire, welcoming his aunts and some of Hurst's family to Netherfield, and—to what Darcy imagined was Miss Bingley's consternation—continuing to admire Jane Bennet. Darcy had written to him, explained he would not return to Netherfield, and invited him to come to London for a few days, where Bingley could shake off his infatuation.

But Bingley had declined, thanked him for settling his business in town, and established himself more firmly in Hertfordshire. He was young and not always steady in his resolve, but he was quick to decisions that, once made, usually stuck. It was a trait Darcy despaired of, yet envied. He was never so quick to decisions, preferring to deliberate and consider all sides of an issue. But Bingley had never carried the weight of guardian and almost parent to a much younger sister or master of a great estate or heir to an ancient family name and lineage. He was Charles Bingley, only son of a wealthy tradesman, with a fortune in the bank and a sister to marry off. He was a man of leisure, needing only to be refined and moulded and given purpose. Darcy had done what he could, and now could only hope Jane Bennet—if she was indeed the lady Bingley would make his wife—was all that she appeared to be and more like her sister Elizabeth than like her mother.

Miss Bennet had been all that was kind the morning he called on Longbourn. It was earlier than usual to pay a visit, barely ten o'clock, but he had set a meeting in town with Lady Catherine's solicitor at three o'clock, and did not wish to break it. The latest news from Kent had concerned him; a small dam between Rosings and a bordering estate had collapsed and flooded fields already seeded for spring and two tenant cottages. Lady Catherine blamed the tenants and her neighbour and demanded legal action; reason would not stop her and the solicitor likely wished only to please Lady Catherine.

Their meeting—and his trip to Kent to see the ruined fields and outbuildings for himself—had gone smoothly enough, but then, as now, his mind was less engaged with legal matters than it should have been. Instead, it was his call at Longbourn and his conversation with Miss Bennet that remained front of mind. He had been greatly disappointed not to see Elizabeth, and surprised to find her still abed.

"Is she well?"

"She is unaffected by yesterday's incident, but she was awake until nearly dawn. I heard her pacing in her room, and saw her candle lit," Miss Bennet told him quietly, once she had led him to a small parlour away from Mrs Bennet's glares and occupied by the youngest two Bennets and a table covered in buttons and lace. "I apologise for my mother. She is upset about what has occurred since yesterday, and blames Elizabeth for refusing Mr Collins, which has led him to abandon Longbourn and move to a neighbour's home."

"He has left?"

"The insult of Lizzy's refusal was so great, as was his sickness from his time in the rowboat, that he determined himself better hosted elsewhere. Lady Lucas was here at the time and invited him to come to Lucas Lodge."

“I see.” The man was an idiot without manners but better he be farther away from Elizabeth.

“You should leave before Mama requests you bring Mr Collins back here,” Miss Catherine said.

“Or marry Lizzy in his stead,” said Miss Lydia, snorting with laughter.

Miss Bennet gave him an apologetic look. “Things are rather fraught at the moment. I shall tell Lizzy that you called. I understand your groom retrieved your coat earlier this morning.”

“Yes, I thank you on behalf of whoever did the brushing.” He bowed his head. “Please, give your sister my best wishes, and my thanks for her valiant rescue and good company. ”

And that had been that. The six weeks he had spent in Hertfordshire had come to a close, and he was left with a curious pang, wondering—as a gossip might—about Collins and his matrimonial intentions and wishing he could have spoken to Elizabeth and heard her version of events. They had been briefly united in their dealings with Mr Collins, and he should have liked to tell her that as much of an ordeal as it may have been, rarely had he spent a more enjoyable time in a rainstorm.

Not rarely. Ever. There, in a dank boat-house with too many cobwebs and too few comforts, he had sat enthralled by Elizabeth’s conversation, her wit and her rejoinders to Mr Collins. The stories of her childhood fascinations, and those boys so fascinated by her, painted a childhood so different from his more formal upbringing. A girl scampering through the fields, catching frogs, and playing cricket? No wonder those boys proposed. They saw a jewel when they were hardly out of leading strings, well before they even understood romantic stirrings.

Darcy shifted in his seat, regretting again that he had not seen her and ensured she was recovered. With Bingley remaining in Meryton, he pondered a brief return to Netherfield on the journey to Pemberley. Bingley's interest in Miss Bennet was such that there were likely daily calls between the estates. He imagined Elizabeth accompanied her sister on visits to Netherfield; he would enjoy watching the fireworks between Miss Bingley and the aunts who intimidated her, and hearing Elizabeth's observations on the delicate balance of servility and sarcasm being performed.

But he had no rational reason for such a visit. He had no connexion to Elizabeth Bennet that would allow him to hover, so to speak, and observe and enjoy her company. And he would have Georgiana with him, and he was unwilling to subject her to a place where Wickham might still lurk about, nor expose her to the mix of Bingley and Hurst relations there. He did not know Hurst's family, but had some idea of them; it would be best to maintain the distance for his sister's sake. Besides, he thought, only half-jokingly, once at Netherfield, it was likely Miss Bingley would do all within her power to keep him there. If she could not induce him to remain through her entreaties and wiles, she might break the axles on his carriage to force him and Georgiana to stay. No, best to close that chapter. He would return to Netherfield only if Bingley truly needed him—for assistance or for a wedding.

It was a most dissatisfying decision.

CHAPTER NINE

February 1812

Despite Mrs Bennet's continued reminders of Mr Collins's betrayal and his choice of a wife and Elizabeth's own melancholy, which she attributed to disappointment in her friend, the next two months passed pleurably enough as witness to the deepening connexion between Jane and Mr Bingley. It was a marvellous thing, really, to watch two people so well-matched falling in love. After all, not every match was based on such affection. Henry Goulding loved Alice Welby but the marriage between his sister and her husband—a vicar in York who was the second son of a baronet—was based as much on his need for her dowry and her desire for a life outside of Meryton. Charlotte had married Mr Collins to escape spinsterhood and have her own home and family; the fact that she would have to share that home and create a family with such a man had little bearing .

I wish for more.

Charlotte might not be romantic, but Elizabeth found it difficult to resist the pull towards an attachment based on the heart when seeing the looks exchanged between her sister and Mr Bingley. She wished for someone besides her father with whom to admire it; as pleased as Mr Bennet was for Jane forming an alliance, he seemed to derive more enjoyment from poking fun at Mr Bingley.

It was true, he was young and rather puppyish; the absence of Mr Darcy, his friend and guide, however, had seemed to steel something in him. Or perhaps it was the presence of his family—two elderly aunts from Scarborough, brought to Netherfield

by a distant relation who seemed overawed by the house—and Hurst's cousins that emboldened Mr Bingley to more fully assume the mantle as head of his family. If Elizabeth thought Mr Darcy would be proud to see it, she kept that thought to herself. After all, the loyalties of her two closest confidantes had shifted.

She did try with Kitty, thinking there might be some possibility that she was more intelligent when without Lydia's company, asking her about the plaiting she had done when remaking a bonnet. It did not work; Longbourn was too crowded, too full of spies, interruptions, and inanities.

Sensible conversation? A rational exchange of observations, be it about trees or difficult men? Such pleasure had ridden off with Mr Darcy. Elizabeth could not say she missed him—in truth, she scarcely knew the gentleman, having spent a total of perhaps five hours in conversation with him over the course of less than two months. Regretting his absence, however, was an easier confession. She avoided thinking about why she had disdained his company for weeks, thinking him cold and proud, and over the course of one afternoon's close confinement, had found him earnest and interesting.

How perverse that the mysterious Mr Darcy grows warmer in personality in the damp and cold, and assumes that cool formality when placed in a comfortable room.

Any disappointment Elizabeth had felt that Mr Darcy had not returned to Netherfield was dashed away on the bright February morning Jane emerged from the parlour with Mr Bingley and whispered to her, "We are engaged."

Happy as she was for Jane—and relieved though she was for herself that Mrs Bennet now had a wedding to plan—Elizabeth had her own entanglement to manage. She was contending with the attentions of Mr Hurst's cousin, Mr Nugent, a plump man of twenty-two years who had joined the Netherfield party just before the New Year.

From their first introduction, Mr Nugent had assumed them friends, amusing her with whispered bon mots about the company and wicked memories of his cousin's youth. His insouciance was diverting, and Elizabeth exerted herself to keep his jibes away from the ears of Lydia and Kitty, whose laughter would be far too raucous. After two weeks' acquaintance, her capacity for such amusement exhausted, Elizabeth was exerting her own exile from his company. At every dinner, he managed a chair next to hers. At every call to Longbourn or Netherfield, he found a seat by her. He was persistent in his desire for her company, unfailing in declaiming her wit, and tireless in expressing his admiration for her honesty and intelligence .

And yet, for all that Mr Nugent offered her in praise, Elizabeth could only think him tiresome. A puppy who cannot learn or be trained and was allergic to gravity and sense. He is no Mr Collins, yet, in my twentieth year, I have succeeded in beguiling the two most absurd men of my acquaintance.

Miss Bingley was laughing at her, she was certain of it.

"My dear Eliza," she said coyly one afternoon at Longbourn while Jane was occupied with Mrs Hurst and a fashion magazine, "how have you managed it? In the half year of our acquaintance, you have caught the eye of two eligible gentlemen, each of whom may boast a steady income and admirable oratorical skills. Of course, your cousin has since made a love match, but dear Mr Nugent is a particular prize, as he can offer you a house in town and an invalid mother-in-law ensconced in the mistress' suite. The house is small but comfortable, though nothing to Longbourn," she added wickedly, her eyes fixed on a deep scratch in the table between them. "When shall I wish you joy?"

Elizabeth returned Miss Bingley's expectant smile. "We shall soon be sisters, and in our family, we respect our elders, including on order of marriage. Thus, your joy must come before mine. Do confide in me, are you enjoying the attentions of some eligible gentleman in town?"

She lifted the teapot. “More tea?”

Of course, discourtesy to Miss Bingley would solve none of the dilemmas she faced nor hasten the return of a gentleman whose conversation was more pleasurable than any other to be found in Meryton. In May, Mr Darcy surely would come to Meryton for the wedding; but it was only February. Solace could be found in the out of doors—if she could be there alone.

In the four or five years before she reached her twentieth birthday, Elizabeth had relished the great freedom of her solitary walks. She would go early, when most of Longbourn was still abed, or in mid-afternoon, when callers were less frequent and her family was occupied or resting. Of her four sisters, only Kitty truly enjoyed tramping in the wood but after the onset of a chronic cough the previous spring, she had confined her walks to Lucas Lodge and into Meryton. “Not everyone has the constitution for or enjoyment of the damp forest,” Mrs Bennet proclaimed. Elizabeth was sorrier for Kitty than for herself; without outdoor occupation, she had sunk more deeply under the influence of her younger sister.

Still, Elizabeth was content, especially after the trepidation she had felt during Mr Collins’s visit. She had escaped his company on four occasions before he succeeded in following her to make his unwanted proposal. Although he had returned to Hunsford, she could not set aside a sense of caution when walking alone. Her intuition was not wrong. She had scarcely reached the edge of the lane at the end of Netherfield’s long drive when she heard the sound of hoofbeats rounding its curve. All too quickly she saw it was Mr Nugent and Mr Hurst; their grooms, each with a covey of birds dangling from their saddles, rode behind .

“Miss Elizabeth, how wonderful to find you here. We were just returning to Netherfield with this evening’s dinner.”

“It appears the pheasants were amenable to your invitation to join you at the table.”

Both men looked momentarily confused before Mr Hurst guffawed. “Indeed. The birds were happy to make our acquaintance and will have place of honour on my plate.” He gestured back to the grooms. “Take those to the kitchens for dressing and get yourselves a cup of warm ale.”

Mr Nugent’s attention remained on Elizabeth, a benign smile aimed in her direction. She wondered whether he had yet understood her joke. He was not the cleverest man, after all. When his cousin called his name, he turned to Mr Hurst, who said to him, “I wish for some brandy and a change of clothes. I shall see you at the house.” Then the older, ruddy-cheeked man nodded to Elizabeth. “Good day to you. The wind is blowing colder. Best not to get caught out in another storm.”

Mr Hurst’s admonition was not unkind, precisely, but he chuckled as he turned his horse away. Suddenly Mr Nugent was by her side, his reins in hand. “May I accompany you to Longbourn?”

Elizabeth wished to deny him the pleasure, but instead nodded and began to walk towards her home. She was grateful for the unusual silence that befell them but chose to respect it, to refrain from pointing out foliage or asking of the hunt, in order to preserve it. However, her demeanour disturbed Mr Nugent.

“You are quiet. All is well? You are not fleeing an argument with a sister or hunting for nature’s bounty?”

“I am enjoying nature’s bounty.” She gestured at the sky. “It is blue above me, some semblance of green peeks through the brown around me, and the air is crisp and redolent of all that late winter offers in its brief hold before spring’s arrival.”

“You are a poet, the way you craft your thoughts into beautiful prose! Do go on!”

“I am neither a poet nor even a writer?—”

“But you fill my head with such thoughts and images with your words.”

Because you are a simpleton, she thought before replying, “You must read verse to understand the difference between mere description and true poetry.”

“Was that Shakespeare, then?”

She shook her head and sighed quietly. Mr Nugent was not discouraged by his lack of understanding; clearly he did not recognise it nor any other deficiency in their rapport as he began rattling on about his admiration of a good, solid oak table and the majesty of a horse he hoped to purchase. They passed a tenant’s cottage, which Elizabeth had always marked as a milepost on the road to Longbourn. When Mr Nugent let out an affected sigh and slowed his step, Elizabeth fought the urge to quicken her own.

“Miss Elizabeth, this is, for me and I hope for yourself, a truly fortuitous meeting. You see, I had hoped to call on you tomorrow morning at Longbourn.”

This was not a promising beginning to any conversation with Mr Nugent. She replied quickly. “My mother will always welcome visitors?—”

“Your mother is not my concern. It is you I wish to speak to, and to your father.”

Alarm flooded through her. “My father, as you know, is surrounded by ladies and will enjoy the steadier conversation you offer him.”

“Ah, but you are the steady one, Miss Elizabeth. So clever, so able to understand all that is said and guess at what is being withheld in thought. I admire that, so very much.”

Elizabeth willed herself not to blush at his pretty words. She quickened her pace, wishing the three miles between the estates could be halved. They had gone scarcely

a mile while he prattled on about horses and table legs.

“Many would not agree, sir. Cleverness and wit are nothing to amiability, arts, and affluence.”

“See—there, you have done it yet again,” he cried, his flushed face crinkling in amusement. “Oh, Miss Elizabeth,” he said, suddenly sobering. “You are such a delightful creature. I love to laugh and no one has made me laugh as you do—although at times, I only half-understand you, I wish to spend my lifetime in the attempt of it. I am nothing if not earnest.”

She pretended not to hear him. “I am nothing if not late, sir. I had promised Mary I would practise with her.”

“You are a wonderful sister. Bingley is a lucky man, for he too shall claim you as sister.”

Would it not rain? Could she summon a crack of thunder?

“I wish a different title.” Mr Nugent dropped the reins and stepped in front of her. “This is not how I envisioned it but the expression on your face tells me this is the moment of greatest expectation, and that happiness can follow only if you agree with my wish to marry you. ”

All within her went cold and hot, and she felt almost faint with desperation. Not again. Not another unwanted suitor whose hopes and skill in professing admiration ran ahead of discernment and wisdom. “Mr Nugent, you are everything kind but I fear a gulf of understanding lies between us. In our brief acquaintance, we have become friends?—”

“Brief? I say, we have dined together nine times in the past weeks, and had tea on

seven occasions! We have walked, sat together, and always in perfect harmony. It is more than amity and friendship, Miss Elizabeth, but a brilliant sparkle of mutual opinion and thought!”

“I thank you, sir, for no one has ever associated me with brilliance or sparkle, but I beg you to refrain from any further interest in my company.”

“Has another man bested me and made his claim on your heart?”

She nearly laughed, clamping a hand across her mouth to stifle any outburst. Mr Nugent’s beseeching expression, his round cheeks red with emotion, quickly sobered her. He was scarcely older than herself and, though rather thickwitted, he was a sweet young man. An eager, naïve, decent young man who needs to follow Mr Bingley’s path and find a wise and trustworthy friend to guide him in the world. He needs his own Mr Darcy.

No, Mr Darcy was the last man she should be thinking of at this moment. She might suggest to Mr Bingley that outside of a cardroom or pheasant hunt, Mr Hurst was a poor role model for his cousin, but what to say at this moment to Mr Nugent—who looked as he so often did: perplexed. Over his shoulder, only a hundred or so yards away, she could see Lydia and Kitty walking down the drive from Lucas Lodge. They, her silliest sisters, would be her escape. One might even prove Mr Nugent’s salvation.

Elizabeth raised her hand and waved to them.

CHAPTER TEN

As rational as Elizabeth considered herself, the fifth time she refused a proposal of marriage, even she knew she had become a ridiculous creature. Her family agreed and acted to elaborate on their feelings. Mrs Bennet was the most voluble in her outrage, if nearly unintelligible in her accusations and invectives, and was soon helped to her bed before she could voice even more injurious thoughts and threats.

The drawing room had hardly grown quiet before Kitty and Lydia, who had deserted Elizabeth on Longbourn's drive to laughingly deliver the news of her newest thwarted proposal—stupidly announced to them by the affronted Mr Nugent—showed their true feelings.

“What is so wonderful about Lizzy that she captures the eye of every eligible man in Meryton?” said an astonished Lydia.

Kitty appeared even more indignant, stamping her foot angrily. “Papa, you should have made her marry Mr Collins so she could not interfere with our chances with any marriageable men who follow!”

“She shall make all of us appear uninterested in marriage!” cried Lydia.

“Now, now,” said Mr Bennet, who seemed as distressed by the shrieking that pulled him from his book-room as he did by the news prompting it. “Unless she has determined herself as disinterested in husbands as Lizzy, Jane is to marry Mr Bingley.” He looked to his eldest daughter, who sat beside Elizabeth, looking stricken. “Jane, you do not plan to jilt Mr Bingley, do you?”

“No, of course not,” Jane replied almost sharply, her troubled expression turned to disbelief. “It is not the same circumstance at all, Papa.”

Elizabeth gave her a grateful look before turning to her father. “Jane is right. Mutual love and misguided infatuation are quite different things.”

His brows rose. “As is the life of a bitter spinster and that of a married woman, cared for by her husband and children. Not every lady gets to make the choice even once, let alone two or three times.”

Such a cutting remark from her father should not have surprised her, but the hurt it caused did make Elizabeth catch her breath. Her sisters, however, continued to share their thoughts. Kitty seemed especially injured on behalf of the rejected suitor.

“Poor Mr Nugent. He is all that a gentleman should be!”

“He is short and fat,” Lydia reminded her.

“But he makes up for it with his smile and fortune,” insisted Kitty.

Lydia nodded vigorously. “Lizzy’s refusal to marry will put off any worthy gentlemen from coming to Meryton!”

Although Jane did her best to quiet her youngest sisters, urging them to go to their mother and discuss their concerns, she and Mary appeared more mortified on Mr Nugent’s behalf than accepting of Elizabeth’s refusal. “He is young but he is a good man and you could improve each other’s understanding and happiness,” said Jane. “And our families would be further joined.”

As if I should desire Caroline Bingley any nearer to me! Elizabeth composed herself before replying. “I wish a husband who is more than my equal, not a man in constant

need of my advice and correction and my tolerance to set aside mistress duties for an invalid mother. Such a marriage can only lead to resentment and unhappiness.”

“Would not love make for an easy patience?” asked Mary.

“Perhaps you want nothing but patience, but to call it by another name—hope—is misleading,” said Elizabeth. “I am an imperfect creature who seeks a man who is at least somewhat less flawed.”

Such an admission seemed to placate Mary, who had never claimed any wish to marry, but Jane appeared sad. “I did think you enjoyed Mr Nugent’s company, Lizzy, but if he was not your ideal then you have done the right thing in refusing his suit. Still, he must be greatly disappointed.”

Have I wronged Mr Nugent when even Jane believes me cruel in my understanding and acceptance of my future?

Elizabeth carried that feeling with her when her father called her to his book-room later that day . Mr Bennet, upon hearing Elizabeth’s explanation of the dumbfounded gentleman she had denied the opportunity for her hand, did not smile. “Next to being married, a girl likes to be crossed in love a little now and then. It is something to think of, and gives her a sort of distinction among her companions. But you, Lizzy, have not been crossed. You have done the crossing.”

Something in his voice alarmed her. His wit could be mean, but that he directed at her mother or Mrs Philips or Lydia and Kitty. Not at me.

“Most girls are accustomed to one offer, which they accept, gratifying the wishes of the young man and their families. One proposal per girl is the custom. But you, Lizzy, have had a surfeit of proposals?—”

“Papa, you cannot include youthful infatuations! I was a child when Mr Goulding and Mr Lucas made their ‘proposals’.”

“Yes, and your mother reminds me that with a little effort, I could have held their fathers to those offers.” His eyebrows rose. “She also reminds me that each of them will inherit a fine estate, and have since married or become betrothed to other of Meryton’s finest jewels.”

Elizabeth did not need reminding that Mr Goulding and Alice Welby had wed a month prior, and that Mr Lucas had returned to Meryton in January and quickly become engaged to Susan Nettles—to say nothing of Charlotte marrying Mr Collins.

“All your suitors are husbands now, Lizzy. Fool though he is, Mr Collins will inherit this fine estate, a fact your mother will bemoan daily until my merciful death allows me silence.” He chuckled. “Never let it be said that Mrs Bennet of Longbourn does not have the finest memory in all of Meryton.”

Never let it be said she does not have the noisiest grievances as well.

“Had her perception been sharper and kinder, Mama would have understood that Mary was the best match for Mr Collins.” Elizabeth looked at her father, as she so often had in this room, hoping he would nod in agreement. He did not.

“What you escaped in a husband, I lost in a son-in-law who would have amused me for my life’s duration. I feel his enmity is such that we may never again see him visit Longbourn until he is its master—not that I shall see him, of course.”

When Elizabeth did not smile at his joke, Mr Bennet became more severe. “Until Mr Bingley came along, none of your sisters had received a proposal, not even when Lydia was eleven and sweet on Robert Millington. You, my dear girl, have received—and refused—five proposals from four young men.”

“Two were mere boys .”

Shrugging, he sat back in his chair. “Your mother is rather cross. Do you understand her frustration?”

“Yes, Papa. I have ears and am fortunate she has not boxed them,” she replied, unable to disguise her irritation. “As the object of her disdain, I am well aware. But you have met Mr Nugent.”

“Yes, he has scarcely reached his majority, lives under the thumb of a bedridden mother and hypochondriac aunt, and can scarcely hold an intelligent conversation beyond horses and haberdashers. I must say, Lizzy, is Mr Collins the only fully grown man who has determined to have you?”

“You are inviting a conversation to amuse you and mortify me, and I have had enough of both already today.”

He steepled his fingers, hiding his smile. “And an unwanted proposal. It was just the one, yes? Shall we expect another from Mr Nugent or will his attentions be directed elsewhere?”

She waved her hand. “If he could gain a friend of more gravitas, or a mentor less interested in discussing the latest fashion in cravats, I believe Mr Nugent could become a worthy husband for a less challenging lady. Over time, perhaps he would notice Kitty, who shares his interest in fashion and gossip and appears to admire him.”

“Heaven help us if Kitty is as particular as you, but a little seasoning would likely help the both of them.” He winked at her but his expression remained sober. “Mrs Bennet is overfull with the town’s gossip, but even I have heard talk about your lack of interest in marriage.”

“My lack of interest is in marriage to a fool or a child-man. I wish to respect my husband as a man of sense, strength, wisdom, and humour.”

“And some fortune, I assume, lest you be scrubbing pots and pulling turnips alongside your farmer husband?”

At least he did not smile at his joke; it had scratched at her in a way she did not like.

“Lizzy, although you have long been the most sensible of my daughters?—”

“Am I no longer?”

“You are no Mary, who claims herself content to remain always at Longbourn, nor one of the silliest girls in England, but it is time to be sensible of your place in the world and ensure your future.” Mr Bennet rubbed his eyes before giving her a look that exhibited his failing patience.

“I am loath to lose you, but it is time you take a husband. You have had more opportunities than any four women together can boast—proposals from two men of fortunes or income and whom you should not refuse, but have. Until now, though you are not of age, I have granted you the right to refuse an offer. With some six months until you reach your majority, that can no longer stand. You leave me little choice but to ensure your future and those of your sisters, at least two of them quite keen on this marriage business.”

“Papa—”

“You must accept the next proposal of marriage that is made to you.”

Suddenly cold, she gripped the arms of her chair. “You do not mean it! You would have me surrender my future and force my marriage to a scoundrel, a wastrel, a man I

cannot like or respect?" She was at a loss for words. Her wit abandoned her, as it seemed her father had done.

"No scoundrels have yet courted you—I believe you too discerning to allow them near you." Mr Bennet shrugged. "But you must decide what you do like, and remain in company only with gentlemen whom you consider acceptable as a husband. It is easy enough to avoid men with horrid breath, bad teeth, and contrary dispositions—unless, of course, they are very rich."

She laughed but it was bitter. "I am certain to earn at least three more proposals with so little to be satisfied. "

"I did not wish Mr Collins as your husband but the foolish man is my heir. Mr Nugent is young and vain, but he claims a house in town and a decent income, making him an eminently suitable match for the daughter of a gentleman."

"He is a coxcomb, who laughs loudly and stares too much."

"Your liveliness commands attention, dear girl, and thus you are plagued by staring men."

She smiled tightly, almost too angry for tears. "And my wit condemns me to a horrible fate."

"Before you determined him not so terrible, I recall complaints about Mr Darcy's stares as well."

Yes, though not at my bosom, and not with his mouth agape.

"Perhaps you will encounter him at Jane's wedding, if he stands up with Bingley. Your mother may despise him, but ten thousand a year and a house in Mayfair would

soften her opinion.”

In an infuriating sign of dismissal usually reserved for Elizabeth’s mother or sisters, Mr Bennet reached for his book. “Your last two proposals were only months apart, Lizzy. I am certain your next offer cannot be too far off.”

An ultimatum! Never had her father delivered her such a blow! Only once had he scolded her, when as a child of four years she had pointed at an enormous wart on Mr Russell’s nose and refused to eat the buns made by the elderly baker. She had embarrassed her father and Mr Russell, and gained a lesson in kindness and propriety—one that two of her sisters certainly had not learnt. The way they had carried on, emphasising Mr Nugent’s mortification rather than that felt by Elizabeth! These girls had no understanding of how it felt to win affections you could not reciprocate. Hardly affections—Mr Collins scarcely liked me; he wished to force me into his idea of the ideal wife.

Jane, who had been all understanding after the debacle with Mr Collins, continued to show undue dismay on the part of Mr Nugent. He would be her near relation, as cousin to Mr Hurst, but in her throes of happiness with Mr Bingley, could she not recognise the similarities between her betrothed and Mr Nugent? Mr Bingley remained a man quick to action and yet slow to correct his sister, as tranquil in the face of her vitriol as he was Mrs Bennet’s fawning. Elizabeth liked Mr Bingley and admired his kind heart and joyful disposition, but could not enjoy his happy complacency.

Perhaps no man could escape the severity of her judgment, but she hoped to spare Mr Nugent’s feelings and help preserve Jane’s equanimity. She must leave Meryton, for a time, at least. The following morning, she returned to the book-room, where Mr Bennet sat with an expectant look.

“Well, Lizzy, have you used your prerogative and changed your mind on Mr

Nugent?"

Irritated at once again being the object of her father's mean teasing, she fisted her skirt in her hands and presented the arch smile she knew he always enjoyed.

"What if there are more suitable men in the world beyond those who have offered for me in Meryton? Would it not be better for everyone that I remain unattached for them, for a man I can truly love and respect and who will give the same to me, and allow Jane her joy here, without such a capricious sister to mind?"

Her father agreed it wise to separate Elizabeth from her latest notoriety, and after reminding her of his stipulation, decreed she would go to London and stay with the Gardiners at Gracechurch Street, until joining Sir William and Maria on their visit to Charlotte in April.

There , Elizabeth promised herself, I shall avoid the company of all unmarried men.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In spite of the letter Elizabeth had penned to her aunt, thanking her for welcoming her to Gracechurch Street, Mr and Mrs Gardiner remained perplexed about the haste of, and reason for, her visit.

“Lizzy, I do not agree with your father’s actions, but even you must admit that being admired by two eligible men, and receiving proposals from both, is quite the accomplishment.”

“Eligible in age and income, Uncle. There is more to a marriage than gaining a good roof and one’s own chair by the fire.”

Regretfully, her favourite male relation did not smile at her joke. Nodding, he said, “Yes, there is securing your future. You have a good mind, and you use it in ways that can challenge others. It is not a simple thing to find a man of equal intelligence who can withstand the test of your cleverness and wit.”

Her aunt was especially dissatisfied with the Bennets’ behaviour towards Elizabeth. “A danger to Jane’s engagement! Perhaps your parents should do more than laugh and indulge your youngest sisters’ behaviours. They reflect poorly on you and Jane. Lydia should not be out; she is too young.”

“Mary cared little for being out, but as Kitty neared seventeen, how could they not allow Lydia? Or shall I say, how could they ignore her tantrums?” Elizabeth tickled the chin of the youngest Gardiner, a babe of nine months who, unlike the three elder children, was still allowed to join adult conversations. “My father prefers his peace to

our respectability.”

Aunt Gardiner frowned. “Yet he worries about your respectability? Lizzy, you have said Mr Nugent was too green, yet also too forward in his attentions to you. Truly, with all the advantages of the match, was there no possibility you could come to see him as a husband?”

“If I chose to wait two years until his mind seasoned into something resembling a serious man and he was master of his own home and of his future?” Elizabeth shook her head. “No, I liked Mr Nugent but as with Mr Collins, I will not be the only voice of sense and intelligence in a marriage, nor shape my thoughts to please those of the lady who truly rules my home.”

“This seems reasonable to me, though I enjoy having a lady rule my home.” Mr Gardiner winked at his wife. “How is Jane injured by your refusal?”

“Mr Nugent is cousin to Mr Bingley’s brother-in-law, Mr Hurst.” Elizabeth’s aunt and uncle exchanged a look, and eager to avoid any reproach, she quickly added, “Jane thinks Mr Bingley could assist Mr Nugent with some of the knowledge he has learnt from his friend, Mr Darcy, but that is terribly unfair to all involved. Mr Bingley was not the most diligent student, and Mr Darcy can only share so much of his time and intelligence.”

Mr Gardiner chuckled. “I believe he shared both of those with you in November, Lizzy.”

Fighting not to blush, Elizabeth buried her face in her cousin’s swaddling blanket. She took a deep breath of his lovely baby smell before looking up and returning her uncle’s look. “And there too it was drained as we dealt with Mr Collins.”

“If your previous suitors lacked sense and character, it seems Mr Darcy is the

opposite. Sense, character, intelligence, and fortune—all that you would seek in a husband.”

“Although I am not seeking a husband?—”

“Do not shut the door on marriage because you have suffered through two odious proposals.” Mrs Gardiner waved a finger at her. “Your uncle knows some fine gentlemen, and my friends have nephews and sons.”

“No, please do not introduce me to any of them!”

“Lizzy!”

“Did my father not explain all of his plan in exiling me from Longbourn?”

Uncle Gardiner snorted. “His ridiculous notion of protecting Jane’s engagement...obviously your mother provoked this action.”

Elizabeth shook her head and surrendered the babe to his mother, who in turn handed him to the nursemaid. “My father has declared I must accept the next proposal made to me—regardless of the man’s character, fortune, or sense.”

Her aunt gasped but Mr Gardiner seemed amused. “ You, more than anyone, understand your father’s humour can take a perverse bent.”

Turning to her uncle, she shook her head, replying, “He was everything serious. My surfeit of admirers and proposals has amused him for many years...merely saying those words—‘many years’—should be explanation enough that he is no longer amused, and thus demands I come to a decision and marry the next man who asks for my hand. The offer is likely, in his mind, to be the last.”

The Gardiners exchanged an astonished look. “He cannot be so unfair to you,” her uncle nearly roared, “to command you to a fate with any rogue or fool who seeks you out!”

“Edward, our Lizzy is too wise to allow such men in her company.”

“You forget Mr Collins, surely the most foolish man in the church, if not all of England,” Elizabeth said, almost wearily. She was tired of discussing affairs of the heart in which all the feeling was misdirected. Young boys enraptured by her skills in skipping stones or besting them in footraces, stupid men enraged by the same sort of impertinence she had yet to outgrow and determined to stamp it out, and young men too green to understand her and certain to grow horrified by her—not a serious or worthy offer among them. And yet a line had been drawn.

“Mr Nugent is all that most in my situation could hope for, and my disinterest in his affections—my ‘cruel refusal of his ardent proposal’, as Mama calls it—is the height of impetuous neglect for my future. A selfish act.”

Her uncle began to speak, but after a quelling glance from his wife, he said only, “A father wishes both security and happiness for his daughters, but an ultimatum is no guarantee of either.”

Reaching for Elizabeth’s hands, her aunt pressed them in hers. She could feel the solidity of the ring which encircled Mrs Gardiner’s finger, a simple band of gold given to her as a symbol of faithfulness and felicity. Until this moment, in company with the happiest married couple she knew, she had not realised how much it meant to her to have a true marriage of affection, of minds and hearts that matched, loved, and understood the other.

Managing a wan smile rather than the sob she felt, Elizabeth agreed. “It is a hopeless business. If I enjoy a man’s company and he misreads my friendship for something

more, I must quickly end the acquaintance. And if I should feel that real affection could grow from the friendship, I am bound to disappoint any mutual feeling by fearing discovery of his true, not yet exposed, character.”

“You are safe with us,” her aunt reassured her, “safe from introductions to any man of our acquaintance, unless you wish it.”

Relief surged through her, and she found herself able to smile. “Command me to play with my cousins, re-arrange your library, or, if you are truly daring, to practise my songbook...I am at your whims until I go to Kent, and certainly, other than her husband, Charlotte will know no men there from whom I must hide.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The ride from Derbyshire down the Great North Road was as ever, informative for a man who often travelled it and was a close observer of the route. Near Grantham, young rabbits were a common sight once again. By Stilton, the trees were budding and wildflowers blooming earlier than a year prior. In Meryton, a few miles west of the busy road, Darcy could only imagine events, but he was certain one young lady was enjoying the nascent signs of spring. Elizabeth Bennet would be relishing the smell of fresh earth, of mulberry trees with their velvet buds, crocuses peeking out of the still chilly ground. She would be walking, rambling about, alone or in company with one of her sisters. No, she said none enjoyed walking as she does. With Miss Lucas, perhaps.

It comforted him to think she had a friend in Meryton with whom to exchange confidences; the few times he had been in company with Miss Lucas, he had found no fault with her conversation or comportment and saw a sensible young lady who would support her friends and family even if she herself did not garner the attention of young men.

Elizabeth garners attention. Darcy smiled when he recalled Miss Lucas's brother had been enthralled by her, albeit when neither was of age to pursue a connexion. Goulding had proposed when both he and Elizabeth still had their milk teeth. Now he was to marry another young lady; Mr Lucas had gone off to town and likely he too was married. Neither had retained their 'love' for Elizabeth.

Once acquainted with Elizabeth Bennet, how could a man ever look twice at another lady? Darcy rubbed his eyes. I have not. But I must.

He had not forgot the way he had been drawn to her nor how he had struggled with her proximity while she stayed at Netherfield with her sister. How often had he stood near her to catch her words and expressions? Quite often—when he was not feeling overly vulnerable to her and fleeing a room. Foremost in his memory were those few hours they had spent in close company in the boat-house, conversing and laughing in shared harmony, and the frightening urge he had felt to hold her in his arms. How difficult it had been to turn his back to her and stand outside, forcibly disengaging himself before the arrival of their rescuers from Longbourn. How cold it had felt!

Sighing, Darcy shifted to a more comfortable position on the padded seat. He wondered how Bingley was faring. He knew of his engagement to Miss Jane Bennet, of course, but the lines announcing the happy news were nearly the only ones legible in the two letters he had received from his friend. ‘I am to be married to Miss Jane Bennet and hope you will come to support me in May.’

Of course he would, no matter that Bingley’s wedding was only the second impetus for going. Thoughts of seeing Elizabeth again would certainly help him get through his Easter visit to Rosings.

London was as it ever was. He kept himself to familiar haunts—White’s and Brooks’s for company and conversation, and D’Angelo’s to expend energy. It was there he spent an afternoon, putting his tutelage to the test in a series of matches with his cousin. Darcy had the longer reach but Richard, with his career in the military, was the more expert fencer and he made sure to remind Darcy of it. Much as he enjoyed swordplay, he faulted himself for his lack of practise.

That evening, he was reunited with the victorious colonel for dinner. He rubbed his arm as they rode in his carriage.

“Do we expect rain or does my excellent swordplay still affect you?”

It was dry as dust but Darcy was unwilling to admit to having a muscle that ached.

“I am sorry you are in pain already for it can only worsen with the headaches Lady Catherine will cause you.” Richard snorted. “Are you prepared for three weeks of terrible dinners and long afternoons spent persuading Rosings’s neighbours not to sue her and her tenants not to flee for the hills? ”

Darcy chuckled. “I survived four days in December at Rosings without your company. I am prepared for whatever may happen.”

“And without my protection, you managed to leave without an engagement to Anne. Truly impressive.”

“I shall always leave Rosings without an engagement to Anne. The only question is whether I will be able to persuade Lady Catherine of that truth.”

“Get yourself a wife and she may believe you. Or not,” Richard laughed.

Darcy managed a nod, and directed his attention to the sights outside his window. His cousin was excessively talkative, as usual, and stayed to his topic.

“You say that Bingley is engaged to his angel? Was it his idea or her father’s?”

“It is a love match, and I am pleased for him. Her father is a gentleman, which lifts Bingley in society.” Darcy stretched out his legs. “You would understand his attraction to Miss Bennet. She is kind-hearted, serves as calm to his chaos, and is even prettier than he.”

“Bennet, eh? She is sister to the infamous Miss Elizabeth Bennet? You have described that lady’s intrepidity but said nary a word on her appearance. Is she that unlike her sister, with only her wit to recommend her?”

Darcy was at a loss to describe her in a manner that would not reveal his strong partiality. He sighed as a vision of Elizabeth in Netherfield's library, slowly turning the pages of her book, the low candlelight casting soft shadows on her face, sprang unbidden from his memory. He ached to know more news of her, to see her. The few words he could make out in Bingley's latest letter were paeans to 'his angel', 'Jane', or 'a fine roast' .

The days he would spend in Meryton for Bingley's wedding would put paid to these unsettled feelings he had towards Elizabeth—perhaps seeing her and speaking to her could help close the door on the lack of farewell in November.

“Oh dear. Is she that bad?”

“No, no, no. She is quite lovely.”

“I see.”

He looked up. Richard was grinning at him. “‘Quite lovely?’ Mark the date. The unconquerable Fitzwilliam Darcy has complimented a lady's beauty—after first being struck dumb.”

“Does it surprise you I am not made of stone? I can admire a woman's looks or disparage a man's horse or his character, as you well know.”

Richard gave him a sceptical look but said no more.

Thank goodness . He could not have Richard suspecting him of feelings he would not acknowledge for a lady he might meet again only at Bingley's wedding—particularly when at Rosings, where Richard's cursed idleness made him curious about Darcy's innermost thoughts and Lady Catherine retained ears and eyes within the house and grounds. His visit there in December was brief—he managed the business with the

flooded neighbours—and painful, for while Lady Catherine was not on her deathbed, he had seen the toll that asperity and limited company had taken. He had seen as much despair as displeasure when he left to spend Yuletide with Georgiana at Pemberley, and thus, his guilt had fuelled his promise to spend a full three weeks at Easter. Three weeks? He groaned. They had not yet left town for Rosings and already he was anticipating their departure from there.

That restiveness he had felt for months rose in him as the carriage came to a stop in front of White's. He felt it here in town, he had felt it at Pemberley. It made little sense—Pemberley was his home, the place where he was most content. And yet the disquiet had followed him there; Georgiana had noticed and worried that she was the cause—again. Bless Mrs Annesley; she could speak to and calm his sister as no one else had managed. Else, he would not be able to leave her for this dreaded sojourn to Kent.

Perhaps I need someone who can calm my worries, too.

In the few days he had in town, Darcy had turned away most invitations but could not decline attendance at a dinner party at the Bradfords'. Sir Walter and his wife were neighbours—just four houses away from him in Grosvenor Street—and it was incumbent on him to support the couple, who had lost their youngest daughter to fever only a year ago. The girl had been only a few years older than Georgiana and had always been kind to her, even giving her one of her dolls when eight-year-old Georgiana had lost her own.

I can enjoy their company and please my aunt and uncle by appearing in society.

After such an enjoyable evening, Darcy thought to spend a leisurely morning; he had no appointments until the afternoon, when he planned to go to the bookstalls and find himself the most engrossing books possible for the weeks he would be at Rosings, as well as a novel or two for Anne. His cousin would be pleased, and he was determined

to pick out titles that would shock her mother, should Anne be foolish enough to read them outside of her chambers.

He breakfasted late and was dawdling over the newspaper when his butler entered the room. “Sir, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst are in the front hall. Shall I show them to the drawing room?”

He cursed. One evening out in company, and somehow, word has leaked to them that I am in town. He did not wish to meet with either lady, but good manners and a little alarm about news they might have on Bingley’s upcoming wedding prompted him to rise from the table.

Darcy greeted the sisters and alerted them that he had only a few minutes to spare before a meeting. He ignored Miss Bingley’s feeble explanation that they had hoped to visit with Georgiana and congratulated them on gaining a fine sister in Jane Bennet.

“Dear Jane is so sweet, but her sisters! Especially that conniving Eliza. You made a fortunate escape after your heroics, Mr Darcy, when she led her cousin into the woods during a storm and was indecently exposed.”

“She was not exposed,” he replied sharply. “As is well known, Mr Collins was injured, and Mr Goulding and I were in their company during the storm. I trust no one has spread half-truths about the events of those hours.”

Mrs Hurst spoke before her sister. “Of course not. Your good name and reputation are untainted. The other gentlemen are well-settled with wives.”

A moment’s panic seized his throat. “Mr Collins has married?”

“Miss Charlotte Lucas, who was sat upon the highest shelf until she threw herself at

him.” Miss Bingley laughed meanly.

He breathed out. While it was no doubt distressing to Elizabeth to lose her friend, at least she was in no more danger from her loathsome cousin.

“She managed to make herself tolerate him,” Mrs Hurst tittered. “But she is out of Lucas Lodge, a fortunate escape at her age, and shall someday be mistress of Longbourn. That is something.”

If Mrs Hurst meant her sister to read between the lines, she failed in her mission. Miss Bingley only shrugged. “More cunning than the Bennets, who will lose their home.” She spent a moment smoothing her gloves before settling a worried look on Darcy. “You think Miss Eliza clever but truly, she has vicious propensities.”

He sighed. Here he was presented with his first news of Elizabeth Bennet in months, and his sources were determined to malign her. He could be civil, for the sake of learning more, until replying to their insults.

“Vicious propensities, such as gossiping and slandering?”

Mrs Hurst understood his jab but her sister was too carried away to take warning.

“Capriciousness! After spurning Mr Collins, Eliza dallied with Mr Hurst’s poor cousin, flirting and cooing only to break his heart as well when she refused his proposal! A decent man of fortune and education! ”

Whatever ease he still felt evaporated. The poor girl was besieged by half-witted admirers and spiteful snakes. He could only hope this suitor was not as insistent as the previous one.

He looked at Mrs Hurst. “Your husband’s cousin was with your party at Netherfield,

after I returned to town?”

“Yes, Mr Nugent. He is a year or so younger than Charles, always cheerful and friendly, and?—”

“And with a good income and a house in Sussex,” said Miss Bingley. “A fine catch, certainly beyond Elizabeth Bennet’s station. She beguiled poor Mr Nugent and broke his heart. His disappointment has only worsened his poor mother’s health.”

His mother. Ah yes, the dowager who lay abed with her spirituals and her many doctors. Hurst dined out on tales of his late father’s sister and her myriad obsessions with potions and oils from the Orient. Nugent may have a house and fortune, but it was a happy escape for Elizabeth, who now had suffered proposals from two ridiculous men overawed by difficult old women.

He wondered at the true source of Miss Bingley’s upset for Mr Nugent. She , after all, was rather in need of a man of fortune, and one with an estate and a house in town would be a triumph for the lady—as well as a great relief to himself and her brother.

“I am grieved for any man or woman whose heart is wounded,” he said, with more generosity than he felt. He looked at Miss Bingley, sour-faced and bitter-souled. “Was Mr Nugent much sought by other ladies, and thus this outrage on his behalf?”

Her jaw dropped in a most unladylike manner. “Of course not—he lacks a certain sophistication and depth. Nothing like Mr Hurst,” she assured her sister. “Apparently, he likes rustics and had eyes only for Miss Eliza, who is all wiles and arts. You know this, Mr Darcy. She tried to entrap you as well.”

“Intelligent conversation is not a form of entrapment.” He tried to quell the anger in his voice. “The Bennets are hardly rustics. Mr Bennet is a gentleman, and thus, Miss Elizabeth is Mr Nugent’s equal, and mine.”

Unchastened, Miss Bingley took a new approach to gaining his sympathy. “I fear dear Jane will want her with us, even in town! As if it is Charles’s job to find her a husband.”

Your brother is unlikely to find a husband for you unless money changes hands. Darcy’s patience had ebbed, and he stood to make his excuses. “Ladies, my apologies, but I have an appointment,” he prevaricated. “Was there anything else pressing that you wish to discuss?”

Miss Bingley stood and stepped towards him. “Only a wish that you be careful, sir, and remain away from Netherfield. The Bennets have declared Miss Elizabeth must wed the next man who proposes, be he a sheepherder or a wrinkly old soldier.”

An ultimatum? For having the good sense to refuse fools? Discomfited, Darcy moved away from her, taking a place behind his chair. “A demand? She is to be forced to wed?”

“She is tainted now, of course, with so many offers declined, and is desperate to save herself from another unwanted proposal. No man of good character and fortune is safe from her attempting an imposition. Not that you are prone to her allurements,” Miss Bingley said as Darcy dug his fingers into the upholstery, “but she is clever, and there is danger there for an eligible man such as yourself, particularly as she failed in her previous attempt to compromise you.”

A heavy silence descended on the room as Darcy considered his response. Mrs Hurst appeared nervous and began moving towards the door. He stalked past her and took hold of the door handle. After a deep breath to calm himself, he turned to them.

“Your warning is quite unnecessary. I assure you I am safe from any woman’s ill intentions.”

The moment the front door closed behind the Bingley sisters, Darcy told his butler to send word he would be delayed meeting his solicitor, and retreated to his study. For the next half an hour at least, he wore a hole in the carpet, pacing and worrying over the strange news delivered by the Bingley sisters.

No one should be forced to marry. If forced marriage was the law of the land, he likely would have been wed five years ago to Anne.

Tainted?

Elizabeth Bennet was an intelligent, thoughtful, curious, kind-hearted young lady who deserved far better than parents so weak of character. Her vulgar mother and careless father neither understood her full worth nor deserved her. How had it come to this? Had his departure from Netherfield after they had sheltered together so damaged her reputation?

He now recalled meeting Albert Nugent a year or two ago at a dinner party hosted by the Hursts at their home on Grosvenor Square. Nugent was an eager young buck, almost still a boy, and full of smiles; he was not unlike Bingley in many ways—other than claiming his place as an acolyte of Brummel and at the beck and call of his sour-faced mother, who sat silently eyeing the goings-on and speaking only to Nugent and an elder daughter, engaged to marry some baronet. No, regardless of his fortune and connexions, Elizabeth Bennet could not be shackled to such a man. Yet by spurning Nugent's offer, she was expected to accept whatever man came along next and admired her enough to want her as his wife. Admired? Any man would admire her. What if a man wanted her only in order to conquer her mind and quash her spirit?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elizabeth found Gracechurch Street a welcome respite from the chaos of Longbourn and the whispers she suspected were rampant in Meryton. Much as she missed Jane, she did not overly regret her absence from the business of the wedding arrangements; letters from her sisters spoke of laces and dinners at Netherfield and parties and ‘poor Jane having to call Miss Bingley her sister’.

Miss Bingley will be sister to all of you as well, she thought. And she is equally horrified.

She preferred the time spent amusing her little cousins, enjoying the novels and poetry that her aunt kept in her sitting room, and taking long walks accompanied by her maid or her uncle’s man down the busy thoroughfares and verdant parks. Visits to the British Museum, the theatre, and bookshops gave her equal pleasure, particularly as Mr and Mrs Gardiner kept her close company and her uncle’s glare was practised on any gentleman who dared to look twice at Elizabeth .

The three weeks which had proved such an antidote to Elizabeth’s sensibilities were quickly forgot when she arrived in Kent with Sir William and Maria Lucas and laid eyes on her cousin. If marriage was said to be the making of a man, it had done Mr Collins no favours. His hubris had grown in tandem with his belly.

Charlotte must spend all her time letting out his trousers and jackets.

After a grandiose speech welcoming them to his ‘humble home’, and allowing Charlotte to greet her father and sister, Mr Collins proceeded to pull them this way

and that to point to and boast of the glories of Hunsford Parsonage. Nearly every sentence began the same: “Lady Catherine graciously suggested...”

Elizabeth caught Charlotte’s eye and gave her a small smile. She knew she could not indulge her true feelings and mock the man to his wife, but she hoped Charlotte would tolerate her own need to make sport of the ridiculous. The ridiculous Lady Catherine, that is.

“Mr Collins has benefited greatly from the knowledge and advice of his patroness,” Elizabeth said quietly as they watched the vicar leading the rest of the party into the garden.

“Lady Catherine has been generous indeed. Not even my father could offer more guidance or insight.” Charlotte pressed Elizabeth’s hand. “I have missed you, Lizzy. Your humour and good sense will be a balm to me.”

Returning the squeeze, Elizabeth accompanied Charlotte on a slow pace towards Mr Collins and the Lucases. “Good sense is in short supply at Longbourn, but as I have replenished myself these past weeks at the Gardiners, I am sure to have much to spare you. ”

“Thank you. As you see, Mr Collins is quite proud of our home and somewhat overawed by Lady Catherine. She is aware of your visit—Mr Collins has been effusive in speaking of my father to her, and of your position as my dear friend and the second-born daughter of the cousin he is heir to.”

Elizabeth, all too aware of Mr Collins’s lack of discretion, swallowed. “Effusive? Dare I ask after my description?”

“Worry not. She knows only that our families have long been friends, and that you enjoy walking, and play and sing.”

“I do two of those things rather badly, as you know.”

“I know nothing of the kind, Lizzy, but she will request you exhibit, and ensure you realise her own daughter would exceed your talent had she ever learnt.”

Elizabeth stopped, delighted to see Charlotte’s sly humour unaltered. “Truly? This is the glorious Anne de Bourgh with whom you are friends, and who was said to be engaged to Mr Darcy?”

“Shhh.” Charlotte waved and called to her husband, who stood only yards away, staring curiously at them. “I shall go see to tea, Mr Collins.” She tugged Elizabeth’s arm and they began their return to the house. “Miss de Bourgh is everything opposite to what her mother and Mr Collins will tell you. She does have a certain sweetness, but is excessively lonely?—”

“I should imagine?—”

“And I have endeavoured to become her friend. You are a bold creature and while you may frighten Miss de Bourgh with your liveliness, she will like you. However, I must warn you of Lady Catherine’s temperament. It will not shock you that she holds strong opinions and shares them frequently.”

Accustomed to admonitions from her mother and aunts that she too shared her views rather frequently, Elizabeth simply nodded. “I will do nothing to offend her or lessen her approval of Mr Collins, Charlotte. I promise.”

Whatever Elizabeth had anticipated of her first meeting with Lady Catherine, Rosings itself was overwhelming. Overwhelmingly oppressive and garish. As they were led through the grand hall and through a series of smaller, increasingly dark rooms towards the afternoon parlour where the lady awaited them, she reminded herself not to laugh aloud or stare too long at its shadowed opulence. She had been in museums

and galleries and spent her childhood playing hiding games in the winding halls and elegant rooms of Meryton's grandest houses. But while those homes paled in size and grandeur to this palace, they, at least, had light and warmth within their walls.

The coldness extended to Lady Catherine's welcome, which Elizabeth would better characterise as an interrogation. Tall and proud in her high-backed gilt-edged chair, her faded beauty made harsh by years of frowning, she peered closely at Sir William and Elizabeth but—much to the relief of the trembling girl—appeared to dismiss Maria.

And then the questions began, and Elizabeth could not but admire Lady Catherine's disregard for manners as she spoke over Mr Collins' speeches and interrupted any replies she and Sir William attempted. Her life and family were canvassed and found wanting, and Mr Collins began apologising for the disappointment he too had found upon visiting Longbourn. Pleased for the respite, Elizabeth turned away and looked at Charlotte, who sat quietly, calming her sister and smiling serenely at Miss de Bourgh, a singularly unimpressive figure who attracted more sympathy than interest. Pale, and cloaked in a heavy shawl in the dim room, she appeared more spectral than flesh; only her sniffing and an occasional rise of a handkerchief betrayed her humanity. How could anyone believe her able to be the wife of a man as vigorous as Mr Darcy?

“Miss Bennet?—”

Elizabeth turned quickly back to Lady Catherine, prepared for judgment after confessing so much that had earned her disfavour.

“Your education is inadequate, you have no connexions of merit, and you profess yourself content to teach these meagre talents to your elder sister's future children? You are a pretty thing. Have you no interest in improving your own marriage prospects?”

“No, I do not.”

The lady’s squints and frowns made clear her displeasure. “Your cousin is a strange, impertinent creature, Mr Collins.”

Seeing the obvious pleasure he took in Lady Catherine’s unknowing agreement with his own judgment nearly caused Elizabeth to laugh aloud. Instead, she managed only to nod. “Your discernment is impressive, Lady Catherine, for while others have made similar observations of my character, you have concluded it so quickly. I am all admiration.”

A pinched look was her only reward for such a compliment.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mr Collins's unhappiness with Elizabeth after her tête-à-tête with Lady Catherine was clear. The following morning, he approached her from his garden as she returned from a walk and insisted she stop and take in a particular view of the house from his berry patch. She saw nothing special in the vista, but mindful of Charlotte, complimented the impressive height of the chimney and the pretty flower box. It was a small effort to give him relief that she was not a full troglodyte.

He smiled, revealing his crooked front tooth. "You see the happy life enjoyed here by my dear Charlotte, one which you might have had. I am cousin to your father and his heir, and you must understand what you have lost for yourself and your family. Whatever your disappointment, do not forsake marriage. Redeem yourself in the eyes of God and perhaps you will have another suitor."

It was kindly meant, she told herself, and expressed those sentiments to him as graciously as she could. When it was clear Mr Collins was satisfied she would heed his advice, Elizabeth went quickly towards the house, where Charlotte greeted her with the post.

Handing her a letter from Jane, Charlotte said, "Please share any interesting news with me, Lizzy. Sisters always include interesting tit-bits in their letters, and my only sister is here with me."

Promising to share news and gossip, Elizabeth went eagerly to her room.

Dearest Lizzy,

How I miss you here at Longbourn! My days are kept busy with Mama's planning, and I am helping Mary with her piecework. She is taking a particular interest in church of late. Mr John Smith, the nephew of Mr Wilkshire, has come to visit before returning to Cambridge, where he is studying for the church. With his uncle's blessing, he has undertaken an ambitious endeavour to clothe children in a London poorhouse, which Uncle Gardiner told us holds the lowliest of the poor. Mary is ably assisting, setting aside her playing and reading to instead gather scraps and fabrics and fill basket after basket with garments. Kitty helps too, and Lydia has set herself the task of collecting old lace and ribbon and trimming the dresses. Mama has discerned some mutual admiration between Mary and Mr Smith, and though it remains unspoken by any but her, in loud whispers to me and Mr Bingley, she is encouraging the effort by remaking Papa's old shirts.

Do you see how long it has taken for me to mention Mr Bingley? Like you, he is ever in my thoughts, and to my good fortune, he is here at Longbourn every day. Only rain has kept us apart. Although fewer in number than a month ago, his guests do occupy his time. After his aunts returned to Scarborough, Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst went to town for a week to visit 'quality shops'. We rub along well enough, though I confess I prefer Louisa's company and conversation to that of Caroline. Mr Nugent remains at Netherfield, which itself makes clear he does not suffer from your refusal. In fact, Lizzy, and do sit down to read these words, his admiration has again been piqued. Not by Miss Bingley or Priscilla Lewis—as hoped by her mother—but by our Kitty! At every gathering, they sit and laugh together, and he often accompanies Mr Bingley to Longbourn. When he does not, Kitty seems affected by his absence. Mama is beside herself. You know well the expectant gleam in her eye. I hesitate to think what Mr Nugent's mother thinks of his interest in Bennet sisters, nor do I believe Kitty understands what it is to live with one's mother-in-law. But I speak too soon, and too much, because I miss talking to you here, on my bed, while plaiting our hair. If you were here, I would ask you to forgive me for encouraging Mr Nugent's suit; it is clear to me how much more sense and understanding of the world you have, and I would not wish you plagued by a difficult mother-in-law.

I shall see you in little more than a fortnight, and we shall laugh and be merry and talk of anything but lace and white soup.

Your sister,

Jane

Elizabeth fell back on her bed. Such a letter! Mary and the vicar's nephew? Kitty and Mr Nugent? How could she believe him sincere in his feelings, this green young man who seemed far too eager to hand his heart to a lady named Bennet? Well, it was not her place to worry. There was a husband for every lady, a wife for every man—it was matching them together, ensuring they liked and complemented one another, that proved most difficult.

It was two days later, on their fourth visit to Rosings, this time to view an early bloom in Lady Catherine's rose garden, that Elizabeth learnt her stay in Kent would soon be vastly more complicated, and interesting.

“My nephew tends my sister's rose garden at Pemberley, which has these very roses in the hothouse. It is cooler there, being farther north, and I daresay Rosings's gardens are finer with the sea air, but my sister Anne insisted on planting the same blooms to which she had been accustomed as a girl, in our mother's garden.”

Lady Catherine's wistful smile softened the usual harshness of her countenance, and for the first time, Elizabeth could truly see a trace of resemblance between her and Mr Darcy. It was not the eyes or nose; his eyes were dark and his nose patrician while Lady Catherine was light and had a small, upturned nose that hardly fit her scale. But the half-smile was familiar, and especially becoming to a face such as Lady Catherine's. It was the first smile Elizabeth had seen on her. She lived a life alone, with a silent daughter and servants. How lonely it must be .

“Darcy arrives tomorrow, with my brother’s younger son, as they always do for Easter.” Lady Catherine turned away from the flowers, her face once again stern. “They miss it so here, where they spent much time as boys, and Darcy especially misses Anne, for whom he has always had special consideration.”

Perhaps his presence will lure her from the house, Elizabeth thought, trying desperately to refrain from exhibiting the thrum of excitement that ran through her at the news of Mr Darcy’s arrival. She had made effort after effort not to think of him. Beyond a possible renewal of their acquaintance at Jane and Mr Bingley’s wedding, she had not imagined any reason they might again meet. But they would, here in Kent! If not at Rosings, they might encounter one another on the grounds and most certainly at church services. She would have the opportunity to thank him again for his assistance that day, and perhaps he would wryly comment on all that she had lost in not becoming Mrs William Collins.

Would he wish to see her? They were acquaintances, not friends, who had spent days in a house barely speaking, and hours in a damp shelter, talking and fending off Mr Collins’s various affronts. He had done what a gentleman ought, and sat guard over her in the presence of her loathsome cousin. But he had turned away quickly when it was clear their ordeal would end.

Yes, Mr Darcy would be polite to her, but she could expect little more. And having already piqued the interest and temper of Lady Catherine, perhaps it was best she act as a new and disinterested party to any conversation that involved him.

How disappointing it would be if that pleased him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Darcy glanced at the clock. Near an hour gone of their stay at Rosings, and the hands on the green-japanned floor clock could not move more slowly. Perhaps it needed winding. It was the newest piece in the room—a wedding gift to Sir Lewis and Lady Catherine from some long-forgot de Bourgh relation. It ticked loudly enough to remind them of time passing, but it was not loud enough to drown out the sounds of Mr Collins and Lady Catherine.

He shifted in his chair; likely it had been just as uncomfortable two hundred years ago when first stuffed with horsehair. His movements, gratefully, did not catch his aunt's eye due to the gloom that permeated the rooms at Rosings. Lady Catherine insisted curtains be drawn on sunny days to protect her rugs, tapestries and upholsteries and would not allow candles to be lit until sundown. Stale air redolent of heavy perfumes and medicinal salves permeated the place, doing as much damage to the precious fabrics as any sunlight, he thought. A good airing out, as done twice a year at Pemberley, would likely reduce the heaviness and stench. In their own rooms and in the study and library where their aunt would not tread, he and Richard would have the curtains thrown open and windows flung wide to bring in fresh air.

If only they could get to those rooms. His aunt allowed them only a brief moment to refresh themselves, followed by a pot of weak, tepid tea, before besieging them in a tumult of questions followed by declarations refuting their answers. Darcy's mood was little helped by the presence of the odious cleric whom he had last seen in November, wet and mud-splattered, after his attempt to force marriage on Elizabeth Bennet.

Richard's quiet snore came at the exact moment Collins said something of real interest.

“Sir William Lucas, my dear Charlotte's father, has happily returned to his home in Meryton, situated not two miles from Longbourn Village, the estate where Charlotte and I shall one day make our home. It is nothing to Rosings's glories, of course, and its gardens pale even to the plantings at Hunsford Parsonage, which I have modelled on those designed by Lady Catherine herself, and which Sir William compared to those he saw when he visited St James's Palace some eight—or was it eleven years—ago? I trust that you, Mr Darcy, have an equal appreciation for?”

“Sir William has visited here recently?”

Collins looked startled to be so addressed. They had greeted one another politely, seeming oddly united in wishing not to provoke any suspicion from Lady Catherine. He is fortunate I am acknowledging him, let alone doing it politely .

“Yes, um, he came some two weeks ago to deliver Maria, younger sister to my dear Charlotte, for a visit that shall last through much of April.”

The younger sister was friend to Elizabeth's younger sisters, all of them lacking sense but fond of gossip and therefore in possession of news. Quickly Darcy determined he would pay a call on the parsonage as soon as possible.

Collins continued to natter away until interrupted by Lady Catherine. “Your other visitor, Mrs Collins's friend, is an odd sort of girl, rather proud and eager to share opinions yet deficient in the education and arts which are the foundation of any estimable young lady, as with my dear Anne, who would—had her health allowed—be proficient in all the capacities which a country girl such as your cousin and her many, many sisters, is lacking.”

‘Your cousin and her many, many sisters...’

For perhaps the first time in her life, Lady Catherine had Darcy’s full attention. She saw it, and misunderstanding the reasons for it, carried on.

“Indeed, Darcy, much as Georgiana must regret not accompanying you to Rosings, where she provides happy company for Anne and heeds my advice on her playing, you should be glad not to have your sister meet Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

She is here? Half a mile from where I sit?

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he said slowly, and rather stupidly, to Mr Collins, “is a guest at your parsonage?” Dear lord, she is staying in the home of her petulant, rejected suitor?

The man shuffled his feet, looking from the floor to Lady Catherine and back to the floor before replying. “ Yes, my cousin Elizabeth accompanied Sir William and my sister Maria. Miss Elizabeth, as Lady Catherine said, has proved herself in need of a greater understanding of her present situation in life and the station to which she can aspire?—”

“Mr Collins.” Darcy struggled not to leap from his chair and thrash the man. “Your cousin, Mr Bennet, is a gentleman. In that, he and I are equal, and thus his daughters’ present situation is one that permits them, nay, expects them, to aspire to the highest station in society.”

Richard’s sharp inhale showed him to be awake. “Good work, old man,” he said quietly.

“Darcy,” cried his aunt. “You cannot compare yourself, one who carries the ancient bloodlines of Fitzwilliams and Darcys, to that of a common landowner whose estate

is entailed away!”

He could, actually. Having heard quite enough and anticipating an unfortunate number of similar experiences in the days to come, he was altogether too eager to lay eyes on Elizabeth. He stood. “I should like to pay my respects to Mrs. Collins.”

Lady Catherine was indignant. “You have not been to your rooms, nor seen Anne, who must surely be stirring from her nap.”

Darcy gave her the smile he kept in reserve for moments such as these: the smile of her favourite nephew, the smile he had inherited from his mother. “There will be time, Aunt. I truly wish to stretch my legs a bit after the journey here.”

As expected, Lady Catherine softened and gave him an indulgent nod before narrowing her eyes and demanding they not stay away long. “Do not dawdle. Anne is all expectation for your visit.”

Collins, seemingly overcome with gratitude by such a tribute to his wife, disregarded any antipathy or insults between them and clearly misunderstood the obvious reason for Darcy’s wish to visit Hunsford. He bumbled his way through several bows before they could extract themselves from the room.

Richard stifled his laughter, and turning away to avoid Lady Catherine’s scrutiny, murmured, “Darcy, what a fire you have lit and left untended.”

He shrugged. Elizabeth was here, in Kent. She had likely stood on the very carpet on which he walked.

He steadied himself, realising he had never once given thought—or paid a visit—to the parsonage. He felt Richard’s bemusement as they walked across the park, but he was intent on ignoring both men—most particularly the one breathing heavily as he

continued delivering an endless deluge of words lauding Lady Catherine and the position of the house, the trees, and the sky above.

Although the gardens were large and plentiful, the parsonage itself was small. Far smaller than even the dower house at Pemberley. Certainly not suitable for Elizabeth Bennet.

Her stupid, erstwhile suitor finally ceased his oration and gesticulations and, rushing ahead through the gate, called out to his beleaguered wife. Collins stopped on the stair, quaking with anticipation, and then, with every form of grandiosity disguised as modesty, led them into the house and into a small parlour, where he announced them to the three ladies within.

Darcy spotted Elizabeth immediately, seated by one of the room's narrow windows, a letter in her hands. She looked up, startled, and rose. He nodded quickly, forcing himself to remain expressionless, and then turned to Mrs Collins, paying her his compliments on her marriage and new home. A younger lady, obviously Miss Lucas, a prettier version of her elder sister, sat wide-eyed staring at him. Introductions were made and finally he was free to look at Elizabeth and greet her.

She looked extraordinary. No—she looked as she had in his memories, but those memories were nothing to the actual sight of her sitting feet away from him, her eyes bright and expectant, her cheeks flushed as though she were as pleased to see him as he to see her. The memory of his last glimpse of her, gazing at him from her seat in the pony cart, mirthful and suppressing laughter at the odd sounds made by her cousin, rose in his memory.

Eager to hear her speak of the past few months they had not been in company, and concerned for her welfare under Collins's roof, Darcy strove to be more composed than he had when he first heard of her presence. "Miss Bennet, I am pleased to see you again. I hope you are well and your family is in good health."

She smiled but her reply was overrun by his loutish cousin.

“Ah, the redoubtable Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I have heard much of you and your exploits?—”

Darcy shot Richard a warning glance—could the man not recall in whose house he sat?—and quickly addressed Mrs Collins. “Your house appears to be most conveniently situated and the garden is very pleasant.”

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. It is kind of you and Colonel Fitzwilliam to visit us. ”

He could think of little else to carry the conversation and pondered what he should say to Elizabeth without betraying his eagerness. Groping for a topic, he once again addressed her. “And is your family in good health?”

She laughed lightly, teasing him for his awkward manners. “They are, thank you, as of the last time I saw them before departing Longbourn in February.”

February? Was she forced to flee from Nugent?

She clearly saw the question in his eyes. “After Jane became engaged to Mr Bingley, I joined my aunt and uncle in town. Happy as I am for their betrothal, my mother’s enjoyment of wedding planning was rather overwhelming.”

Mr Collins cleared his throat loudly and moved to stand by his wife’s chair. “My own wedding was quite wonderful, as I chose a bride of great modesty and thrift who saw no purpose in such grand expense.”

“Mama made Charlotte’s dress,” whispered Miss Lucas, “for there was no time to have one made in town.”

“Hear, hear,” said Richard, sprawled in a chair far too small for him. “Enough talk of frippery, Miss Lucas. You and Miss Bennet must tell us your thoughts on Kent. Have you yet laid eyes on the great haunted oak?”

The girl gasped, her sister served tea, and as Richard told a wildly embellished tale of the giant oak tree struck by lightning back when they were boys, and the burnt scarring on the trunk that resembled a giant wolf, Darcy studied Elizabeth. The unease she had clearly felt upon their arrival was gone and her eyes filled with mirth at Richard’s story of three boys terrified of, and then fascinated by the gnarled, half-dead oak. He imagined taking her there, showing her round Rosings—mocking its dated grandeur and faded aspirations of Versailles.

“Oh, I should like to see this tree,” cried Miss Lucas.

Richard chuckled. “And you, Miss Bennet? Are you prepared for the sight of this majestic monstrosity?”

“I would be delighted to take its measure,” she said. “There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened.”

Darcy’s lips twitched. Mindful of Collins’s presence, he remained silent.

“Then we shall plan an expedition for next week, perhaps? Poor Darcy here has much work to do with my aunt’s new steward in the coming days. Does he not already appear beset by it all?”

Darcy frowned. His cousin’s charming garrulousness was irritating and loud in the small room, particularly as it was directed at Elizabeth. Moreover, the mention of his aunt only re-lit the reverence Collins held for her, and once again, he began a series of platitudes towards her care of Rosings.

Much as he pitied Mrs Collins for the choice she had made, his thoughts were only of Elizabeth and what she must endure while at the parsonage. He was wild to speak to her, to hear how she had fared these past months, to tell her that he had remained concerned for her welfare. He met her eyes only once more, fearing what he might see in her expression, or she in his.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“What a singular event,” Charlotte said to her later, as they prepared for dinner and the inevitable expressions of awe and self-congratulation Mr Collins was certain to spew in between bites of what smelled like a delicious ragout. “Their carriage had passed the parsonage only an hour or so earlier, and yet Lady Catherine’s nephews hurried here from Rosings. I understand that neither has called here even before Mr Collins secured the position. It is quite interesting, I think.”

Elizabeth nodded, refusing to acknowledge the expressive look her friend was giving her. “Perhaps the desire for fresh air was especially overwhelming to the gentlemen, or perhaps they were squabbling and Lady Catherine tossed them out before they came to blows.”

“Lizzy!” Biting back a smile, Charlotte glanced round the dining room before stepping closer. “Do be careful. Your prior acquaintance with Mr Darcy is somewhat more familiar than is proper and while Mr Collins has remained quiet on the events that occurred that particular day, prudence is a wiser course than humour when in his or Lady Catherine’s company.”

Of course, neither was present but Elizabeth understood her friend’s need for caution. She lived with a mother and sisters who shared secrets and gossip innocently, while Charlotte dwelt in a house where any business conducted or conversation held was undoubtedly reported to Lady Catherine. Since Sir William’s departure from Hunsford, Elizabeth had felt Mr Collins’s presence more keenly, as if he now felt free to observe her closely and determine whether she regretted what she had turned down. Mr Darcy’s arrival at Rosings, compounded by his almost immediate call at

the parsonage, could only worsen his scrutiny.

She leant over the table to re-arrange the soup spoons misplaced earlier by Maria, who was eagerly assisting Hunsford's sole harried servant with table-setting. "I have had wrath and scorn enough for those events. I would not wish for further scrutiny from Lady Catherine."

"Nor would Mr Darcy, yet he came here in all haste and, with his cousin, was all friendliness. Whatever attention he pays you, Lizzy, or you to him, I only caution you for your own sake: do not let it be observed. Lady Catherine is firm in her declarations that her nephew will marry Miss de Bourgh."

Elizabeth lowered her voice to match Charlotte's near-whisper. "She looks decidedly askance at me and cannot think me any threat to her daughter, a lady of noted birth and many, many talents—had she only had the good health to learn and practise them." She smiled, happy to see Charlotte's amused exasperation. "You see, I am a hopeless case, incorrigibly in need of laughter."

"Perhaps you may need it," Charlotte said. "Maria has had a letter from Kitty, in which she shares complaints about Mr Nugent that sound similar to yours."

Elizabeth pretended surprise but she was heartened her younger sister showed discernment.

Charlotte lowered her voice. "You have said nothing to me, but is it true what Kitty says, that your father has declared you must accept your next proposal?"

Everyone in Meryton must know, she thought, making it a most dangerous place for me. "Yes, although perhaps I shall regain my autonomy if Mary or Kitty becomes engaged. Forgive me if I have not put myself forwards to meet your male neighbours and parishioners."

“You have been discerning, for good reason. No woman should be forced to accept an offer, and much as I admit liking the idea of you being situated nearby, there is not a man in the neighbourhood worthy of you. However, Colonel Fitzwilliam is good-humoured and garrulous in manner, if you like that sort of thing.” Charlotte could scarcely hide a smirk. “And we could spend every Easter together.”

Charlotte’s diverting talk of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s charms did nothing to quell the storm brewing within Elizabeth. She could only pick at her dinner, her thoughts too heavily engaged in the happy memory of seeing Mr Darcy. That he remained handsome was no surprise, nor were the formal manners she was accustomed to. Yet she could not comprehend his apparent eagerness to see her almost immediately upon his arrival in Kent.

When he had departed Meryton without waiting to see her, she had assumed their connexion over—gladly on his end, despite the kindness he had shown to her for a few hours. Yes, he had pressed Jane as to her welfare, but the brevity of their friendship was clearly overcome by the difference in their stations and the natural course of their lives.

But if he had wished to forget their acquaintance—a wise decision in view of their company—he seemed to have forgone it. What was behind his haste to see her? What excuse did he make to his aunt to leave Rosings so soon after arriving, to visit the parsonage? What, she wondered, had prompted it, and was he now satisfied to see her in good health?

In good health! I was blushing and barely civil, startled as I was by seeing him here and fully aware of Mr Collins, standing behind him, watching and listening to all that occurred. Loathsome mushroom!

Much as she wished to see one man, evading the notice of the other would remain challenging.

In spite of a restless night which found her at her window watching the moon until at last, near one o'clock, her eyelids drooped, Elizabeth was awake early and out in the dew-covered woods before the rest of the parsonage stirred. She was not expecting to encounter anyone, nor expecting anyone to be on a walk with a similar lack of ambition, but she could not hold back a frisson of delight when she saw a familiar figure turning the corner ahead of her. Even with the sun at his back, shining into her eyes and nearly blinding her, she knew it was Mr Darcy.

“Good morning, Miss Bennet.”

Shielding her eyes with a hand, she smiled up at him. “Good morning, Mr Darcy.”

He stepped quickly to one side, allowing her to turn herself and escape the blinding rays. “I find you in peril again, although I prefer the sun to the rain as an opponent.” Apparently noting her amused expression, he added, “Or an intransigent suitor.”

At that she laughed. “Indeed, that was a permutation of perils.”

“May I walk with you?” He gestured towards a path shielded by trees.

As they began strolling, he said, “I am pleased to see you again. I apologise I was unable to see for myself at Longbourn that you were well, but there were previous, rather urgent, demands on my time—business here at Rosings, in fact—that I could not put aside.”

That Lady Catherine was the cause of his hasty departure from Netherfield was some comfort. She was not a lady whose importuning could be easily ignored.

“Truly,” he continued, “were you well? Are you well?”

Shaking off her stupor, Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, I was fortunate not to have a fever,

nor to have need for Mr Jones's tonics, but my mother made me keep to my bed for a full day, and thus I missed your call."

"Miss Bennet assured me you were in full health, and when I was in town, I learnt from Bingley's sisters that Mr Collins had wed a young lady who was not from Longbourn. "

Mr Darcy's frown matched her own, although hers was in disgust at his source of information. Then he sighed.

"It was a relief to me that you escaped him, and that the events of the hours we spent with him were not somehow twisted to ensure your acquiescence to his offer."

"Offers . Indeed, much as my father was disgusted by Mr Collins's conduct, it was your testimony, and that of Mr Goulding, that determined he deserved no such consideration. Of course," she added, "we were aided by Lady Lucas's fortuitous arrival at Longbourn and her application to Mr Collins that Lucas Lodge would be more welcoming to his recovery, that truly guaranteed his future with Charlotte."

He grimaced. "Yes, I believe Mrs Collins is...well-situated. A fine house and garden, and the townspeople are a good sort."

Elizabeth nodded, though in fact she knew very little of the neighbours, careful as she had been to avoid notice as an eligible young lady of small fortune and little charm but powerless to refuse a proposal.

As they walked past a tall oak tree, Mr Darcy kicked away a branch. Perhaps it jostled the same memory in him as in her, of the clumsy cleric's branch-bashing last autumn, for he turned the subject to Mr Collins. "How do you find your cousin? Has marriage much changed him?"

She shook her head and laughed lightly. “Indeed it has. His wardrobe is better fitted, though whether that is due to Charlotte’s skill with needle and thread or tastier dinners that help him fill out his jackets and trousers, I cannot say. However, he is as dedicated to admiring walls and chimneys at Rosings as he was as a single man in Meryton.”

Mr Darcy chuckled. “Well, it is said marriage maketh the man.”

“Yes, but whether it maketh him better or worse will always provide debate.”

She turned to glimpse his expression, hoping to see him smiling, but instead he appeared lost in thought. Once again, I have taken a joke too far. In a more sober voice, she asked, “And you, sir? I hope you were unscathed by our brief moment of rain-dampened camaraderie. You have not returned to Netherfield, but been busy with your own estate?”

“Always. Pemberley is well run by my steward and servants, but it is my home and I prefer to spend what time I can there, with my sister.” He chuckled. “But unscathed? Yes and no. The estate matters I came here to address last autumn also required I tramp in the mud, and the boots previously saturated at Longbourn did not survive.”

“Your poor boots! I hope your valet was kinder to you than my mother was to me about my hems and gloves that day. And your greatcoat! It was a kindness you lent it to me, and I hope it was not ruined.”

He slowed, his hands behind his back, and she felt him looking at her. “You need not worry for my boots or coat, or even the state of my hat, although that too has seen better days.”

His gaze seemed to penetrate her, sweeping over her face as if searching for something. She knew not what and her own gaze fell to his lips and the soft smile he

wore. Unsettled, uncertain of what had just passed between them, she took a breath and began to walk again. She could think of little to say and was pleased when he managed to speak.

“I was quite surprised—happily surprised—to learn you were at Hunsford, albeit in the home of the man you so forcefully refused. I hope it is not uncomfortable for you.”

“With a mother and sisters fond of gossip, I am accustomed to caution in my conversation. But here, as a guest, I am quieter than usual and more restrained—a true test of my penchant to laugh at the absurd and nonsensical.” When Mr Darcy smirked, she knew he had understood, and continued. “Mr Collins is tolerant of my friendship with Charlotte, but his resentment and his need to remind me of what I turned down, is never far from mind.” Or tongue.

“Has he threatened you or made you feel unsafe in any way?” His voice was sharp; she could hear the anger in it.

She lifted her hand and touched his arm in reassurance. “No, all is well. I simply take care not to offend him or Lady Catherine, but you know I often fail to contain my impertinence, or my enjoyment of wit at the expense of others’ harmony.”

He gave no sign that he had heard her. She had expected a chuckle or at least a smile, but his head was lowered. Realising her hand remained on his arm, she pulled it away and began to walk, her hand tingling.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Two days later, Mr and Mrs Collins, Miss Lucas, and Elizabeth joined the party in Lady Catherine's largest, and in Darcy's mind, most garishly ugly, drawing room. His aunt received them civilly, but it was clear to him that their company was acceptable only because she scorned her closest neighbours and disliked those whose fortunes or taste might rival her own. In sum, nobody else was available for or would accept her invitation.

The hideous room could hold a hundred people, yet it felt suddenly small when the party from Hunsford entered. Elizabeth was clad in a pretty blue gown, a mirthful expression playing on her lips; her eyes briefly caught his own, and for several minutes afterwards, he found his breath was short. After their encounter in the woods—the most agreeable half an hour he had spent in months—Darcy had not had a moment to wander the paths between Rosings and the parsonage and seek her out. Instead, when he was supposed to be squaring Rosings's dwindling accounts, he had been preoccupied thinking of their conversation and how deeply gratified he felt hearing her thoughts and reassurances. His distraction was made worse by the memory of her smile and the feeling of her hand pressing on his arm. Innocently done—the briefest of contacts—but had a woman's touch ever ignited such feeling?

Conscious not to show true pleasure in Elizabeth's company when his aunt and Mr Collins were present, he watched as Richard moved quickly towards her and Miss Lucas. His cousin was clearly eager. Since he did not read and had no estate business with which to occupy himself, anything was a welcome relief to him at Rosings. It was unsurprising, then, that he seated himself by Elizabeth, and engaged her immediately in a lively discussion. Darcy, entrapped as he was by his aunt on one

side and Anne on the other, covertly observed their conversation. He overheard bits relating to travel and music. Elizabeth appeared immensely entertained, and much to his annoyance, their conversation flowed with an alarming spirit.

It took little time for him to realise that she had captured his cousin's fancy. Richard was a serious man when it came to soldiering, but when with family, he preferred levity, and when at Rosings, he had a bent for the absurd. 'It is the only method of survival under Lady Catherine's roof,' he claimed.

Was he now determined to have a flirtation with Elizabeth, who took similar enjoyment in examining the absurd and laughing at it? Darcy cursed inwardly. I had felt responsibility to watch Collins, but now my cousin as well?

Beyond recounting the overview of their acquaintance in Meryton, encompassing the days spent confined at Netherfield and the hours in the boat-house, Darcy had been careful in speaking of Elizabeth to his cousin. Richard enjoyed teasing him too much, particularly when it concerned a lady. Close as they were, it was not Richard to whom he would speak of any real interest in a woman. In fact, he would not reveal himself to anyone until his mind was made up, and he had yet to encounter any lady who piqued true interest, let alone intent.

At least, not until Elizabeth Bennet. He had been unable to sleep the previous night, tossing in his bed as he thought of her small smiles, the familiar expression on her countenance—teasing, amused, overly aware of the foibles of her company.

He spent dinner mired in frustration—discreetly watching Richard speaking amiably to Elizabeth—and disgust, listening to Collins exalt Lady Catherine's estimable steerage of Rosings. If only he knew how poorly she managed both her land and her coffers. When coffee was over, Richard, in a voice no one could ignore, reminded Elizabeth of having promised to play for him. When did she make him any promise? Darcy wondered resentfully. He watched as she moved directly to the instrument and

began to play a light country air. Lady Catherine listened to less than half the song, and then began talking, as loudly as before, to him.

Mortified by her ill manners, he paid little attention to whatever aspersions she was undoubtedly casting, for he perceived that Richard, now seated beside Elizabeth, was leaning far too close to her—and had more than once grazed her arm. Jealousy flared within him. Having seen Collins attempt his suit was nothing to what he experienced now, and Darcy could feel the tight grip of control he usually maintained slipping away. He was on his feet and moving deliberately towards the pianoforte, stationing himself so that he clearly could see Elizabeth's countenance. Squaring his shoulders, he caught Richard's eye and narrowed his own. His cousin responded with a surprised expression and moved backwards slightly. Suddenly, Lady Catherine's voice rose through the cacophony of music and frustration rattling in his mind.

“What is happening there, that I am excluded? Miss Bennet, have you never learnt to play proper music rather than these rustic tunes?”

Never had Darcy been thankful for his aunt's poor manners, but at this moment, he blessed her.

Elizabeth finished her performance, rose, and smiled at Lady Catherine. “I was unprepared for the magnificence of Rosings's instrument. It is one that should be played only by the most talented, practised hands, and only the greatest compositions should flow forth from it. Alas, I am not assiduous in my practise nor naturally talented, so rather than attempt Pleyel or Schubert or Beethoven, I can only apply myself to those folk songs and country airs they arranged.” She curtseyed and gave the lady a smile with as much sincerity as insouciance. “I hope you were not displeased.”

Darcy could see that Collins was not displeased by Elizabeth's display of humility, but he was too stupid to glean even a hint of the teasing within it. Lady Catherine

paused, as if taking her measure, before bemoaning the absence of Georgiana and the untested genius of Anne and requesting Elizabeth play a Scotch air. Darcy could scarcely look at Elizabeth or Richard for fear of bursting into laughter.

Later, hours after the Hunsford party had returned home, Darcy found his cousin on the terrace, his legs outstretched and boots resting on the stone rail. Richard greeted him happily and passed him a bottle of the brandy he always brought with him to Rosings. As Darcy listened, his cousin grew ever more rapturous about the jolly fun of Elizabeth's company. She had a quick wit and understood his jokes, plainly read the war news, and had a way of unsettling Lady Catherine that was politely subversive.

"She is amusing and pretty, and I must say, she fills a dress nicely."

Darcy tensed. "She is a lady. Do not speak of her in such a manner."

"Yes, well, I am a bit drunk. On bad wine, fine brandy, or love, I cannot say." He laughed loudly.

He was indeed foxed, which Darcy took as some excuse, and likely relishing the chance for conversation with a beautiful, witty woman outside the eyes of the ton .
"You are not serious, then. Only drunk."

Richard sighed loudly. "If there was a way I could afford her as a wife, I would be tempted to pursue her. Imagine the next twenty years watching her flummox Lady Catherine."

I have, thought Darcy. "Set it aside. She has been courted enough by fools and unserious men. "

"Well then, I fit right into it, do I not?"

Yes, but you are dangerous in light of her father's ultimatum . More dangerous knowing of it or less, he could not be certain.

"Leave her be. You cannot have a true interest in her." Darcy turned away. It was a clear night, and every star in the sky seemed to wish to exhibit its bright glow. He felt Richard's eyes boring into him.

"Perhaps I only wish to enjoy my visit here, and she is amusing company. Easy on the eyes, as well. Unlike you , I can enjoy conversation with a lady without exciting society."

"Nor Anne or Lady Catherine." Darcy sat heavily on the stone wall. "I envy you that freedom, to talk, turn pages, enjoy a dance?—"

"Or a flirtation."

"Damnation, you must take care with her."

His cousin lowered his feet to the ground and straightened in his seat. He rose and adjusted his waistcoat before speaking in a measured, if still somewhat thick, voice. "Like you, I am a gentleman, not a rogue. Unlike you, I am brave enough to conduct a flirtation when both parties are amenable. If you mean to have Miss Elizabeth, declare yourself. To her , not to me. Else, I shall continue to monopolise her company and spare you the glares of an angry aunt and forsaken cousin."

Darcy watched him walk off, down the length of the terrace and through the furthest door into the house. His cousin had encouraged him to do as he should and act on his feelings for Elizabeth. What, exactly, those feelings were, however, was the question.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Since Sir William's departure a fortnight earlier, Elizabeth's visit to Hunsford, in company with the Collinses and Maria and a handful of amusing if interminable visits to Rosings, had passed slowly. With the arrival of Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, however, it seemed every day provided fresh conversation and amusement. While Mr Darcy was frequently engaged with his aunt's estate business, the colonel was especially eager to visit the parsonage. Elizabeth enjoyed his cheerful company; his observations were amusing, his conversation easy. And who did not like to laugh, or to see Charlotte lighter in spirits from such gaiety?

She supposed he saved any deeper thought for his duties to his men and the military, and was enjoying a respite away from those responsibilities. Mr Darcy carried heavy responsibilities as well and if his burdens followed him to the dark environs of Rosings' study and what she imagined might be neglected ledgers and accounts, she could not be happy for him. Or herself .

There was a fervour in the colonel, however, that—while amusing—gave her some discomfort. Unlike her younger sisters, she had never been partial to a red coat; the life of an army wife was not one to which she aspired. Although she hoped she was only a distraction to entertain him with conversation while trapped at the gloomy home of his aunt, Elizabeth determined that she would do all she could to discourage anything more. It was easy enough, when he sat near her and kept his attention fixed to her, to draw him away by speaking to Maria about her newest piece of embroidery or whether she knew of Mary's endeavours for the poorhouse.

When Elizabeth again chanced upon Mr Darcy, who appeared to be fond of the

morning dew no matter its effects on his boots, she determined she would enquire about Colonel Fitzwilliam. After greeting one another and taking a path away from the main lane, towards Rosings's long-neglected maze, Mr Darcy surprised her by raising the topic himself.

“You must not think I willingly abandon you to my cousin's attentions. He is eager for entertainment. He despises being idle and can only ride, write letters, fish, and converse with Anne for so many hours.”

“I see. Perhaps I should perform with puppets or do a card trick?”

“No, no, I do not mean to insult your charms,” he said, looking mortified. “You provide wonderfully intelligent and spirited conversation, and I regret not having my share of it.”

Elizabeth burst out laughing. “My word, Mr Darcy, I believe you have paid me a week's worth of compliments at the expense of your own equanimity. I am sorry you and Lady Catherine had no share of our fun.”

Smiling, and clearly relieved, he said, “My aunt has a peculiar sense of ‘fun’. She would not follow that pleasure and happiness could come without any expense, but simply by listening and sharing another's small joys and heartaches. Cordiality.”

“Cordiality underlies friendship and marriage. It is how I would describe the connexion between my aunt and uncle Gardiner, with whom I stayed in town. Of course, I believe Jane and Mr Bingley and Mr Goulding and his new wife also enjoy a similar amity.”

If Mr Darcy, surely hunted by many ladies for his fortune, connexion, and handsome mien, was surprised by her expounding on felicity in marriage, he did not show it. But truly, why should he mind? He had been very clear in November that he had no

designs on her. 'You are safe from both of us.'

When he made no effort to agree or argue her point, she returned to their earlier subject. "I enjoy Colonel Fitzwilliam's company. Each of us suffers from some degree of idleness here."

Her declaration sparked a quick, rather sharp reply. "My cousin is a good man but he is overfond of flirtation. You need not fear unwanted attentions from him."

"I am grateful for your assurance—or was it a warning?" She laughed lightly to conceal her confusion at his bewildering change in tone. "Although I admit his figure and manners far exceed that of some previous suitors, I am not seeking a husband."

He seemed not to hear her. "I will warn him away from you, if needed. "

"I do not require your assistance, sir. Setting aside my own feelings, which are only those of a friend to your cousin, why do you wish him away from me? As I said, I am not seeking a husband. Jane is so full of goodness, she will need me to teach her children how to misbehave."

Mr Darcy stared at her for a moment before looking off in the distance. Whatever he seemed to wish to say went unsaid, and with all ease gone between them, Elizabeth blurted, "I received another proposal, in February from Mr Hurst's cousin."

He frowned and said nothing for a few moments. "I had heard something of Mr Nugent's application to you," he replied finally, gravely. "I confess I am glad, but not surprised, that you found him wanting."

The surprise—and dismay—was Elizabeth's, for having had him as witness to Mr Collins's unwanted entreaties, she was perversely disappointed Mr Darcy had not revealed his knowledge of this more recent event. Of course, it was unreasonable of

her to feel this way; her romantic travails were none of his affair and beyond their previous walk, when had there been opportunity? However, his satisfaction that she refused Mr Nugent did please her. “Wanting for maturity and depth, yes. A fortune that includes a house with eleven bedchambers and three thoroughbreds in the stable is not an inducement to felicity for every lady.” She paused to admire a cluster of bright yellow daffodils, tempted to pluck them but all too aware Mr Collins would be alarmed by her thievery of Lady Catherine’s property.

“I wonder at Miss Bingley’s lack of interest.”

She turned to him, somewhat amazed. “Do you? Perchance she does not wish to live with her mother-in-law.”

“Few wish for that circumstance,” he said. “I met Nugent once, and know of his, um, household. He is much like Bingley was a year or two ago. Earnest and decent, but in need of some seasoning.”

“Ah, yes, I liked him as I did Mr Bingley. But I am too sharp-tongued for such sweet harmony as Jane and Mr Bingley enjoy. My wretched wit would prove a great disappointment to Mr Nugent.”

““Wretched?””

Mr Darcy said it with such disbelief Elizabeth turned towards him, peering up to see why he was aggravated. His frown disappeared when he saw her concern, and his expression quickly softened. Shaking his head slowly, he gave her a small smile.

“Believe me, Miss Elizabeth, nothing about you is wretched.”

She turned away, desperate to hide the blush she could feel heating her cheeks. “Oh, my father tells me to be kinder when I am courted again. In his wisdom, so long as

my suitor has his hair, can keep me supplied in writing paper and walking boots and tolerate my impertinence and summer freckles, I can be satisfied.”

“So little?” His voice did not hide his incredulity. “What of a good income, a home?”

“Those are important as well, but one should not discount the importance of good teeth and hair. So few men can boast of both, I feel quite safe from any importuning.”

Her heart was full that afternoon, thinking about her conversation with Mr Darcy . He is as charming as his cousin, but more careful in displaying it—even to me, whose feelings he does not encourage. He was, she decided, a man accustomed to controlling himself and managing others. He had concurred with her thoughts on Mr Nugent, and not appeared overset by her nervous chattering.

And she had nervously chattered. He discomposed her—his steady gaze and the way he gave her his full attention, his thick, wavy hair, and the striking handsomeness revealed when he smiled.

Poor Miss de Bourgh, his own rebuffed intended, seemed to have been denied not only charm, but the ability to exert control over her own life, an opinion which altered when she accompanied Colonel Fitzwilliam to the parsonage, driving up in a little phaeton drawn by a pair of prancing white ponies. Elizabeth watched from the grassy mound across from the house, where she was labouring over a pencil sketch of the parsonage for Charlotte, as he clambered out of the vehicle. Miss de Bourgh refused to leave her seat and come inside, instead instructing him to remain at the house until her return in half an hour. Her companion, the Mrs Jenkinson known primarily by Elizabeth for having a pianoforte in her rooms, nodded, and the two women and the phaeton disappeared quickly down the lane. Amazed by the delicate lady’s brash directive to him, Elizabeth looked at the colonel, who only shrugged as he walked over to join her on the grass. “Anne prefers to drive with those who do not tell her to slow down or take care on turns.”

She shrugged as well, already knowing that the next thirty minutes would be enjoyably spent. They would be more enjoyable had Mr Darcy joined them. Perhaps the colonel saw something in her expression, for he said, “Anne has little enough for entertainment, and she grows weary of my conversation. She does not care to laugh as you do.”

“In that she is more like your other cousin, Mr Darcy. He smiles, but I have rarely heard him laugh.”

“No? Your confinement in a damp boat-house did not provoke a belly laugh?” He chuckled, but his understanding was apparent. “You have been in company with him here, where he is careful not to show the very little joy he takes in his visits, and at Bingley’s place in the country, where Miss Bingley may have attached herself to his side and made him rather miserable.”

She laughed at his perceptiveness, and setting aside her earlier musings on Mr Darcy’s smile, said, “Indeed, although I may not know Mr Darcy well enough to determine a frown of misery from a grimace of annoyance, his expressions here and at Netherfield are remarkably alike.”

“Whether or not he can show it, Darcy has told me how much he enjoys your company.”

The surge of feeling those words gave her would be examined later. Hoping the heat in her cheeks would subside quickly, she said, “A gentleman in his position, rich and eligible, must be careful in the company of young ladies. Fortunately he knows he is safe from me, and I from him, and that makes for an ease in our conversation.”

When Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared surprised by her observation, Elizabeth began worrying that she had done just the opposite of what she had intended: given him hope if he —despite what Mr Darcy had said—wished to pursue her.

No, you must stop this, she told herself. Not every man you meet wishes to marry you. Only those too green or too unbearable to contemplate.

“Even the most well-guarded heart is vulnerable, Miss Bennet.” He smiled becomingly, and as Charlotte had pointed out to her the day they all first met, the colonel’s broad grin rendered him almost handsome. “Not mine, of course, for I have no time for affairs of the heart. It is better to cry for one’s mama than for the poor wife you may leave a widow.”

On Sunday, she sat in church mindlessly counting the number of times Mr Collins inveighed against sin. She had already heard him reading the sermon aloud in his study, both before and after Lady Catherine had made her changes to it. Now, as her mind wandered, she allowed her eyes to drift as well, settling them on the tall man in the front pew beside the great lady herself. Mr Darcy sat straight and tall, alert and seemingly focused on Mr Collins. It was an admirable use of his concentration, for she could not pretend such interest. Within moments, she saw his expression shift, and his head turn slightly to the side. His eyes met hers. Blushing to be caught staring, she pulled her eyes away but not before she noticed a slight lift to his lips. As she did, Elizabeth felt as though she was being scrutinised; the skin on her neck prickled with the sensation. Much as she wished to turn and discover who was watching her, the wide brim of her Sunday bonnet prevented it. She satisfied herself that it likely was one of the idle widows or the Johnson girls she met when accompanying Charlotte to deliver a food basket and clean cloths when their baby brother was born a fortnight ago.

She smiled at the girls later in the churchyard and while Charlotte and Maria spoke to a neighbour, she watched Colonel Fitzwilliam help his aunt and cousin into their carriage. Mr Collins stood nearby, engaged in conversation with a roughly dressed man she assumed was requesting some assistance; a frowning Lady Catherine watched the two men, heedless of her daughter’s struggles with her shawl in the other seat. The colonel saw it, however, and as he moved to assist his cousin, Mr Darcy

stepped away from the carriage and towards her.

“I hope you are well, and not overly beset by visits from an idle soldier.”

The joking tenor of his voice made her smile—their previous conversation about the colonel seemingly forgot—and she sought to make clear she was not the sole object of those visits. “The ladies of Hunsford Parsonage have appreciated the levity your cousin brings with him.”

“I regret my obligations have prevented my joining him. Tomorrow, if the weather is good, is the date of our excursion to the fabled oak. ”

“Oh yes. We are all excitement for it.”

“Good.” He gestured towards Charlotte and Maria, and walked her to them. “I should caution you that the tree is so large and so fearsome in appearance, that if Lady Catherine ever deigned to walk out and see it, she would command it be cut down in all due haste. You see, only manicured, well-behaved trees in the style of the French are permitted within Rosings Park.”

“I understand you are teasing me and I am sworn to silence,” she said, delighted with his wry warning. “But as with anything that is much praised, I hope the truth of its looks will not disappoint.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The following afternoon was indeed sunny and dry when Darcy and the colonel led the party from Hunsford nearly a mile over low-rolling hills to reach the storied tree. Darcy was overly conscious of Collins's presence. The cleric had insisted on accompanying them on such a 'glorious expedition to see God's creation' and, as expected, had done little more than slow their pace and frustrate his hopes to speak to Elizabeth. Instead, Darcy walked with Miss Lucas, a nervous girl prone to untimely giggling and inexplicably terrified of snakes in the grass, and watched Richard enjoy conversation with Elizabeth and Mrs Collins. He took the opportunity to enquire of the girl's family and satisfy his own curiosity about her brothers, who, he quickly learnt, numbered four.

"Charlotte is eldest, then John and Andrew. John once wished to marry Elizabeth, but then swore off marriage to build his fortune. Now he has married and his wife can spend his fortune, my mother says. Andrew is at school reading the law. Peter and Edward claim they will join the navy and fight pirates and Frenchmen, but Peter is only nine and if he cannot sit still in a carriage, I do not think a boat is ideal for him. And Edward is too fond of Cook's pies. He is rather stout and could sink the vessel."

"True," Darcy replied, amused by such a vivid description of a large, boisterous family. "Yet there is always the army. Or perhaps they could prepare themselves for sea battles in rowboats."

"Oh, we haven't any boats. The stream runs underground nearest Lucas Lodge." She stole a look at him and in a hushed voice, stuttered out, "Sir, last autumn, did Mr Collins truly rescue Lizzy from falling in the stream by Longbourn?"

Coughing kept him from laughing aloud. Of course the little toad claimed himself a hero. “There was never any danger to Miss Elizabeth.”

As they climbed the final knoll and strode through the open field, gasps of awe and delight could be heard as they neared the massive oak. Its huge trunk sprouted dozens of thick, twisted branches reaching up and spanning the sky. Though nearly half those limbs appeared dead, on the others, a canopy of buds gave proof of life and of the generous shade they would provide when their leaves opened. The black scar burnt onto its broad trunk did not disappoint—all four newcomers quickly noticed the fearsome wolf’s face etched within the ashy bark. Wishing to know her thoughts on the impressive sight, Darcy stepped closer to Elizabeth.

“Is it as you expected?”

“It is remarkable,” she said. “As tall as anything I have ever seen, and as magnificent as its mythology. And the wolf is so clear!”

“It is God’s own creation,” declared Collins, his mouth agape as he stared up at the tree.

“It is a frightening size,” cried Miss Lucas.

“John and Andrew and the Goulding boys would have used this as a pirate ship or fortress,” her sister replied. “With Elizabeth right up in the highest branches.”

“Miss Bennet, you are a daring one,” said the colonel admiringly. “Had I had a sister like you, my childhood would have been endlessly jolly.”

She rolled her eyes. “Your parents are fortunate not to have had such a daughter. Until the age of twelve, I was the source of most of my parents’ exasperation.”

Darcy said quietly, so only she could hear, “It has changed then, has it?”

He was pleased to see her smile at his brazen joke. “Fortunately for me, less so for my parents. Beyond the travails of my marital state,” she said only to him before speaking more loudly, “recall I have three younger sisters, one in particular, requiring more attention. And discipline.”

The importance of discipline and order in a household were then thoroughly expounded on by Collins, but his unwilling audience was happily engaged in a close examination of the tree. The three ladies discovered that, holding hands, they still could not embrace the full circumference of its trunk, and in looking up, Elizabeth admitted that she and her surefooted climbing skills would likely face defeat if she dared an attempt to scale even its lowest branches.

“Alas, I have grown too old for adventures in trees,” she said. “I can only take its measure by tracing its trunk or collecting its fallen weapons...um, acorns.”

She gave Mrs Collins a mischievous smile, prompting the lady to laugh aloud. “Yes, I do recall the terrible acorn battles of our youth. Elizabeth had fine aim.” She glanced at her husband, still pacing round the tree, and then back to their party.

“As did I,” Richard said with great enthusiasm. He smiled at Elizabeth. “If we were wed, our children would be the terrors of the woods, for I not only had better aim, but was a better climber than my brother or Darcy.”

Damnation! Has he lost all tact? First he imagines her a sister, now a wife?

Darcy glared at Richard, who shrugged like the oaf he was proving to be.

“I shall not count conjecture as a proposal,” Elizabeth said amidst the uneasy silence which greeted such a declaration. “Even Mr Goulding offered me a toad and one of

his sister's prettiest ribbons."

Darcy grinned, shaking his head in admiration for the way she could use her gift of humour to dispel an awkward moment. "A man who forgets the truth about who was the family's best climber should not be trusted as a husband, let alone a colonel in the king's army."

Amidst the laughter, and as they neared the blankets and platters of cheese, fruits, meats, and bread laid out by Rosings' servants, Elizabeth turned and looked at him. "You too are a 'wretched wit', sir?"

He saw that his amusement pleased her but even better was her smile when he chose a seat next to her. After such an arduous journey on foot, the group drank deeply of wine and lemonade and ate hungrily. Collins extolled the impressive placement of the massive tree. "No other tree dare grow near it, for its beauty demands respect and worship."

He looked round the group and took a large bite of what Darcy suspected was his third meat pie. "As likely," Darcy said pointedly, averting his gaze from the vicar, "the sweeping shade it casts has dwarfed and daunted other saplings, which are denied the sun they need for growth. Not even grass thrives so well under its branches as it does here, mere feet from its canopy."

Richard guffawed. "Never mind my cousin and all his knowledge of estates and farmland, it is clear the mighty tree instils fear amongst its brethren and they have sworn off planting their own roots."

While Collins appeared confused as to whether his opinion was being affirmed or derided, the ladies dedicated themselves to unwrapping the sweets in the picnic basket. Elizabeth held up a tiny lemon tartlet, its crust shiny with a sugary glaze.

“Oh, how Mama would like this for Jane’s wedding breakfast,” she murmured.

Richard reached for a piece of shortcake. “Your sister weds Bingley in a few weeks?”

“Yes, in May.” She replaced the tart and appeared discomfited at the subject she had opened up.

“And perhaps another sister to follow in the coming months,” Miss Lucas cried. “Kitty is once again fond of Mr Nugent.”

Elizabeth shot her a quelling look, and Darcy—mindful that Collins, drowsily recumbent on the blanket but apparently listening—spoke quickly to Richard. “You have yet to regale everyone with the legend of the ghostly shepherd.”

Pleased to take the stage, Richard began the tale—a raucously funny story of missing sheep and swooping branches, night fairies and buried treasure—that their late uncle de Bourgh had told to them and Anne when they were children. As Collins snored lightly, Miss Lucas gripped her sister’s hand, her eyes rapt. Darcy thought her a pleasant young lady, decently mannered and full of blushes. Georgiana would not be harmed by knowing her. But Elizabeth, her face alight with merriment, would be a wonderful friend to his sister. A wonderful sister, truly. He knew, watching her as she followed Richard’s dramatic storytelling, that Elizabeth would recall the story and share it with her family—and perhaps with her future children. His breath caught.

Our children.

He loved her. He thought he had understood it at Pemberley, when thoughts and memories of her began saturating his every waking moment. Such contemplations had been both an indulgence and a daily struggle, but now, as Darcy gazed at Elizabeth, he knew the true strength of his feelings, of his need for her. In the next breath, he realised he had no idea of what she might feel for him , or whether she

even wished to know of his feelings. She was friendly and warm towards him, as she was to everyone. Her comments on marriage and friendship matched his own, but she professed herself uninterested in marriage. ‘ Good teeth and hair’. He looked down, hiding his smile. Knowing that she must accept her next proposal, he could not force her into an unwanted attachment. If I am to be the anomaly, the man whom she does wish as her husband, I wish it on merit and feeling.

Elizabeth Bennet could bring him neither fortune nor connexions. His own relations would see it as a terrible match and baulk at him marrying someone of no consequence in the world. His own parents would have frowned upon it. His aunts and uncles and cousins, even many of his acquaintances, would not appreciate—or even see—Elizabeth’s lively spark, her amiable disposition, or the quality of her mind through the fog of their own displeasure and self-importance. It was a loss for them, for a time. His family needed him and he had no doubt they would come round and give Elizabeth the respect and affection she gave so freely, so often.

Too freely, for too many were drawn to her. He must not wait overlong to earn her hand lest another proposal, wished for or feared, was made to her.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Eager as Elizabeth was to return home and support Jane as her wedding neared, she was reluctant to abandon the company of Mr Darcy. The price of his proximity was one of constant wariness; she knew Mr Collins was watching her and was uncertain as to whether he may have enlisted Maria to help. She was certain he was reading the girl's letters; whether Maria allowed it happily did not matter.

Perhaps it was guilt or simply loneliness, but since her father had gone back to Meryton, Maria often sought out Elizabeth's company. The girl who had never shown much joy in the outdoors had become her eager companion on walks. Elizabeth hoped it was for the company of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who seemed to have enlisted himself as Mr Darcy's afternoon walking companion. How much more enjoyable their outing to the tree would have been had Mr Collins not determined the importance of his presence and his cogitations on the Great and Ghastly Oak. It meant she and Mr Darcy scarcely spoke until her cousin had fallen asleep, and even then, they always had been in company. He seemed little bothered by it, always polite, often warm, but also careful in her company.

She laughed at herself. Wistful thinking about a man who likely thought her far too forward in her opinions. I told him what I seek in marriage and that I do not wish for a husband? He must think me mad.

She was leaving in two days, and would not see him again until the wedding. She hoped he would be welcomed with civility and that the rumours which had arisen when she was packed off to London would have died off.

What will Mama say when I return home after three months without an offer of marriage? Elizabeth could only hope her own foibles would be forgot amidst the happy business of Jane's impending wedding and the budding romances of Mary and Kitty.

However, the letter she had received from Jane today only clouded her future.

Dearest Lizzy,

I am in great anticipation of your return to us at Longbourn. I need you here, with me, to keep me calm, to lead me away from further talk with Mama of laces and puddings, and Mrs Hurst's questions on wall-papers and fabrics. I thought I knew my own opinions but I have found myself persuaded this way towards yellow florals and that way towards green stripes and I fear I no longer know myself.

Elizabeth laughed. Jane would go from a household where her mother ruled to one where Mr Bingley's sisters would never fail to offer opinions on any choice she made. Oh Jane, you must assert yourself, she thought before returning to her letter.

We are well here, but all has changed. Mary has determined herself unready to commit to even the idea of Mr Smith as a suitor until he finishes his studies; she is scarcely nineteen and he is but twenty-two, and she says his promise must first be to God. Mr Smith agrees and has returned to Oxford.

"Oh Mary." Her sister was true to herself in the worst of ways, but perhaps there was wisdom in their mutual decision. It did show a unity of thought that should be admired.

Mr Nugent has left Netherfield without a proposal to Kitty. I would have thought her heart to be broken but instead, she claims herself, like you, too clever and independent to imagine herself as his wife. I cannot say I am displeased for her. Mr

Nugent is enjoyable company, but even Mr Bingley worries his unserious nature is encouraged by his mother in order that she may retain some power over him and their fortune. Kitty understands that I have reeled a little, knowing I would be mistress of a house which remains home to its former mistress, Miss Bingley. If I ensured Kitty understood that a dowager and mother to an only son would likely be at least as formidable, it was because I believed telling her was the necessary duty of an elder sister. You would have done the same far more quickly, I am certain.

“Well done, Jane!” Elizabeth lay back on her bed and pondered the peculiarity of Mr Nugent. Did Kitty see it too, in Mr Nugent’s constant mentions of his ‘dear mama’? Had Kitty simply enjoyed a flirtation with him to keep up with Mary? The business of love and marriage was complicated, she concluded, for reason and sensibility played no role when one party’s affections could not be trusted. At least Jane had trod a smoother path.

As you imagine, my parents are dissatisfied with both outcomes. They had long assumed Mary would remain at home, and their hopes for a good match with a man likely to be vicar somewhere in Hertfordshire had heartened them—especially Papa. They try not to show their frustration with Mary, and instead reserve it for ‘the caddish Mr Nugent’, who was spurned by you and thus seeking revenge on the Bennets by dallying with Kitty. I have told them you are innocent of any injury to him and to any dishonourable feelings he held for Kitty. I am sorry, Lizzy. I look so forward to your arrival home and yet send news that may make you wish to stay away. Please, do come home.

Your loving sister,

Jane

Elizabeth set aside her thoughts on Mary, and even her own suspicions about the feckless Mr Nugent. She did think him capable of such retaliation, if so directed by

his mother. You lose, sir. Kitty did not care !

But beyond the awkwardness of Kitty being thwarted in love by the man whom she had thwarted previously, what did it mean for her? Nothing good, apparently. Hence the second letter from Longbourn, addressed in her father's strong, familiar hand. He had not written to her, nor replied to any of her letters, since she had left Longbourn in February. Now that he had, she feared reading it.

Dear Lizzy,

As expected, Longbourn has not been quieter or sillier since you left us in February. To the contrary, in fact. I am pleased that you have kept out of romantic travails while in London and Kent. We have been quite busy with those of your sisters, and as the neighbours report no entanglements for Lydia, I feel blessed indeed. Jane remains your staunchest supporter and tells me that you and Mr Collins have managed to rub along as well as possible at Hunsford. If no other lesson could be taken from living at Longbourn, you have learnt tolerance for those that are foolish, peevish, and incurious. How I do wish you could have applied those lessons and endured your cousin or Mr Nugent when they proposed, for it has set an unfortunate example for your sisters. Neither man was your ideal, nor perhaps mine, but your practice of creating expectations for your mother and for young men—and refusing to meet them—has been followed now by Mary and Kitty. As I no longer enjoy the prospect of being relieved of their company, it is you we again rely upon to do your duty and restore the Bennet reputation, such as it is...

Blinking back tears at his insult, Elizabeth read on as her father reiterated his demand that she, as his 'most sought-after daughter', accept whatever hand was next offered. Outrage, disappointment, and fear assailed her. How could he make such a demand of a daughter he once favoured? Once at Longbourn, she could not pretend and prevaricate. She would be watched, perhaps forced into introductions. No one came to Meryton. The militia, a traveller resting en route to London...only the Netherfield

party had excited any deserved interest.

And only Mr Darcy has excited mine.

She could rely on Jane and Mr Bingley for protection, but after they left on their wedding trip and until their return, she would be at Longbourn. It would be a long, difficult six weeks.

Elizabeth was not formed for melancholy, or the habit of dwelling on the difficulties of her family, or the increasingly mercurial temper of her father. She still had to enact one last vision of a poised, well-behaved lady when she and Maria paid their final call at Rosings. There, with the Collinses, they found Lady Catherine in a particularly foul mood. It was likely due to the absence of her nephews, whom she announced had been detained by business with the steward at the ‘infernally awful Cullip estate’.

Though greatly disappointed by their absence, Elizabeth was not so immodest to think the dowager would miss her company, even though she had taken great pleasure in a pupil as earnest as Maria. The girl had refolded every gown three times as directed, refashioned her hair in the mode Lady Catherine recommended, and pledged to avoid beets and radishes in her diet.

In the more intimate dinner, after bemoaning both the absence of sense and the overly salted tongue, Lady Catherine began a final, and rather sweeping perusal of Elizabeth’s failings.

“Miss Bennet, you have been in Kent these five weeks and have spent much of your time out of doors rather than furthering the education you sorely lack. I offered you a place to practise, recommended music to learn and books to read, and have seen no return on my investment of good will. What shall you tell your parents of your time here?”

“I shall tell them how much pleasure I took in making new acquaintances and in seeing my good friend Mrs Collins so happily settled.” Elizabeth bowed her head and attempted a humble tone. “Your gestures were kindly meant, madam, and I regret any offence that I did not improve myself by them.”

“Well, I must say, you could have benefited much from Anne’s company. When next you visit, if your family or employer can give you up, she will be much occupied as a wife.”

Elizabeth said nothing to the insult about her future prospects. Miss de Bourgh remained silent at the announcement of her calendar and Mr Collins was quick to support the idea of the glorious union of Rosings and Pemberley.

“Yes, yes, yes. It has ever been planned, Mr Collins. My own wedding was a celebrated union between two great families, just as will be Anne’s to Darcy.” Lady Catherine waved a dismissive hand before once again peering closely at Elizabeth.

She is enjoying herself, Elizabeth thought, with her nephews absent and thus unable to divert her from her favourite exercises—boasting of Mr Darcy’s supposed engagement to her daughter and determining all of my flaws.

“Marriage is the natural state of things. Your friend, Mrs Collins, made an advantageous marriage. Your sister is to be married. Even Mrs Jenkinson—before she won the opportunity to be with my Anne—she at least wed and buried a husband and had her own home. Why are you not married, Miss Bennet? At the very least, you have the advantage of looks and figure. It is surprising you have not received an offer.”

Elizabeth set down her fork, realising that in her frustration she might spill her peas. “I have no resistance to the state of marriage.”

“Lizzy could be married many times over,” cried Maria, looking ever so pleased for supplying Lady Catherine with new intelligence. “My own brother proposed to Lizzy, as did Mr Collins, Mr Goulding, and Mr Nugent.”

Elizabeth wished desperately to disappear. The girl had not opened her mouth all evening but to put forkfuls of pheasant and potatoes in it, and now she chose to speak and reveal what she knew Charlotte had told her should be kept from Lady Catherine?

She dared a look at Charlotte, who sat very still, her attention fixed on her plate; only a slight tremble in the hand holding her fork betrayed what was certain to be deep mortification. Mr Collins was pale but paid no notice to his wife or her sister; rather, he looked up and frowned at Elizabeth, as if he were insulted to learn he was not the last of the men she had rejected.

Or perhaps gratified to discover he has more company? The hoyden lecture is certain to come tonight.

Lady Catherine’s complexion darkened. “Mr Collins! Is this true?”

He tore his gaze from Elizabeth and looked at his patroness. “I, er, did indeed make an offer to my cousin, but it was refused. She?—”

His hapless flailing only served to deepen Lady Catherine’s anger. Her eyes flashed as she hissed, “I believed Miss Elizabeth, like her sisters, was found wanting once you made the acquaintance of Miss Charlotte Lucas!”

“Well, yes?—”

Mr Collins’s face was turning purple, and fearing an apoplexy and uncertain whether Charlotte was prepared to be a young widow, Elizabeth spoke.

“It was a curious series of events that led to the proposal,” she explained. “Mr Collins and I were among a group taking shelter during a storm in Hertfordshire. He had a slight injury, which I helped tend, and he felt it proper to propose to me and protect my reputation. It was a gentlemanly gesture, but unnecessary, as I was in no way imposed upon.” Elizabeth managed to smile at Charlotte before giving Lady Catherine the modest expression she no doubt expected. “I knew his heart had already been captured by my friend.”

Mr Collins gave no sign of relief or even understanding that she had prevaricated in order to save his dignity. He merely glanced at his wife and whimpered, “Oh yes. My dear Charlotte.”

Lady Catherine’s eyebrows rose. “That is scandalous behaviour, entrapping yourself with your cousin, and casting your charms at him.”

“That is not at all what occurred, madam.”

“Taking shelter together? The two of you? Mr Collins, what say you to this?”

Fear poured off the man. “We were not alone, never alone, Lady Catherine! I-I was escorting my cousin back to Longbourn as a storm began to threaten and we sheltered in the estate’s boat-house with, um?—”

“My childhood friend, Mr Goulding, was there as well when the storm became too dangerous for his horse to continue on. There was enough room within the boat-house for all of us to sit quite a distance apart.” Elizabeth thought it was a reasonable explanation but Lady Catherine was anything but reasonable.

Mr Collins nodded. “Yes, when the storm ended, Mr Goulding sought help. I was uncertain I could walk the mile to Longbourn on my injured ankle.”

Lady Catherine glared at Elizabeth. “This Goulding fellow—a common farmer, I suppose—abandoned you without thought to propriety. You were indeed alone with my vicar, casting your arts and allurements without care for his character or your own reputation.”

“No, madam, I did not. Every effort was made to ensure propriety—Mr Collins was sat in a boat, care being taken for his injuries, while I was on a bench some watery distance away.”

“He was defenceless, then, as you cast your charms!” Lady Catherine leant towards Elizabeth, her face pinched in anger. “Do you think I have not observed your coquetry with my nephews? Luring Richard to ‘turn your pages’ and laughing loudly in company? Compelling Darcy to abandon Anne to come silence your raucous behaviour?”

Desperate to flee lest she speak rashly and injure Charlotte’s relationship with Rosings, Elizabeth looked away from Lady Catherine’s piercing gaze. The dowager was more monstrous than the gnarled, burnt oak! Taking a breath, she said, “I was asked to play. I made no efforts to charm anyone, only to please you with my meagre efforts on the pianoforte.”

“Ha! There you can claim failure as well.” Lady Catherine turned to Mr Collins. “I am appalled that you, to whom I have been everything generous with advice and counsel, could have a relation such as this.” Her finger shook with anger as she pointed it at Elizabeth. “Are all of her sisters as given to harlotry and beguilement?”

Elizabeth heard Maria’s quiet gasp, felt Charlotte’s palpable shock. For herself, she could scarcely breathe; never had she been so offended, her very character attacked.

“Do not dare to impugn Miss Bennet’s good name.” Mr Darcy stood in the doorway, his hands clenched, cold fury on his face.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“ You warned me away but I must ask, do you like Miss Bennet or do you more than like her? I find it hard to tell, the distance you keep from her and how often your eyes seem to be on Collins. Perhaps it is his oafish company and his stultifying platitudes that you fancy.”

Darcy knew Richard’s words were meant to be more teasing than sardonic, but tired and hungry after a long afternoon inspecting the roof on a tenant house and conferring with Rosings’s closest neighbour over a crumbling stone fence, he tossed an annoyed look at him. “I wish to keep Collins’s attention from her. He watches our every interaction, undoubtedly still resentful of innocent events last autumn. I feel, protective, I would say, for she has been importuned too often by men she does not like.”

“She liked me,” teased his cousin. “I made her laugh and never intended in any way for her to think I held serious ambition for her affections.”

“Right. Such earnest flirtation could cause a woman of less sense to swoon into your arms. Do be careful or you will find yourself with a wife of far less charm and beauty.”

“Do you plan to protect her from unwanted swains, as a brother might? As a brother myself, I would not look kindly on a man whose cheeks flushed when my sister leant over or whose eyes darkened with desire when she smiled.”

“You are incorrigible.” Darcy flushed, but it was anger rather than besottedness that

overtook him. "I believe you did exactly that on her first evening at Rosings."

"I was helping turn her pages, as I have told you twice before." Richard slowed his pace as Rosings came into view, its windows brightly lit. "Now tell me, do you plan to marry her yourself?"

Darcy hesitated. He feared confessing too much to Richard, but revealing to him that Elizabeth was bound to accept the next proposal she received, no matter the man's station or purse or decency was giving away too much information. Perhaps it was the tedium or Richard's propensity to drink and flirt to excess these past weeks, but he could not trust his cousin not to make light of her predicament in the wrong company.

"She leaves Rosings in two days, and I will see her again next month at Bingley's wedding. Then I can best determine what is in her heart. After two proposals she did not desire, I cannot chance mistaking her feelings."

"You cannot fear joining her list of rejected suitors?" Richard smiled. "No lady of sense, as you like to portray her, would refuse you. But you always were rather principled."

No, he thought. Thanks to you and Elizabeth, I have been made aware of my limitations and failings. He had been astonished by Elizabeth Bennet, struggling to reconcile what he knew was an imprudent connexion with his fascination with her. Everything about her had delighted and vexed him, and if not for an untimely encounter, a deluge of rain, and a conveniently placed boat-house, he might not have ever known she held the opposite opinion of him. Her misapprehensions about Wickham were easily relieved and she had been forthright, sweetly teasing in fact, about his terrible manners at the assembly. Of course, he had said nothing of that to Richard, either. The only teasing he wanted—needed—was from Elizabeth, and the longer they both remained in Kent, the less of it was being accomplished.

“She is a lady who deserves a man of principles.”

Richard appeared distinctly amused, much to Darcy’s exasperation. Sighing, he asked, “May I ask what you find amusing?”

“The contrast between you and Collins as her suitors is beyond understanding. With him as your comparison, even you can charm the lady.”

Darcy raised an eyebrow and smiled a little. “Well, she is a woman of sense.”

Chuckling, Richard said, “I do wish you joy. Miss Bennet is very charming and very pretty, if too poor for my tastes.”

“As you have expressed, even to her .”

“Honesty is a virtue.” A wide grin formed on his cousin’s face. “Were you jealous of my charm, old man?”

“Alas, older man, I have never been jealous of your dubious charms.” Darcy patted Apollo’s neck, urging him into a canter, and called out, “I only wondered at your shockingly good taste to choose her as your object.”

The sound of raised voices drew both men quickly from the entry hall towards the dining room. Elizabeth? What is she doing here? Darcy picked up his pace as he heard Lady Catherine’s voice, full of vengeful spite.

“...Are all of her sisters as given to harlotry and beguilement?”

“Do not impugn Miss Bennet’s good name!”

Darcy practically launched himself into the room, glad at the shock he saw sweeping

across his aunt's face, and approached the table in slow, measured steps, his voice low with anger. "Miss Bennet was never alone with Mr Collins, nor alone with any man. I, too, was there, in the boat-house, and in fact assisted her in helping Mr Collins to reach it after he injured himself. She acted with haste to find shelter for us, and ensured Mr Collins was cared for upon his return to Longbourn. She is a fine young lady of gentle birth who has shown nothing but quality of character and manner in the face of the invectives you hurl and the discourtesy shown her by others."

He turned and looked at Elizabeth—poor, dear Elizabeth, her stricken expression nearly his undoing—and bowed his head in apology. "It is a fault in my character that I ever allowed you, or anyone, to believe otherwise."

Lady Catherine pounded her hand on the table. "You, Darcy? You were in intimate company with such a forward young woman? You are fortunate indeed that Mr Collins has upheld your reputation, much as his own is now harmed by a deliberate withholding of fact."

He nearly laughed at the absurdity of her rationalisation. "You commend that man for protecting my name while you impugn his and Miss Bennet's? It is she who ensured our well-being, no matter the threat to her reputation, during a violent storm."

Lady Catherine's eyes narrowed and she gave the trembling vicar a dark look, one filled with disgust and the promise of an unpleasant future conversation, before returning her gaze to Darcy. "You have withheld critical information about your time at that rented estate, for you clearly are far better acquainted with Miss Elizabeth Bennet than you have admitted. Dare I guess how well acquainted? Is she your mistress?"

Gasps filled the room. "How dare you," Darcy snapped at his aunt. "You hold the title of 'Lady' and besmirch it with your every word and action. You must apologise,

now, to Miss Bennet.”

“I will do no such thing. I want my question answered.”

“Here is your answer. Your ‘guess’ is a slander to my character,” Elizabeth said, rising from her seat. “I have been nothing but polite in company that clearly thinks poorly of me, and will spin its own web of hideous conjectures for nothing more than amusement and outrage. Being kind and courteous costs nothing, but you prefer to trade in insult. It can only make you poorer in the eyes of God.”

Breathing heavily, she looked at Mrs Collins. “I am beset by a headache and will return to the parsonage.”

And then she fled the room .

Darcy raced after her, leaving behind the outraged shouts from Lady Catherine to bring Elizabeth to heel, Collins’s loud and fervent declarations that he would do so, and Richard’s angry growls to shut up. She was at the front door, begging the white-wigged footman to open it, when he reached her. The servant appeared uncertain, looking back towards the commanding voice of his mistress to ‘control your cousin’!”

Darcy could see Elizabeth was pale and trembling; he took her arm and steered her away, down the hall to a small sitting room, where he sat her on a striped-green sofa. He pulled open the curtains to allow in the moonlight and brought in a candle from the wall sconce in the hall. It being Rosings, no fire was lit, so he took her cold hands in his own, cradling them. “Elizabeth, are you well? No apology is enough for what my aunt has said?—”

“No, no. She went too far, but she had provocation—no, I am not a harlot, but neither am I heroic, as you seem to believe. I am forward, with my opinions and in my efforts

to be friendly. My father has warned me of it, that I invite attention through it, and you have seen it and it has injured you with your aunt.”

“Fie on my aunt, who has abused you in every way imaginable since your arrival. I should have stopped it sooner, but took the coward’s way out by merely diverting her attention. Obviously, the strength of our—” he fumbled for words—“um, friendship and my respect for you is easily seen.”

Even in the dim light afforded them, he could see a blush sweep her cheeks.

“I thank you for your timely arrival this evening. Had I known you and the colonel would not join us at dinner, I may have pled an indisposition.”

He shook his head. “We were not informed of the invitation.”

Her eyes closed and she let out a quiet laugh. “Of course. Truly, I must go. Lady Catherine cannot want me in her home.”

She began to rise, and he stood as well, knowing the situation would only worsen if they were seen together. “Will things be safe for you at the parsonage? Your cousin fears Lady Catherine, which will guide his actions.”

“Mr Collins is a benign actor. He does not like me, wholly resents me, but I am not afraid of him.”

She smiled up at him, her eyes bright and glowing and brave, and he knew he had never loved anyone as he did her. Only the sound of voices moving in the hall could pull him away from making an untimely declaration. He looked into the corridor and saw Richard with Mrs Collins and Miss Lucas in the front entry. Richard waved a hand to signal it was safe, and Darcy led Elizabeth to her friends, whose troubled expressions eased a little when they saw her.

“Lady Catherine demanded to speak alone to Collins,” explained Richard. “He can find his own way back to the parsonage. We shall escort the ladies.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

At Charlotte's urging, Elizabeth escaped to her room as soon as they arrived at the parsonage.

"Mr Collins is likely overcome by events, and it is best he be left alone. I shall add a little brandy to his tea to calm him."

Dear Charlotte! She had given Elizabeth a curious look when she had emerged with Mr Darcy, but said nothing about the evening's events or the time she had spent alone with him. Elizabeth clasped her friend's hand. "You are too good. I am sorry to burden you with managing Mr Collins. If I could leave tonight, I would."

"It is only tomorrow you must endure, Lizzy. Pray for sun so that you may walk and Mr Collins may spend his hours in the garden."

Elizabeth foiled her own hopes for an early walk when she slept past her usual rising time. Warily, she descended the stairs, the smell of toast and clatter of dishes alerting her that at least one of the household was awake and in the dining room. Clutching her bonnet, she walked carefully towards the door, only to hear the dreaded voice of Mr Collins.

"Cousin Elizabeth, join us here."

She entered the room and took her seat across from Charlotte. Mr Collins did not look at her; he was working his way through a plate of eggs and, as was usual, his interest in his meal was all-consuming. Gratefully, she buttered a piece of toast and began

eating quickly, hoping her diligent obedience would satisfy him and she could make her escape. It was not to be, for only minutes later, he rose, frowned at her, and commanded she and Charlotte join him in the parlour. Poor Maria appeared from upstairs and was beckoned in as well, looking hungrily towards the dining room, before Mr Collins closed the door. The ladies took seats as he paced the room, clearing his throat, looking up to the ceiling as if beckoning wisdom from above. Finally, he stopped in front of Elizabeth's chair; she tried not to physically recoil from his proximity.

"I have done my best by you, Cousin Elizabeth, to apologise for the insults and ruinous behaviours you exhibited to Lady Catherine. She is all that is good and though tolerant and understanding of those so far beneath her in standing, her benevolence cannot forgive your careless words and disgusting comportment. Much as you owe the lady an apology, she will not see you nor allow you again within Rosings. You will beg her forgiveness in a letter, which I will carry to her this morning."

He paused, as if expecting Elizabeth to protest. And she did, if only inwardly, for neither Charlotte nor Maria deserved to be subject to Mr Collins's further ire. She would write a note to Lady Catherine. Forgiveness would not be its subject. She gave him a curt nod.

Seemingly satisfied, he turned to Maria, whose wide, fear-filled eyes showed her not yet recovered from the previous evening's events. "I regret you must travel tomorrow with Miss Elizabeth, dear sister. I must order you not to speak to nor listen to a word she speaks in the carriage, lest her penchant towards insolence, harlotry, and deceit affect your understanding of what it means to be a decent Christian lady."

Elizabeth flushed with anger. "Harlotry? How dare you, sir!"

"Do you not recall your own behaviour towards me at Longbourn? Practically

throwing yourself at me and at Mr Darcy, the nephew and future son of Lady Catherine!”

“I was sat in the boat-house due only to your inability to understand I did not wish to marry you and the fall you took while pursuing me through the woods! You prevented my return to Longbourn!”

“You had been proposed to by a man I now call brother!” Mr Collins’s face was now a blotchy red, and his anger seemed overtaken by injury. Breathing heavily, he looked at Charlotte. “John, I take it?”

She gave him a calming look. “They were very young. Lizzy was scarcely sixteen and not yet out,” she said quickly. “John was bound for Cambridge. It was hardly a serious proposal, and our families did not take it as such.”

Although he scarcely looked mollified, Mr Collins took a deep breath and said nothing in reply. The three women shifted uneasily until finally, he asked about Mr Goulding .

“It is a silly tale of childhood, as Charlotte will recall,” Elizabeth began, hoping such a beginning would mollify him. She looked again at Charlotte, trying to meet her eyes, but her friend kept her face turned away. “I was nine, and Mr Goulding was scarcely twelve. We were peeking in the window at a neighbour’s wedding breakfast and he asked me to marry him so we could have cake and white soup, too.”

“A silly tale of childhood, yet one that my wife and likely many in Meryton—where I will make my home—know well. You make me into a laughingstock.” Mr Collins paced round the small room, somehow avoiding the small table placed awkwardly in its centre, undoubtedly at the direction of Lady Catherine.

“Do you make sport of my proposal as well? What is said of it, Maria?”

The girl, clearly terrified, glanced at her sister. Charlotte gave her a small, if tense smile, and turning to her husband, again attempted to soothe his temper.

“Mr Collins, my family and the Bennets are aware that your first proposal was to Elizabeth; it had been anticipated that you would marry one of the Bennets and keep Longbourn within the Bennet family.” Her hand fluttered—an unusual gesture for such a composed woman—before falling to her lap. “There is no shame, only honour, in being your wife, even if I was not the first lady to receive your proposal. Indeed,” her voice softened, “I believe we rub together quite well, and are a better match than you could have made with Elizabeth. Although she is known for her wit and laughter, I have never heard a joke or unpleasant word from her about you or our marriage or your proposals to her. She has maintained an elegant silence, one for which I believe she deserves praise.”

Elizabeth, astonished by Charlotte’s composure, nodded when her friend glanced in her direction before turning back to Mr Collins, who had sunk into a chair, his hands gripping its arms. She continued, “Indeed, sir, I believe Lizzy knew I was the better match for you, and had circumstance allowed—if Mrs Bennet had not pressured her so greatly—she would have told you so.”

An uneasy silence filled the room. Only Mr Collins’s heavy breathing could be heard over the sound of her own heart, beating fast, and Elizabeth stared longingly at the door, wishing to disappear until she could board the post and return to where she felt safe. Longbourn. Gracechurch Street. Anywhere but here.

Mr Collins’s voice interrupted her thoughts. “Your elder sister is sensible enough to accept a proposal, the first she ever received. You have not her beauty or her grace and are unlikely to receive another.”

Maria’s gasp drowned her own. Whatever anger Mr Collins still harboured towards Elizabeth now came spewing forth.

“If still at Longbourn when Charlotte and I claim it, we shall turn you out with your regrets and your walking boots.” Sneering, he stood and fixed her with a cold glare. “You are a foolish girl, wilful and wanton. I see how you look at Mr Darcy, using your wiles to entrap him. I saw it that November day—did you think I had grown fully deaf?—and it has grown far worse! Lady Catherine has seen it as well. He is to marry her daughter! You are not to go near him nor any part of Rosings Park today. Remain in this house and its yard and gardens, or you will be locked in your room.”

As soon as he stepped away, Elizabeth stood up. Her skirts hid her shaking legs, but she could not conceal the anger in her voice or the fury in her eyes.

“As you wish, sir. I have a letter to write.”

Lady Catherine de Bourgh,

I have offended you with my thoughts and behaviours possibly as much as you have offended me with your words. I could easily forgive your pride, if you had not mortified mine. However, I must make the effort, for selfishness must always be forgiven if there is no hope of a cure.

I thank you for your generous hospitality at Rosings, and promise never again to plague you by my presence. I ask one favour—be kind to Mrs Collins, for she is all goodness and speaks only of her respect for you and Rosings. Of course, she has a Job-like tolerance for schemers and fools.

She read over her words. They were ungracious and rude and she meant every one of them. Still, to write such a note to anyone, least of all the patroness of the man who was heir to Longbourn! Knowing she would never send it, she added her final lines.

You must set aside your expectations for your nephew to marry your daughter. Mr Darcy deserves a wife who can challenge his pride and withstand mud on her boots.

One who, perhaps, is impertinent enough to want him as much as he may want her.

Sighing, she pulled out a second sheet of paper and took a calming breath.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh,

I regret we part on poor terms, and apologise for my part in it. I thank you for your generous hospitality at Rosings, and wish you and Miss de Bourgh happiness and continued good health.

Elizabeth Bennet

Yes—short, polite, and to the point. All things that did not describe Lady Catherine. Setting aside the letters to dry, she rose and stretched. It was not yet noon and her trunk was packed, her letter written, a long day of confinement ahead. She would be gone from here tomorrow morning, but filling the hours as a captive of the parsonage and its grounds would be difficult. I might as well pack my walking boots, she thought.

She folded the letters, placing the second in her pocket to hand to Mr Collins, and the first inside of her book; she could not risk Charlotte or Mr Collins seeing it. Grabbing her bonnet, she determined she would enjoy her final day in Kent, even if her pleasure-seeking would be confined to the small patch of greenery surrounding the parsonage.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Richard and Darcy always breakfasted together at Rosings—alone, thankfully, for Anne and Lady Catherine despised the morning sun and always took trays in their rooms. Their aunt rarely emerged from hers until noon, making mornings the best part of the men's day.

It meant they must get through only this afternoon and evening in her company, for they had decided after the events of last night that they would leave Rosings tomorrow—four days earlier than previously announced—with Elizabeth and Miss Lucas in Darcy's carriage; their trunks would be stowed with the men's luggage in the post carriage. Darcy had completed enough of the estate business he had planned on; after Lady Catherine's behaviour towards Elizabeth, his aunt would have to apply to the earl for any further assistance. Darcy would have effort enough simply to sit with her at dinner and remain civil .

Now it was past noon, and eager to avoid Lady Catherine when she descended the stairs and expected to be waited upon, they mounted their horses. Richard agreed to ride to Westerham to deliver papers to Goodbody, the solicitor there, while Darcy went in search of Elizabeth. Although she had been calm, her equanimity seeming to relax as they had walked to the parsonage last evening, he was dismayed to find she had not walked out this morning—at least not on any of the paths he knew she frequented. He needed to see her, hold her. Most likely, he would accomplish only the former, but seeing her and hearing further assurances of the humours within the parsonage would do wonders for his equanimity. Collins could not turn him away, nor keep Elizabeth from speaking to him.

Let him try.

His horse was as restless as he, and he gave him free throttle to canter down Rosings's gravel drive, across its manicured gardens, and into the open fields. The formal landscape made him ache for the natural, untamed beauty of Pemberley. Of course, when after a quarter hour of exercise, he still had not caught sight of the beauty he truly yearned to see, he steered his horse towards the parsonage.

Suddenly there was a cry and a flash of white flew into his path. Yanking the reins, he pulled Apollo to the right, slowing him as he shouted. When he turned back, Miss Lucas was there, trembling and gasping, covered in dust.

“Good lord, Miss Lucas, did you not hear my horse? You could have been badly hurt.”

The girl was breathing so hard, Darcy feared he might have instead scared her into apoplexy. He jumped down from his saddle. “Miss Lucas? Are you hurt?”

“No! Please, Mr Darcy,” she panted. “I came in search of you... it is Lizzy. Mr Collins read my letters, he knows she must marry the next man who asks, and he has taken her with him...there is a man, I think, he plans to force her to accept. It is all my fault for speaking last night?—”

“A man? Where has he taken her?”

“In...in the meadow between the parsonage and Rosings.”

“You are a good girl. Go to your sister, and remain in the house.” He threw himself back onto Apollo. “Have faith, all will be well.”

His words were as much for himself and Elizabeth as for Miss Lucas. Darcy rode

quickly towards the meadow, a deep dip below a small hill he had often rolled down as a child before plucking flowers for his mother. It took only moments to reach it, and to see Elizabeth standing between Mr Collins and another man. At his approach, he could see the alarm in Elizabeth's expression, and she broke away and ran towards him. He slid off his mount and reached to pull her into his arms. "You are well?" She nodded, pale but her eyes flashed with anger.

Quickly, he stepped towards Collins, whose contorted, sickly expression made it appear he was in need of a chamber-pot. The second man was at least twice his age—likely even older than Mr Bennet. He was rough around the edges, clad in worn clothing and scuffed boots, and appeared disinterested in Darcy's arrival. Dick Brown, he recalled, who lived in what had once been the Sommer farm.

"Collins," he said sharply, his eyes narrowed. "Brown. Why are you here, now?"

Brown shrugged and pointed at Collins, who sputtered, "I-I was merely introducing Cousin Elizabeth to a parishioner."

"Introducing? Here? Odd spot for a fortuitous meeting. Mere serendipity?"

"Not at all." Elizabeth's voice trembled, but it seemed more with anger than fear. "Mr Collins forbade me from leaving the grounds of the parsonage today, likely to ensure I was easily found when Mr Brown appeared. Mr Collins told him he was to marry me."

"Is this true, Collins?" The vicar appeared ready to faint. "Speak up, man, with the truth!"

"S-she must wed. Her father commands it. Lady Catherine wished to ensure it."

"Lady Catherine! What has she to do with it?"

Collins appeared unable to confess, but his fellow schemer was happy to supply an answer. “I were promised fifty pounds to marry ’er.”

“Lady Catherine wished to buy me a husband?” Darcy felt Elizabeth sag and pulled her closer.

Brown shrugged. “Me wife died and I need a new one to cook fer me. You sings nice, too.”

“One may not buy a wife, nor is a wife meant to be your servant,” Darcy growled. “Miss Bennet is the daughter of a gentleman and you will stay away from her.”

When Brown’s eyes swept over Elizabeth, Darcy took a step towards him, his fists clenched. “It is a shame you lost your wife, but be gone now, else you may lose your tenancy as well. My aunt’s promise is null and you had best leave before you are as dishonoured as this man of the cloth.”

Brown startled. “But Mr Collins?—”

“Collins is a fool. Rosings’s business, accounts and tenancy are determined by my pen—Lady Catherine depends on it, as does the local magistrate.”

Brown looked at Collins, who nodded feebly. “His duty as her nephew and future son.”

Darcy held his tongue until Brown, spewing curses and spittle, stormed off. Then, the anger he had not spent on the ignorant farmer was turned on Collins. “I have never struck a man of the cloth, but I am sorely tempted to do so.”

“As am I,” said Elizabeth.

“No!” Collins stumbled backwards; Darcy caught him by his jacket and held it firmly as he loomed over the cowering fool.

“You will listen to me, and take heed of my words, else your lack of prudence, wisdom, and godliness will be your doom. Do you understand what you have done? Taking Miss Elizabeth against her will, against all decency, to attempt to marry her to a stranger? I could have you thrown in gaol!”

“No! Lady Catherine said?—”

“You are a servant of God, not of Lady Catherine! Nor are you Miss Bennet’s father nor acting on his wishes! You hold no standing with Miss Bennet, to command her behaviour or to order her to marry. You have behaved so abominably to her, she who has been nothing but gracious and kind to all she meets! Even after rejecting you and forced to run away from your unwanted affections, she ensured your well-being when you were injured. And yet still you blasphemed her character. You deserve no decency from her, no respect from your parishioners nor your wife. You will apologise to Miss Bennet. And you will never again speak of my business, nor that of Miss de Bourgh, to whom I am not engaged nor ever will be.”

“But—”

“Now .”

Collins swallowed and looked at Elizabeth. “I apologise for my misunderstanding—I only hoped to ensure you were soundly wed before returning home.” He turned back to Darcy. “My cousin Bennet demanded she make a marriage to whichever suitor proposed, and Lady Catherine feared her arts and allurements would compel you or Colonel Fitzwilliam into a foolish engagement.”

“Ha,” Darcy clapped his fist, compelling a flinch from the quaking vicar.

“How could you!” Elizabeth cried. “Your anger over my refusal gives you no right to the business of my life.”

“You wear the collar, but you fail to honour the word and spirit of our Lord. You should be ashamed. Go home to your wife. She is a woman of sense, and it is she you should listen to, not Lady Catherine. You have the living, which she cannot revoke. Let grace and sense guide your conscience, else you will find yourself shunned even by God.”

“The living... It is secure? Neither she nor you can withdraw it?”

Darcy rolled his eyes in disgust. “Tempted as I am to do so, the living is yours until you choose to leave it, or land in gaol. Listen to your wife, not my aunt. You could not find a better, more rational companion than Mrs Collins.”

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. I apologise for my husband’s dreadful error in judgment.” Mrs Collins stood behind them, hand in hand with Miss Lucas, their faces ashen. She looked at Elizabeth and her face crumpled. “Oh Lizzy! I am so sorry!”

Elizabeth moved quickly to her, enfolding her in a hug. Darcy could not hear what was said, but when they separated, they exchanged a warm, if sorrowful, look.

“Come, Mr Collins. We must go home now.” Mrs Collins waited expectantly before her husband began trudging towards her, his shoulders slumped. Miss Lucas looked back, her large eyes wider than usual.

Elizabeth let out a sigh, and then laughed sadly. “I wish to go home, too.”

Her beleaguered expression tugged at something within him, an ache where he had not known there was feeling. Darcy inhaled deeply, calming his anger, as he thought of what to say. His breathing evened as he watched her, her gaze lifting to the clear

blue sky, its bright sun reflecting in eyes laced with long dark lashes. When she felt his stare and turned towards him, he looked to the ground, desperate to hold and comfort her. Her proximity had sent his pulse surging, and though he could pretend his heightened colour was due to his anger, he could not halt his quickened breath.

“Elizabeth.”

Quietly, he linked their arms, enfolding her hand within his as he tightly twined their fingers together in a firm grip. For a second, he studied their hands, unsure of where her fingers ended and his began, so entangled was his hold. It felt so right, so comforting, the way his hand completely engulfed hers.

“I know a place.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

After the head-spinning events of the past hour, Elizabeth did not have the faintest notion of where to go. Mr Darcy led her through the meadow, past the beds of spring crocuses and lilies, to a bench next to a small fountain. Whatever beauty it had once held was gone, its stone chipped and its water clouded with rotting leaves, but a small redbird seemed happy to rest and drink there. Find pleasure in small things, Elizabeth thought to herself. She was glad for Mr Darcy's warm, dry hand, finding strength in its firm grip and reluctant to release it. "Thank you," she said, relieved that her voice did not tremble.

"It is Miss Lucas who deserves credit," he assured her. "She understood your cousin was up to something and came in search of me. I wish I could have arrived sooner."

"Oh dear Maria!" So often the girl had frustrated Elizabeth with her untimely comments and her mentions of private matters—speaking of her other proposals in front of Mr Collins—but it was that same youthful innocence she could now thank. "I know she saw Mr Collins beckon me to join him outside of the garden—which he had earlier forbidden me to leave—to see a flower. I should have been more sceptical of his purpose. Mr Brown was there, waiting."

"Your cousin should be tossed from the church, and my aunt tossed from her lofty perch. Her behaviour to you last evening was awful enough, but this?" His large hand rubbed his temples, briefly shielding his eyes from her. "I am ashamed to call her my relation."

"We all have family whom we wish were strangers. Oddly, ours are well acquainted."

She laughed softly. "I have others who embarrass me, but for both of our sakes, I hope your aunt and my cousin are the worst we can boast of."

"Indeed."

He sat inches away, proper and dignified, and she missed the feel of his arms round her. A hoyden, a harlot. How Lady Catherine would have thundered had she seen me run into his arms. Elizabeth would not miss that woman, or her home and its ugly furnishings, neglected pianoforte, and overcooked dinners. Longbourn was far less grand but its chairs were snug, the pianoforte well-tuned, and its kitchen and table among the best in Meryton.

I may not be there long, if Papa has his way. Who will protect me there, until I can join Jane and Mr Bingley?

The sounds of chirping stirred her from her thoughts. Two blackbirds were splashing in the fountain. She turned to Mr Darcy, expecting him to be enjoying the sight as well, but instead he was studying her. Swallowing, she realised she owed him even more than she had said already.

"I wish you to know, sir, I appreciate how you have watched out for me. I have guarded myself since I left Longbourn, not understanding that something like today could occur." She turned her face towards the sun. "I was heedless of the true danger."

"You defended yourself from your cousin today and in Hertfordshire! You are a strong woman, of great courage and sense to refuse your cousin and stand up to your family and to him. And then to stay in his home, in order to visit your friend? You are all that is generous."

She shrugged, not wishing to be praised when her friend suffered. "Poor Charlotte.

Only a woman so desperate to escape her family home and have her own family would marry a man like my cousin. I have tried to reconcile myself to the marriage, to truly understand it. Now I can feel only pity.”

Mr Darcy’s expression grew more troubled. “Never for yourself, I trust.”

“No, I have been fortunate. Indeed, I have enough horrible marriage proposals to write a novel rivalling Radcliffe. Perhaps in the hours I can spare from playing with my future nieces and nephews?—”

“You cannot say you will never marry,” he said sharply. “Your father’s ultimatum is unfair to any daughter, but it is a grave disservice to one who has your liveliness and beauty.”

“You know of the ultimatum?” Mortified, she searched her memory, trying to remember whether it had ever been mentioned in his presence. “From Maria? She learnt of it from Kitty, and Mr Collins clearly read her letters.”

Frowning, he shook his head. “In London. Miss Bingley and her sister, when they told me of Mr Nugent’s proposal, said your father was angry and had issued you an edict. It was cruel and thoughtless of him, and put you in danger of rogues and men prone to heedless flirtation.”

He had known, all this time?

“Hence your desire to protect me from your cousin,” she said slowly, as realisation set in, “lest he be stupid enough to like me.”

“Of course he likes you—who could not? Richard is charming but often flippant, saying things he does not mean. I desired to protect you, to keep you from becoming entrapped because he made light of something. I heard him joke of marriage in your

presence at least three times,” he added, scowling.

And indeed he had. Elizabeth could not like that Mr Darcy had known of her predicament, but that he felt it incumbent on himself to guard her and ensure no man took advantage of her! This day had been too full of tumultuous feeling, however, and she sought to remain calm. “I did not appoint you as my protector, but I appreciate it nevertheless. Since that fateful day at Longbourn, you have been my friend, and I have felt safe in your company.”

His eyes softened and his lips turned up in a small smile. “I am not safe from you.”

“But you are safe from me...you said those very words to me in Hertfordshire.” She stared at him, shocked, as he stood and began pacing in front of her.

“I have not been safe from you for many months, not since we first met and you impressed me with your beauty and your kind heart. I have never met another lady who so captured my attention, and who showed both sisterly affection and bracing wit.”

“Ha, perhaps it is you who is flippant,” she said, laughing nervously at his compliments. “My mother says I am vexatious and difficult. ‘Lizzy, you are a ridiculous creature. What man will marry you, a lady renowned for her dirty hems and unceasing refusals?’”

“I will.” Mr Darcy stood before her, his dark eyes grave and imploring. “I will marry you.”

The shock of such a declaration prompted another nervous laugh. “No. You cannot make light of my situation nor your own. Every proposal I have received has come about in similar circumstance, from a suitor too young or acting precipitously and without any consideration for mutual felicity.”

“I wish the timing of my declaration were not so awkward—the day’s events have unsettled us both—but I am sincere. I lack the words to express the ardency of my affection for you, Elizabeth—” Mr Darcy stopped, his brows furrowed. “I-I am no better than Nugent or Collins, importuning you about my feelings without regard to what yours may be, and worse, knowing that you must accept any proposal, no matter how abhorrent.”

“No, no, you are anything but abhorrent. I beg you, please do not propose. It is the impulse of the moment which can entrap us both.”

The beseeching tone Elizabeth heard in her voice seemed to affect him, and he stilled, hands on his hips, his eyes to the ground until slowly he lifted them to her.

“Of course. I will not— I cannot —propose, the mere act of which forces your acceptance. I will not take your right of control over your own happiness from you. But know I would, if I knew it was what you wished for.”

“Neither of us believe that your offer is wise.” Sighing, she laughed ruefully. “Had I been as generous and short-sighted as you, I would have had three husbands by now.”

He remained grave. “Must you laugh at everything?”

“I am unkind. My penchant for happiness causes me to laugh at my fears and worries without care for how my choices may prevent happiness in others. Truly I am horrid.”

“No, if you were truly horrid, you would leap at my offer and demand a proposal, regardless of your own feelings, and begin planning how to spend my fortune.”

Although he still appeared grim, his teasing words lightened Elizabeth’s guilt.

“Be assured, I am not seeking any man’s fortune, nor am I a charity case. I have been

on the receiving end of my family's wrath, put Jane in a difficult position with the Hursts, stirred up enmity between the Collinses, and enflamed your aunt's ire. And yet, I know my father. Much as I have worried over his threat, he has never followed through on warnings to my younger sisters on their behaviour and I feel certain he shall not on this one. All will be well. Once Jane is married, I shall live with her and Mr Bingley, and trust myself to their protection."

"That is all you wish for?" He stared at her in disbelief. In the distance, Elizabeth could hear Maria calling her name.

"Lizzy, come back to the house. Mr Collins is gone."

She stood on legs as unsteady as her thoughts. "You have been all that is kindness to me, and it is enough. I do not wish to grieve you but I cannot injure you nor myself any further."

"I would not see you injured. As for myself, only my heart is at risk." He bowed. "I shall escort you to Miss Lucas and ensure your safety at the parsonage before returning to Rosings to speak to my aunt."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The butler watched in horror as Darcy stormed through the halls of Rosings, flinging open the heavy curtains in every room, raising clouds of dust and revealing furniture that was unfaded, unused, and forty years out of date. “A mausoleum,” he muttered. “A memorial to rot and neglect.”

He found his aunt in her usual haunt, the garish gold parlour that had not seen full sun in a decade. There, too, without greeting her, he walked to the windows and drew back the draperies.

“Darcy! Stop!” Her shocked, angry voice carried across the room—across most of Rosings, he wagered. “What are you doing? Leave those be!”

Turning, he found Lady Catherine squinting, a hand held up to shield her eyes from the bright, dust-heavy light now pouring in. The heavy powder she wore could not conceal the deep creases in her face or the greyish tint of her skin. She looked as poorly as she had in December .

“No. It is time to let the light inside these walls, to cast off what has been hidden within.”

“What do you mean—hidden?”

“The false belief that I will marry Anne, that my mother wished for it.”

Her hand wavered. She sat back in her chair, shadowed from the sunbeams, glittering

with dust, streaming in. “It is not false. She wished it. I wish it. It must be done.”

“Must?” Darcy spied Richard entering the room, closing the doors behind him, and from his keen expression, clearly engaged in the tense exchange. Grateful for his witness, he nodded to him and looked back at his aunt. “Will you accomplish it in the same manner you attempted to marry off Miss Bennet? Will you pay me to marry Anne, and push her at me, when she least suspects it? I must say, fifty pounds is rather cheap of you. What is your price for Anne?”

Lady Catherine said nothing, merely waved her hand to dispel the dust.

“Do you deny it?” Darcy’s voice rose with his temper. “Did you scheme with Collins to force a marriage between Miss Bennet and a tenant older than her father?”

“Is he? What would it matter—she is an impertinent schemer who needs a husband, and even her father has demanded she wed! They will be grateful to have it arranged and done,” she concluded with a smug smile.

“Elizabeth Bennet, a schemer?” Pacing in front of her, Darcy won the struggle to contain his fury. With the cool hauteur his aunt was more accustomed to, he stepped closer. “Fortunately for her, and for you, your sordid attempt at bribery and forced marriage has failed. You will not be charged by the magistrate, nor, if I have any say, be forgiven by Miss Bennet.”

“Forgiven? By a girl as lowly as she?” Lady Catherine rose from her seat and approached Darcy, shaking her fan as she did. “There was no crime! She was intent on capturing your affections through the basest means. You should be grateful! I have managed things quite well for the girl and her ridiculous family, and for you and Anne.”

“Gratitude is owed? Are you mad?” Darcy could no longer restrain his anger. “You

were intent on selling her—a gentleman’s daughter—to one of your tenants! Have you no shame?”

The colonel now stood beside him, glaring at their aunt. “Badly done, Lady Catherine. Badly done, indeed.”

Condemnation from both nephews appeared to at last alarm her. “It was done for the best, which only a mother or father could understand. A wanton such as she cannot be?—”

“Enough!” Darcy thundered, the fury he had once felt at Wickham scarcely comparing to what he now felt. “Did you not listen last evening when I warned you not to speak of Miss Bennet in such terms?”

Lady Catherine gave no acknowledgement that she had, nor cared.

“Miss Bennet is under my protection. You will not approach her nor have anyone else do so, here in Kent or in any other place she may dwell. I shall see to it that she and Miss Lucas reach London tomorrow safely in my carriage.”

“Tomorrow? No, you will not leave here with her. ”

“We both shall,” Richard said, shaking his head in obvious disgust.

Darcy shot him an acknowledging look. “I will speak to Anne, to explain to her that we shall never marry and to ensure she knows she is welcome at Pemberley. You, Aunt, are not—not until I have your word that you will cease any interference into the lives of Miss Bennet, myself, or even the Collinses.”

“And that much-needed apology to Miss Bennet,” added Richard.

Lady Catherine sank back into her chair, her thunder gone but still intransigent. “You shall have neither.”

“Then we say our farewells to you now, and will take our dinner at the inn.”

Richard nodded his agreement and began to stroll towards the door. Darcy took a deep breath, hoping to quell his anger before seeing Anne or breaking his hand punching one of Rosings’s hideous statues. Then, in a clear and urgent voice, he said to his aunt: “Remember what I said: Miss Bennet is under my protection, and your reputation is within my ability to ruin.”

“Damnation! She did all of that?” Richard swore again and glanced around the mostly empty inn they had escaped to for some peace. “Our aunt’s cruelty does not surprise me, but who knew that quivering toad of a vicar had such viciousness in him.”

Darcy nodded tiredly. Revealing the depth of their aunt’s malevolence had required two brandies before he even began speaking. Now he simply wished to eat his stew and find his bed.

“Collins reported to her what he had read in Miss Lucas’s letters. His anger at Elizabeth’s refusal of him was such that he felt the need for revenge. With Lady Catherine furious at him, myself and Elizabeth after last evening’s revelations, as soon as Collins knew of Mr Bennet’s ultimatum that she accept the hand of the next man who asked for it, he went to Lady Catherine, likely to appease her anger.”

Richard leant his head back against the hard oak of his chair. His bland expression concealed his own disgust when he asked, bitterness in his voice, “The ultimatum which you knew of, and kept from me. Who were you protecting—me, Miss Bennet, or yourself?”

“All three of us,” he admitted. “You, in case your quick but thoughtless tongue put you in a position you did not intend. Myself, from putting her in a position she did not want. And her, from all of it. She left Longbourn eager to escape scrutiny and pressure to wed, and enjoyed the friendship she found with you.”

“And you?”

Darcy took a bite of his half-eaten stew; it was still warm and, suddenly ravenous, he ate silently while his cousin watched, his own bowl already scraped clean.

“The question stands. Why did you protect yourself? I thought you fancied her.”

“I could not put her in a position of having to marry me.”

“Yet you will protect her. As a friend.”

“I have made my wishes known to her. I ensured she knew I would marry her—that I would like nothing more than to marry her—but would not offer for her.” It was a miserable, powerless feeling, to be on the cusp of telling her he loved her and to have her beg him not to propose.

“Did you? You dog!” He peered more closely at Darcy. “Oh. She did not want your proposal.”

“She thought it impulsive and short-sighted. Perhaps it was the former, my temper was high and I wished nothing more than to offer her every bit of comfort and protection I could.” He leant forward, resting his chin on his fists. “I will ensure she arrives safely to her family in London, and in a fortnight, I will see her in Hertfordshire at her sister’s wedding to Bingley. When enough time has passed and she has regained her steadiness and I am certain of her feelings, I will propose.”

“How will you know?”

Darcy shrugged. “She will tell me.” I hope.

The ride to London was excruciating. When he and Richard had called at the parsonage the previous evening to ensure Elizabeth was well and all was peaceful, he had only glimpsed her, standing near the stairs, smiling wanly at them. She appeared even more fatigued in the morning, accepting his hand to climb into the carriage with Miss Lucas. He liked to believe her disappointed that he rode alongside the carriage rather than inside, but with his restless desire warring with his honour, he could not bear to sit so near, gaze at her, and yet be unable to touch her. Listening to his cousin’s laughter and capturing glimpses of Elizabeth’s downcast face hardened his anger towards Lady Catherine and Collins.

His last view of her was on the steps at her uncle’s house in Cheapside. He stood, silently watching a maid open the door and welcome Elizabeth and Miss Lucas inside. And that is the end of it, he thought. Not a sign of feeling nor affection.

He was alone in his study, thinking back over the events of the day and feeling increasingly morose, when his butler, Johnson, came to the door with a tray. “John Coachman found this letter in the carriage. He assumed it fell from the belongings of one of the ladies.”

Darcy took it, trying not to reveal his eagerness. Had she written a letter to him, conveying some feeling she could not when in his company? He recalled Elizabeth’s neat hand on the notes she sent to Longbourn while at Netherfield; yes, this was indeed her letter.

Lady Catherine de Bourgh, it began.

Disheartened it was not meant for him, he read on, smiling at the hostility within her

appeal to his aunt and her request for kindness to her friend. And then, at the very bottom, he saw the words which took away his smile and set his heart wild with hope.

You must set aside your expectations for your nephew to marry your daughter. Mr Darcy deserves a wife who can challenge his pride and withstand mud on her boots. One who, perhaps, is impertinent enough to want him as much as he may want her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

In the past, hardly a day would go by without Elizabeth visiting Mr Bennet in his book-room. It had been her place to escape the cacophony of her mother and sisters, a place to talk sensibly of the news and history, to laugh at the neighbours, or glean what she could of Longbourn's daily business. That habit had ended in February with Mr Nugent's failed proposal, and in spite of the warmth in her father's expression upon her arrival home, Elizabeth had no intention of resuming it. It mattered little, for after supper, as she went to join her sisters in the music room so Mary could show off her newest accomplishment, Mr Bennet beckoned her to join him.

Her spirits fell. She surprised herself with the resentment she still felt; receiving his sole letter in two months only days ago, compounded by Mr Collins' scheming, and the unrelenting disturbance she felt over Mr Darcy made it difficult for her to view her father with any equanimity. She followed him to the room, smelled its familiar smells, sat across from him in the smaller chair by the fire, and waited for him to speak.

"We have missed you here, Lizzy."

"I have missed my home."

Perhaps it was the lack of warmth in her reply which led him to alter his tone. "I hope you enjoyed your time away. Sir William tells me Mr Darcy was there at Rosings. Mr Collins supplied me with letters to the same. Your letters did not make mention of him."

She startled, astonished less to learn Mr Collins was supplying her reports of her visit than she was that she would be questioned about their veracity. “Was it of interest to you?”

Frowning, he asked, “Did he repeat his offer to you? The offer of marriage he made to me for you, in case your reputation was irreparably damaged after what occurred in November?”

Mr Darcy had offered for her? Then? And she had not been informed?

Swallowing her shock, she shook her head. “No,” she replied coolly. It was not a lie if she had not known he was repeating himself. “He did not. I was not aware such an offer had been extended, and am surprised you did not accept on my behalf.”

“You had yet to meet and refuse Mr Nugent. Had I known you would make a habit of despising your suitors, I would have done so, but at the time, knowing your dislike of Mr Darcy and regardless of the assistance he provided to you and Mr Collins, I could not tie you to him.”

He looked smugly at her as if she should be grateful for his paternal interference; she closed her eyes and saw the image of Mr Darcy’s pained expression. In November, he had made a principled offer she would have declined—had she known of it—but she would have been honoured by it nevertheless. Did her ignorance of it affect how she thought of him afterwards? Did it affect how she would have heard his impulsive but heartfelt proposal made two days ago?

“And now you return to us as you were, but with two sisters who have been busy disappointing their parents.” He sighed, she thought, rather dramatically.

Elizabeth was proud of Kitty for recognising Mr Nugent’s true character, and pleased for Mary, for understanding a budding curate needed a position before taking a wife;

Mr Smith was likely to return to court her. Her opinions, however, only seemed to vex her father.

“Once upon a time, you and Jane were my sensible daughters. She retains that title and my esteem, but you, Elizabeth? Have you truly returned home from two months in London and Kent and met not one man worthy of becoming your husband?”

I have, I have! But I told him I would not have him!

His mocking expression deserved neither full honesty nor sincerity. “Papa, I am sorry you are disappointed I have returned to you as I left, unattached even with your threat of automatic betrothal hanging about my head.” She raised an eyebrow to match his. “You may apply to Mr Collins if you wish to know about the marriage to a tenant farmer he wished to force on me, but I hope you will think me sensible for that refusal.”

Jane’s engagement, and Elizabeth’s time apart from her sister, had changed her. She remained blissfully in love with Mr Bingley, of course, but in between their conversations about him, the wedding, and goings-on at Longbourn, Elizabeth saw that her sister showed a deeper understanding of love, which allowed her to see that Elizabeth’s heart was touched.

She had spoken more freely—and far more warmly—about Mr Darcy than she had about any other man, suitor, or neighbour of their acquaintance, giving Jane surety that Mr Darcy could have no reason to propose to a girl lacking fortune and connexions unless there was strong feeling behind it. That afternoon, sitting on Jane’s bed and watching her sister choose which gowns and bonnets she would leave at Longbourn for her sisters, Elizabeth hoped to be persuaded Jane was correct.

“Pink sets off Kitty’s light hair, but she prefers blue,” Jane fretted. “And Lydia always wants to wear pink, when green suits her better.”

“Hmm.”

Elizabeth’s disinterest caught her sister’s attention, and Jane turned round, looking abashed. “What did you say to Mr Darcy?”

“I said I could not accept his offer if he made one.”

“You will not marry him because you are being honourable or because you do not feel the same?”

“Because he is being honourable.”

“Or perhaps he loves you. He could marry anyone but he has stood by you.” Jane took Elizabeth’s hand, then sat beside her. “You say he did not actually propose?”

“He could not...he said he would not, because he knew of Papa’s ultimatum and would not force me to marry him or to prevaricate to Papa that I had received no proposals while in Kent. I did not know he had offered to marry me last November if gossip began and my reputation was at risk.” The depth of his feelings, of his respect for her situation, suddenly overwhelmed her. Elizabeth felt her eyes misting and turned away to gain control of herself.

She had spent too many hours in the carriage ride from Kent mulling over the compliments Mr Darcy had paid her and recalling his troubled frown when she asked him to refrain from proposing. Colonel Fitzwilliam had worn a similar expression when he climbed into the carriage with her and Maria and chattered away about the sights outside and the glories of the fish pie served at the inn in Bromley, where he said they often stopped on their journeys to and from Rosings. She flipped through the pages of her book while he gave her curious looks but gratefully did not press her for conversation nor make his usual teasing comments about Mr Darcy, who rode silently beside the carriage for the entire journey.

“Oh Lizzy! Mr Bingley has nothing but praise for Mr Darcy—he is the best of men, the greatest friend.” Jane shook her head. “I knew nothing of what he said to Papa, of course, but how did Mr Darcy learn of the ultimatum?”

Elizabeth hesitated; here was a subject she wished to avoid, but she could not prevaricate nor hide truth from Jane. “Miss Bingley called on him in London before he went to Kent and told him about my refusal of Mr Nugent’s proposal. Whether she knew I was to be in Kent as well, I do not know, but she was intent on warning him about my scheming ways.”

“Oh. ”

“I am sorry, Jane. It is...she is?—”

“She is rather awful, I know. Petty and jealous and unable to think of the happiness of others.” Jane gave a little shake as if gathering her thoughts and then looked at Elizabeth with a pained expression. “I am perceptive about people, Lizzy, but prefer to speak only of the good I see in them. Miss Bingley challenges me in that habit and reminds me again how fortunate I am to have a sister as dear as you.”

“A sister who will speak her own unkind thoughts aloud with no hesitation? Oh dear, I am likened to Miss Bingley?” Elizabeth laughed. How good it felt to laugh, not to think about her travails of the past months or of what lay ahead.

Jane sighed in that way she had that conveyed genuine affection and concern. “Lizzy, it is not easy to know your own heart, let alone that of a man who affects you.”

“Men are such puzzling creatures. They act as if they are the soundest, most intelligent creatures in the world but I seem to attract insensible ones. Mr Nugent wished less for a wife than for a sister to attend his mother, and Mr Collins professed himself bewitched by three women in mere weeks! Neither had the merest notion that

marriage to a woman as unwilling as I could not possibly produce a happy union.”

“Only Mr Darcy appears to have acted with any logic, or passion, or respect for your situation.”

“To rescue me.”

Jane returned to the closet and held up a yellow gown to herself before setting it on the chair with the others. “I believe there is far more to his efforts, Lizzy. To offer for you once, based on your honour, and then to refrain from proposing so as not to force you to accept? That is more than goodness and respect. It is love.”

Was it true? Mr Darcy had no other reason to propose to a girl such as herself—poor, without connexions, often sharp-tongued, and too bent on refusals—unless there was strong feeling behind it. Strong feeling in a quiet man is far preferable to the flowery declarations from a nattering dandy or fool.

She remembered the previous October, and Jane’s delight upon learning that Mr Bingley shared her preferences for blackberry jam and Stilton cheese. She was eager to know everything of his likes and dislikes, of which there were very few, as his—like her own—was a most agreeable temperament.

Tastes and common preferences did not mean love, but Mr Nugent thought so; he recalled hers and proudly recited them as if her partiality to fruit tarts over meringues was a sonnet. She had never paid attention to how he liked his fish or eggs. But she knew how Mr Darcy took his coffee and the way he had of drumming his thumb on his leg or a chair arm when impatient. She knew he disliked mutton, that he bit his lip when reluctant to smile in company, and only carried handkerchiefs his sister had decorated. If it was not love when Mr Nugent catalogued her preferences, what was it that she noticed so much about Mr Darcy?

Perhaps it was the way their minds seemed so well-matched. Her acquaintance with gentlemen outside of those she had known all her life was small but it had grown this past year, and only with Mr Darcy had she found such an admirable combination of generosity, intelligence, curiosity, and devotion to duty. It seemed too dull to fully describe all she had come to esteem in him. He is handsome and clever and smells good, too.

“These, I think,” Jane said, examining the last three gowns—two pink, one blue—in her closet. “And of course, my meadow-green gown for you, Lizzy. It captures your eyes so perfectly.”

Elizabeth nodded. “And the three inches of hem that must be cut off will be perfect for trimming whatever Mary has ready in her remnant basket.”

Jane smiled. “Lizzy, you have a kind heart and if you give it, I wish it to be to a man you can love as I do Mr Bingley. You seem so uncertain of your feelings for Mr Darcy, and if you do not reciprocate his love, you must tell him. Then, perhaps, you will feel able to meet a man better suited to you than Mr Darcy.”

There is no man better suited for me than Mr Darcy. She could not reveal to Jane what she would scarcely admit to herself. Not only was she in love with Mr Darcy, but after all she had said to him about her satisfaction in refusing other men, he would not dare ask her again.

I shall have to ask him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Darcy arrived at Netherfield on the twelfth of May, only two days before Bingley's wedding, and was dismayed to discover nearly every bedchamber in the house filled with Bingley's relations, friends from town, and Hurst's family. Worse, his room—the one Miss Bingley previously had deemed the finest in an otherwise 'merely adequate' house—had been given to Mr Nugent and he was now relegated to smaller, somewhat musty, quarters. Still worse, he learnt the Collinses were at Lucas Lodge, guests at the wedding and, he was certain, refugees from Lady Catherine's wrath.

How is Elizabeth faring amidst this sea of fools?

He would find out that afternoon, when he accompanied Bingley to Longbourn for his final visit there before the wedding breakfast itself. Tomorrow would be busy with final preparations for the evening's ball, and he was certain he would be needed to calm Bingley's nerves. His own nerves were hardly calm when they crossed Longbourn's threshold .

Is she still impertinent enough to want me as much as I want her?

Elizabeth was sitting with her elder sister when they were taken to the morning parlour. Not only did she smile at him, she appeared as unsettled as he. It seemed a good sign that even their emotions were in mutual tumult.

His joy increased when, after greetings were exchanged, she offered her seat next to Miss Bennet on the settee to Bingley and moved to a chair across the room; an empty

chair sat beside it. He took it, managed to think of everything and nothing he could say, and was sorely glad she had no such struggles.

“Mr Bingley is pleased you are here to support him,” she said. “I hope you have not come merely to flee angry missives from Lady Catherine.”

He returned her small smile. “Not at all. She was unhappy my cousin and I departed early, yet I have received not one letter from Rosings. I hope no letters or unpleasant reminders of that place have haunted you since your return home.”

“Not even my mother, who knows nothing of his actions towards me, wishes to host Mr Collins here. I am sure we shall see him at the ball, and will earnestly avoid one another’s company.”

“You and your dancing slippers have earned such a reprieve,” he agreed. “Have you been to Netherfield and seen the madness there?”

Her outburst of laughter briefly drew Bingley and Miss Bennet from their conversation. “I apologise,” Elizabeth said. “I have never seen a house party filled with so many people of differing opinions, and have enjoyed the many colourful conversations I have had this past week. ”

“With Mr Nugent as well?”

“Oh yes. He has told me all about his betrothed.”

“He is engaged ? So soon? But your sister?”

“Kitty is unbothered.” She shrugged and she smiled impishly, her eyes alight with mischief. “To a lovely lady from Sussex, who is of fine character and whose father boasts even finer stables than his, and who adores his mother’s wit and taste in wall-

papers.”

It took him only a moment to deduce the answer. “The Walters of Sussex? With four daughters who ride and race and despise town?”

“The very ones. Phoebe, I believe. She is a second daughter, which made him wary,” she said, grinning, “but her seat is as fine as her mind for horseflesh, so he knew it to be love.”

“I am happy for him—for them. Even if he did steal my rooms at Netherfield.”

“Poor thing. Perhaps, in exchange for such an uneven trade, you could apply to him for some of his amusing stories.”

Poor thing? Laughing, he shook his head, marvelling at the easiness between them . He had not imagined she would be so welcoming, not after he had created so much awkwardness between them. But with the ease came rising hopes, and he did not wish to spend his valuable time with her discussing Nugent and Lady Catherine. There was another concern he must address.

He leant his head closer. “My cousin Anne tells me your letter was quite gracious.”

“Oh, indeed? Well, it took some practise to get to the point of graciousness. ”

“That does not surprise me.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew the folded letter found in his carriage. Elizabeth looked at it curiously, but without recognition. “This was found in my carriage. I presume, and hope from the sentiments within, that it is one of your ‘practise’ letters.”

Her eyes widened and she reached for it with a trembling hand. “Ah, it has been read?”

“Only by me. My coachman gave it to my butler, neither of whom opened it. I needed to determine what it was, and it was so brief, that yes, I did read all of it. And,” he lowered his voice and looked directly at her, “I think it is brilliant, and not only in its sentiments towards my aunt, who deserves many strong set-downs.”

Her eyes skimmed the very words he praised before replying, quietly, “Well, it is best she only thinks I dislike her, rather than she know of it.” She glanced at Bingley and her sister, who remained happily engrossed in each other, before returning her eyes to him.

Seeing her hesitation to say more, Darcy smiled tenderly. “At the risk of once again showing too much of my own feelings, the rest of your letter is exceptionally insightful. I may not deserve a wife who can challenge my pride and does not mind a little mud on her boots, but she is the wife that I want.”

She blushed, deeply, and looked away for a moment. He could almost see her thoughts play out by watching the rapid change of expression, before she turned back to him, her eyes alight, with, he hoped, as much happy expectation as he felt.

They had no opportunity to go beyond those promising beginnings before Mrs Bennet arrived and announced she required Jane for a final fitting of her gown. Likely it was the first time the lady had ever invited any suitor to leave Longbourn; her expression upon seeing Darcy certainly did not convey hopes he would become one. Leaving before he could truly understand Elizabeth’s feelings or Bingley could steal the kiss he clearly desired from Jane vexed both men. As Netherfield and its boisterously argumentative guests offered no comfort to either, they took a long ride, ending in Meryton so that Bingley could purchase yet another gift for his bride, before returning.

Meryton was again Darcy’s destination the following morning. He was nearly there when the voice he loved most in the world called out.

“Mr Darcy?”

He held a hand to his eyes to shield the sun. It shone behind Elizabeth, providing him a shamefully affecting view of her figure under her light walking gown. He turned his eyes to the ground.

“What brings you here?” She stepped closer. “To Meryton, at this hour? Does Mr Bingley require something for the ball, ten hours from now?”

He could not confess he had scarcely slept the prior evening, thinking of her, nor admit his need to escape Netherfield and the clamour and chatter of the guests it held. Bingley’s puppy-like excitement for his wedding, Mrs Hurst’s zeal for decorating and managing the ball, and Miss Bingley’s churlish disgust at all of it made the house unliveable except for sleeping. And, his mind full of Elizabeth, Darcy had failed at that simple task. Now he was hungry—his breakfast tray had arrived with cold tea and undercooked eggs, but he would not fault the overworked servants for delivering him nothing edible or appetising. His own aversion to engaging with the household was to blame.

Much as he wished to say something witty or resume yesterday’s promising conversation, he could not. Not when she neared him, and without words, brought something truly delightful to his senses.

“You smell like ham,” he said plaintively.

“Pardon me?” She stepped back.

“No, no. Excuse me, I have yet to have breakfast and dinner was a rather unappetising affair and I find myself exceedingly hungry. I thought I might find something to eat in Meryton.”

Elizabeth looked at him closely, her eyes dancing with laughter, and he felt too dull to appreciate the intimacy of it. “Mr Darcy, are you hiding yourself away from the surfeit of Scarborough Bingleys, Sussex Nugents, and Middlesex Hiddletons? Are you not practising your charms and conversation?”

“I am not. They are exhausting and I prefer to save all my charm and conversation for the very few who mean far more to me.”

He was pleased she blushed and that she did not demur from his compliment, indirect as it was. “Well, your wretched desperation has had its effect on me. Will you join us at Longbourn? You may have to dine with my mother and sisters only hours away from the year’s most anticipated events, but there is ham”—she paused, a wicked smile forming as she undoubtedly took note of his eagerness—“and baked eggs, and toast and rolls and Cook’s special fruitcake.”

“Miss Bennet is not the only angel at Longbourn.” His strength returned and he held out his arm. “I like your sisters, all of them, very much. Not as much as you, or even as much as ham, but perhaps when I am less famished, we may discuss some things.”

Promises were made to be broken. As satisfying as the breakfast and conversation were at Longbourn, Darcy was as besieged by chatter and arguments as he had been at Netherfield. He understood that weddings and balls enliven society, but was there no rule on the volume and quantity of the shrieking? If— when —I reach that point with Elizabeth, I will be the calm in the storm. And I shall ban shrieking.

The day prior, thanks to Mrs Bennet’s unwelcomed arrival, he and Elizabeth had not progressed past the promise in her eyes. Today, before once again being shooed away, he had managed to request two sets with her at the evening’s ball. Her answering smile gave him the sort of hope a man needs, he thought later, while sitting in his room and staring mindlessly at the ceiling. How lovely she is, how much she says without words but only with a glance or smile.

His respite for reverie was short. Bingley appeared at his door, wishing to talk about the business of marriage and his future with a wife and sister and so many Bennets, so Darcy set aside his own romantic concerns to manage whatever he could for Bingley—who had, after all, managed his own love affair quite nicely.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Mr Darcy's demeanour at Longbourn's breakfast table, sitting across from Kitty as she expounded on what Maria had told her of 'the magnificence of Rosings', had surprised the Bennets—and Elizabeth, just a little. He was uncomfortable in such boisterous society but his willingness to be there and involve himself with her family was based on far more than simple hunger—although his blissful expression when he saw the breakfast table certainly supported his avowal of being famished.

Elizabeth knew now that his desire to protect her was only part of his wish to marry her. He had given her the liberty to choose him as a suitor, allowed her to decide whether he could propose to her. No man of his standing, of such pride and gravity, would behave as he had, giving her the means to decide his fate, unless he truly loved her.

He loves me. The certainty of it was such that she wondered why she had not been able to fully embrace it until now. She had felt it when he held her after Mr Collins's offensive actions in the meadow. In the grave look he gave her when he last saw her in London. In the shy smile that grew larger when he saw her at Longbourn yesterday, and in the tenderness in his eyes when he assured her of her prescience in knowing what— who —he truly sought in a wife.

If he had hoped she loved him as well, Elizabeth understood her letter certainly gave him reason to believe so. Once it would have been mortifying to be so exposed; now it was past necessary, for had he not exposed his heart to her over and over?

And yet he remained vulnerable, and found ways to guard them both from injury. He

requested two sets with her at the ball, cloaking his sincerity with a jest that it was his duty to protect her from unwanted partners rather than simply appealing to her that he wished her company.

It was time she made herself vulnerable. She was not formed for unhappiness nor creating it for others, and she would not spend her life deliberately courting it.

Although nothing to Jane in beauty, Elizabeth felt herself in looks for the ball. Her creamy gown, trimmed with green and yellow ribbons and lace, was simple; her hair, pulled up and threaded with a small crown of yellow flowers, spoke well of Kitty's eye for fashioning hair. She acknowledged but felt little of the compliments paid her by her sisters or neighbours or Charlotte—poor Charlotte, so worried their friendship was ended over the ridiculous actions of her stupid husband. All it took was the moment when Mr Darcy spotted her. He was standing in Netherfield's entry hall beside Miss Bingley and one of her aunts, looking stoic yet bored, when Elizabeth entered with her family. The attention went to Jane, of course, and Mrs Bennet's voice announcing her own happiness carried through to ensure all knew the family of the bride had arrived. But Mr Darcy looked only at her, his eyes dark and intent, his mouth opening as it had when she had told him of breakfast.

He came to them with alacrity, joining Bingley in greeting the Bennets warmly—although he was all solemnity with her father. Then he turned to her, looking a little dazed, she realised, and everything within her welled up in sheer joy. They were saved from their awkwardness when the sound of the musicians readying for the first set were heard. He offered his arm; she took it and they went into Netherfield's great, dazzlingly decorated ballroom.

They remained silent, a marked contrast to their previous dance together, months ago, at Netherfield. He looked at her curiously, as if wondering at her unusual silence, and perhaps wishing for her to initiate a topic, as she so often did. She smiled and said, "It is all too lovely not to simply enjoy it."

“As are you,” he replied, returning her smile. She wondered if he too felt the thrumming in his hand, his waist, any spot they touched as they whirled about the floor. She regretted her next set was with Mr Bingley, who was not as handsome or compelling and chattered tirelessly about the ball, the wedding trip, the musicians, Jane’s mood, Jane’s beauty, Jane’s happiness. She looked away and found Mr Darcy watching her, his eyebrows lifted in amusement as he danced with Jane. She gave him an arch look and wished to exchange partners with Jane.

I shall never be safe from him, nor do I wish to be.

The music had barely ended when Elizabeth knew what she must do. Stepping across the few feet between them, she tilted her head and smiled. Mr Darcy bit his lip and her heart soared.

“Sir, if you have the next dance free, I wonder if you would take a turn in the garden with me.”

He looked surprised—perhaps concerned—by her application and offered her his arm. They walked towards the terrace doors.

“I have seen you watching Mr Collins and Mr Nugent. All is well, I assure you,” she said quietly as they moved past others enjoying the fresh air.

His expression softened. “Is it? I am glad, but if you are to tell me to go away as you did them, I think you would not ask me to escort you out of doors, alone.”

She led them, or perhaps he did, she could not tell, down the lamp-lit path towards an especially tall stand of honeysuckle hidden behind an even larger stand of shrubbery. She stopped and turned to him, gripping her skirt to keep her hands from fluttering almost as wildly as her heart.

“I have been called ridiculous and capricious—and far worse, as you know—but I am nothing but not determined when I finally come to my senses and understand my heart.” Elizabeth paused, hearing his sharp inhalation. “I can only hope I am not alone in my hopes and understanding when I tell you that you are the best man I know.” She faltered, needing to say more, but unable to express it when he looked at her with so rapt an expression

Mr Darcy took her trembling hand, gently pressing it in his own. His dark eyes bored into hers, making her almost lightheaded with the intensity of it. “You are not alone, my dear Elizabeth. As I said after first expressing my admiration for you, I know you have been besieged by proposals since you were a girl, and if you are not frightened by again hearing the proper words a proposal contains, I would like to offer you one more, which I hope will be your last and the one most acceptable to you.”

Elizabeth blinked. She blinked again, wondering why her view of Mr Darcy was obscured by mist. Swiping at her eyes, she realised the source of the wetness and smiled weakly at him.

“You wish to marry me.”

“Yes.” Now he was blinking.

“I-I... Are you certain? It is my sixth proposal.”

“Seventh. I understand seven to be a lucky number.”

“Let us hope,” she said weakly. Seven?

His expression grew more serious as he took both of her hands in his. “However, it is the first proposal in which the man making it loves and respects you and understands your worth as a woman. As I am a man who abhors failure and wishes only for your

happiness, I wish it to be your last.”

She nodded, and mindful of the deep blush that must be overtaking her cheeks as quickly as the elation filling her heart, she smiled. “Well, then, it shall be the last for each of us. Will you marry me, Mr Darcy? I would like to marry you. ”

He kissed her hands, murmuring her name again and again. “Yes, Elizabeth. How I love you.”

“And I love you,” she whispered, trembling a little in her joy. “It is new to me, saying it aloud, but this love feels as if it is an old friend.”

Elizabeth lay her head against his chest, and then his finger was under her chin, lifting it and peering closely at her. He leant closer, and touched his lips to her cheek, the side of her mouth, and then, ever so gently, to her lips. After a moment, he stepped back and gazed at her tenderly.

“Seven proposals, and but one kiss,” she whispered, which Mr Darcy clearly took as yet another challenge to be bested. His lips fell onto hers, gently as before, before pulling away and returning again and again, each time with more tender force, until her mouth opened under his and the world seemed to open up into something Elizabeth grew quickly eager to explore.

But then, he pulled away, and breathing heavily, simply stood and beheld her. “Dear God, but you are beautiful.”

He was, too. His hair was untidy, his lips soft and swollen, his dark eyes alight with what she understood was desire. Realising she must look even more dishevelled, Elizabeth shyly buried herself in his arms, listening to his racing heart, and inhaling deeply.

He smelled familiar to her, wonderfully so. Her father smelled of tobacco and peppermint, her uncle Gardiner of cinnamon. But Mr Darcy smelled of cologne, a rich mixture of balsam and sandalwood, and of some essence that must simply be his alone. Burrowing her face into his neck, she let out a happy sigh .

A moment passed before he spoke in a light if somewhat strained voice. “Are you well? Have you discovered a small bird or squirrel in my collar?”

She smiled and lifted her face to his. “I have discovered you, the man I truly wished for.”

“The man who did not truly propose, but you agreed in spite of it.”

Elizabeth felt laughter rumble in his chest. “You are certain of it being seven proposals?”

“The boys—Goulding and Lucas. Collins, twice. Nugent. And myself, twice. The proposal at Rosings I could not voice, and this one.”

“Eight, it is eight,” she said, surprising them both. “Your first proposal, made not to me but given by you to my father, to marry me should my honour be questioned. I knew nothing of it until just last week.”

“Ah yes. Your father was in disbelief of my sincerity, and dismissed it entirely. I thought it irresponsible of him.”

Elizabeth pulled back to search his eyes. “He thought I did not like you. I had, um, shared your comment about my lack of ‘tolerability’ with others.”

“Oh.” His brow furrowed.

“I am sorry.”

“No, no. I am guilty as well of a poorly made disclosure,” he admitted. “In fomenting dislike because of our own confused feelings, I said something to Miss Bingley about your fine eyes. I fear it only deepened her animosity towards you.”

She laughed, he pulled her closer, and their lips met again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The wedding of Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley was all that was glorious, but Elizabeth could hardly pay attention to the event her mother and sister had so meticulously planned. The effort to keep her eyes from Darcy was all-consuming. Since the words and promises they had shared and the kisses they had exchanged the night before, she had struggled to fix her attention on anyone who was not the tallest, handsomest, best man she had ever known. No one, not even Jane or Mr Bingley, was yet aware of what had passed between them. It was their wedding day, and she and Darcy had agreed they would not steal the attention from them.

Had she wished drama, it would have been easy to create, for all of her former suitors were at the wedding breakfast: Mr Goulding, Mr Lucas, Mr Nugent, and Mr Collins. Darcy had smiles and handshakes for two of them, a nod to the third, and a permanent glower for the last. Feeling pity for Charlotte, to whom he was everything polite, Elizabeth walked over to Darcy with a cup of her mother's popular punch. "No one but the bride's mother is allowed to swoon on a wedding day, and certainly no one is supposed to die from a thousand sharp glares of hostility."

"He deserves to suffer for what he has done."

"But Charlotte does not, and they will face worse from your aunt when our engagement is announced. Mr Collins is a weak-willed man, but perhaps a few words from you could give him the courage to be a better man."

He looked at her, incredulous. "Which few words, specifically?"

“Hmm, perhaps ‘you shall outlive my aunt’ or ‘She is all bark, no bite’ or ‘I shall not kill you’?”

His smile, the one that lit up his face and which was becoming increasingly common when they were alone, appeared quickly—and just as quickly caught the attention of more than a few revellers. Elizabeth felt their scrutiny, and raised the glass of punch Darcy had refused in their direction. “To Mr and Mrs Bingley,” she said cheerfully.

Darcy strolled over to Mr Collins, who looked up from his cake and as predicted, nearly swooned. Elizabeth watched as Darcy said something quietly to him. Mr Collins nodded eagerly. Darcy clapped his shoulder and once returned to her side, said quietly, “Tempting as your last suggestion was, I opted for ‘All is forgiven, but only if you listen more to your wife than you do to my aunt’.”

“Thank you.” Elizabeth felt a swell of pride at his graciousness, and whispered, “I was wrong about the swooning. I am so pleased with you that I may faint if I do not kiss you.”

A few minutes after Elizabeth emerged from the music room which Darcy had expressed a fervent wish to inspect with her, Mr Bennet came to stand by her. “You look as happy as your sister today. I am glad to see Jane well-settled. She has found herself a husband she likes even more than does your mother, and he will provide me amusement for years to come. But they are so perfectly amicable! Are you certain you wish to live with them?”

She shrugged, displeased with his mocking tone, and kept her eyes fixed to the vision of happiness that was Jane as she spoke to their young Gardiner cousins.

“Have you avoided all of your former lovers? To have all of them—Collins, Lucas, Goulding, and Nugent—here for a wedding is a perversity unto itself.” He chuckled. “Of these hearts and hands, but one you had need accept. And yet, all now are taken.

Do you, seeing today's joy, have any regrets?"

Turning, she gave him an arch look. "Only that I have made the only man I could ever marry wait longer than I should."

"Say what? Lizzy?"

She slipped away, unwilling to give her father any satisfaction and unable to resist embracing her dearest, and newly married, sister.

As the celebration neared its end, Darcy asked to speak to Mr Bennet. They stepped inside the book-room he had last seen in the autumn, the morning he rode to London, disappointed at not seeing Elizabeth beforehand.

"Mr Bennet," he said, once he had sat in the chair across from the desk.

"Drink this," said Mr Bennet. "It is superior to the punch my wife is serving or the wine used for toasts."

He poured two glasses of brandy and pushed one towards Darcy, who sniffed it and set it aside. He had no use for it; love itself, and the knowledge that Elizabeth would be his wife, was intoxicant enough.

Mr Bennet looked at him as if in shared camaraderie. "You too are weary of joy and celebration? Would you prefer to talk philosophy or poetry?"

"Proposals. I am happy to inform you that Elizabeth has accepted mine and I have accepted hers. The first she has ever offered to a gentleman."

Darcy steepled his fingers in imitation of Mr Bennet, who appeared frozen in shock.

“You and Elizabeth?”

“Yes.”

“Is this about the offer you tendered in the autumn to assure her reputation?”

“That offer was given to you, and she never knew of it.” Darcy was somewhat angry that Mr Bennet had withheld that assurance from Elizabeth. It would, at the least, have comforted her in the face of her father’s cruel ultimatum. But time had passed, and it did no one any favours to create enmity. “No, this offer is made based on my love for her. We will have a marriage of mutual felicity based on trust and understanding. ”

“Truly, Mr Darcy? You may have professed sincerity in your proposal and her acceptance of it, but I cannot like the suddenness of it.”

“Mr Bennet, my understanding is that the speed of any alliance was not imperative when you informed your daughter she must accept her next proposal, regardless of who made the offer or in what form or haste.” Darcy stared at the untouched glass of brandy. “The inferiority of the match was not critical to your happiness or to hers—there was only the desire to marry off Elizabeth and be done with the deed.”

“That is not exactly true. Lizzy is the cleverest of my daughters yet she has been a ridiculous creature when it comes to considering matrimony.”

“You would have had her betrothed at the age of ten, was it, to Mr Goulding? Or, staying that proposal, given her hand to Mr Lucas when she was scarcely sixteen and he still at university?”

“Such was my fate at the youthful age of one-and-twenty, and Mrs Bennet a mere seventeen.”

Darcy waited for the man to realise the feebleness of such a defence, but when Mr Bennet failed to acknowledge it, he said, “Of course, and you can celebrate some twenty-five years of mutual respect and felicity in your marriage.”

Mr Bennet sighed. “Point taken, but I must fault your lack of understanding. A childhood proposal, an offer from a friend...these were unserious and I would not have bound her to either and did in fact defend her to the neighbourhood when remarks were later made in jest of her fickleness. It is her refusal of Mr Collins—an unpleasant man who is, unfortunately, my heir—that rankles my wife, and of Mr Nugent, which led us to such an ultimatum. Happiness in marriage is secondary to security.”

“Marriage to me will provide both to your daughter, as you will see from the settlements. I trust we have your blessing.”

Mr Bennet nodded. “You say Elizabeth proposed to you as well?”

“She has suffered so many proposals, she felt it time for her to make her own.” Darcy grinned. Mr Bennet may have forgot his daughter’s sense of joyful mischief, but she was his now to treasure. When a giant cheer sounded from the drawing room, he rose. “We must make our goodbyes to Mr and Mrs Bingley. I will have the settlement papers drawn up and bring them to you next week.”

Half an hour later—Bingley was prone to long farewells, even with a radiant bride awaiting him—Darcy asked Elizabeth to walk with him.

She led him towards some wildly fragrant lilac bushes, where, concealed from the rest of the celebrants, he took her hand and told her they had her father’s blessing.

“And yet you appear displeased.”

“I mean no disrespect to your father, but I cannot like his words. He belittles your value and the importance of happiness in marriage almost as badly as does Mr Collins. He manages his estate as indifferently as he does his paternal role, yet has called you ‘a ridiculous creature’? Fitzwilliam Darcy would never fall in love with a ridiculous creature. He has loved but one lady, and she is the most singular of her sex: beautiful and clever, generous and mischievous. ”

“A gentleman who speaks of himself in the third person only underlines the regard with which my father must revere he who claims the title ‘master of Pemberley’.” She laughed, but Darcy heard the hollowness of it. He lifted her chin and bent his head to hers.

“No man, whether or not he is a gentleman, should disparage a lady, and certainly not one under his care. Months ago, when the gods of rain brought us together, you rightfully accused me of pomposity and rudeness and told me of the terrible offence I had given to you. ‘Tolerable.’ In spite of the admiration I already felt for you, it was I who was in tolerable.”

“You have already apologised for the insult, and explained the reasons for your terrible mood that evening.” She smiled. “And I am a ridiculous creature. I declined proposals because those who offered their hands were too young, too odd, or too ridiculous themselves. But poor Charlotte, who watched and heard me laugh about them, was waiting for just one proposal. Any proposal.”

“She accepted the man you twice refused.” He gave her a look of undisguised tenderness before kissing her temple. “Bless your strength, wilfulness, and discernment.”

“You know,” she tilted her head to one side, a look of wonder in her expression, “I have never been courted. Mr Goulding and Mr Lucas were mere boys of course and Mr Collins’ small compliments were sickening. Mr Nugent apparently thought the

praise and delight he bestowed so liberally and his references to how much I resembled his mother in my wit and wisdom were perhaps his own vision of courting but they only served as warning to me.”

“Your acceptance of my hand does not relieve me of the burden of courting you. In fact, I am compelled to court you, to overtake any and all memories of the horrid suitors you have suffered.”

“I would enjoy that. If you require any assistance, I have on good authority that Mr Hurst is full of intelligence on wooing a woman. Apparently, he is quite charming,” she insisted to Darcy’s amused look. “My favourite bit of advice, which Mr Nugent told me worked well on Mrs Hurst, is ‘You may fascinate a woman by giving her a piece of cheese’.”

“What? Is she a mouse, so fascinated by a bit of Stilton?”

“Her sister would prefer jewels, but some women are easily pleased.”

“You are not.” Darcy laughed. “You truly have been beset by the most charming suitors. I promise I will not tempt you with cheese, or wine, or gold, nor charm you with pretty words, for I lack such facility.”

A moment later, so quickly he thought he imagined it, her finger brushed his hand. “I disagree. Your words are very pretty.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Elizabeth's removal to London in February had ended one of Meryton's more promising topics of gossip, though it was filled briefly by Kitty and Mary's flirtations, Jane's engagement, and the theft of a pregnant sow from Mr Robinson's farm. Elizabeth's return to Longbourn was welcomed with little notice; Jane's wedding to Mr Bingley was, as ensured by Mrs Bennet, the most important topic at any gathering of more than two ladies.

Thus when the banns were called for Elizabeth and Darcy the following Sunday, they were immediately beset with curious glances. Along with hearty congratulations, whispers of 'Elizabeth is won' and assurances that it was true—'she actually said yes?' followed them around Meryton an entire week.

In the first days of their engagement, the couple were so deliriously happy that all else faded into insignificance. Darcy could ignore the bitter glances sent his way by Miss Bingley, Elizabeth could acquiesce to whatever inanity or idea was proposed by Mrs Bennet. The curious glances, rampant gossip, and shameless observations which followed them everywhere they went mattered not at all. The ladies of Meryton, including two mothers whose sons had long ago admired Lizzy Bennet before growing to adulthood and finding wives, talked amongst themselves. It was supposed by them, naturally, that Elizabeth had accepted the 'charmless but rich' gentleman only for his fortune and consequence—and under threat of her father's ultimatum. Why else would she have finally accepted a proposal unless forced to? Mr Darcy's motivations were less clear; surely, a wealthy young man who already managed his own estate, and was handsome besides, had met many rich, pretty young ladies. Had his disagreeableness put off their fathers?

In short, the question was: How and why had Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy come together?

She seemed to actually enjoy his company—her eyes rarely left him and she was always sitting or standing or strolling beside him. And she looked so luminously happy. But he showed no greater sign of affection than a softness about the eyes, an upturned lift to his lips that resembled a smile, and a distinct partiality for her company.

Finally, one evening, as the group sat in the Philipses' drawing room, Mrs Goulding sighed. "Henry calls it a good match, and it is plain to me that Miss Elizabeth loves him, perhaps even more than her sister loves Mr Bingley."

Mrs Long laughed meanly. "You are supposing then that Miss Elizabeth proposed to him?"

Overfull with amusement for all she had overheard that evening and in the past week, Elizabeth winked at her betrothed, leant between the two ladies and said gaily, "Oh, I did."

Elizabeth had assured Darcy that even in this less-elevated level of society, people tended to be much the same. Yes, the inhabitants of Meryton might possess less refinement than Darcy had ever witnessed in Mayfair, but she avowed there were as many ridiculous people amongst her neighbours as he knew within his own circle to provide him adequate familiarity and amusement. He did his best, especially when separated, not to display the aggrieved resignation he often felt while enduring the scrutiny of the neighbourhood, and to remind himself—as she often did—that he was a fortunate man indeed to have won the heart of such a ridiculous creature as she.

Darcy basked in that smile while he listened to Mr Robinson and Mr Long debate the Corn Laws and like Mr Bennet and Sir William before them, turn to him for his

opinions. He had wearied of the activities of the past days; all he wished to do was spend time alone with Elizabeth, to talk and laugh and plan their life together, and perhaps kiss a little more. Being on display to satisfy the overly curious neighbours made his skin itch. However, he knew it must be done—he had won the heart and hand of Meryton's most sought-after maiden, and dispelling any rumours and displaying their mutual affection was paramount.

If only we could display it alone .

With his resolution in mind, Darcy attempted to enjoy what pleasures could be gained. Though he might not appreciate the attention bestowed upon them, he thoroughly enjoyed observing Elizabeth's happiness and easy camaraderie with her friends and neighbours. Occasionally, and seemingly for no other reason beyond lifting his spirits, she looked across the room to smile brightly at him, a smile which he quickly reciprocated, if a little less brightly, before both returned their attentions towards their separate conversations.

He would have to endure it only a little longer before leaving for town. Abandoning her only days after winning her hand, with their joy to celebrate—and Collins still in Meryton—was unthinkable. He used his hours at Netherfield to write letters, announcing his engagement to Georgiana and Richard, to his aunt and uncle, to Anne, and, most formally, to Lady Catherine. If he had left his aunt in doubt of his intentions towards Elizabeth Bennet, it had been meant only to protect Elizabeth. Now it was a certainty and he could put it to paper. He would leave it to Elizabeth, sometime in the future, to decide the terms of their connexion to his aunt and Rosings. In his letter, he wrote:

I shall marry Miss Elizabeth Bennet in June. We shall go immediately to Pemberley with Georgiana. I have written to Anne as well and wish her nothing but peace and happiness, just as I wish for yourself.

He tapped his pen, and suddenly recalling the words previously written in another's hand, went to his travelling writing desk. Pulling out the letter he had found in the carriage, he copied a slightly altered version of Elizabeth's lines onto his own missive.

I have offended you with my actions possibly as much as you have offended me with your words and behaviours. I could forgive your pride, if you had not mortified mine. Sometime in the future, I might make the effort, for selfishness must always be forgiven if there is no hope of a cure.

Lastly, I thank you for your hospitality at Rosings, and promise never again to plague you by my presence unless a promise is made to honour and respect my wife. Until then, I ask one favour—be kind to Mrs Collins, for she is all goodness and speaks only of her respect for you and Rosings.

He stared at the letters, ensured they were dried and sanded, sealed them, and tossed them in his secretary.

“I must go to town to settle our affairs.” After a distracted pause, he added, “And I need to inform my family.”

“I hope they receive the news with pleasure,” Elizabeth replied quietly.

“Georgiana and Colonel Fitzwilliam are in town, so they will be the first to know,” Darcy responded, neatly avoiding the response he feared from his other relations. The letters he had written remained unsent; embarrassed by his inability to write of his happiness with any measure of equanimity or even with a steady hand, he had decided them to be his ‘practise letters’. Besides, it was hardly just to tell Georgiana his happy news and expect her to remain silent until he had told anyone else, so he instead posted short letters to her and Richard, telling them only that he would soon be in town. After they had celebrated, he would inform his aunt and uncle and tell

them of Elizabeth's worth and charm and value to him. Then, finally, he would post his letters to Lady Catherine and Anne.

"I do not know how I shall leave you," he said quietly.

Elizabeth took his hand and placed it on her heart. "You will not. You are here." Then, wrapping her arm in his, she assured him, "I shall miss you, but you will not miss the shopping and the planning. We have given my mother only five weeks to plan 'the grandest wedding in all of Hertfordshire'."

"I am happy to ease her burden and make it three weeks."

"I am sure you are, but I should not like Mrs Jane Bingley and her husband to cut short their wedding trip in order to come to our wedding." She turned to him. "How long will you be gone?"

"I shall leave early tomorrow, and hope to return within four days. I shall bring Georgiana with me, now that Netherfield is quieter."

"Please tell her I look forward to meeting her. And please give Colonel Fitzwilliam my regards," Elizabeth said with a smile Darcy wished held a little less enthusiasm. He knew her heart was his, but until her name was his as well, he could be a little foolish in his jealousy.

Foolishness and jealousy were unfounded, for the connexion that deepened into mutual admiration in a dank boat-house and strengthened in the fields of Kent scarcely needed vows and bands of gold to affirm it. But weeks later, on a sunny late June morning, they were wed and Miss Elizabeth Bennet was no longer to be pursued nor gossiped about as a lady in need of a husband.

That evening, ensconced in their rooms in London, Darcy was fully intent on

showing his wife a passion that would not fade with familiarity or become evanescent as a passing cloud. When he spoke heartfelt words of adoration and love, his breath was still a bit hurried and his eyes a little wild.

A small smile came to Elizabeth's lips as he whispered his precious endearments, and she tilted her head to meet his soft gaze. "You know I feel the same. You are the dearest person to my heart, and you grow dearer still."

Her words seemed to affect him deeply, on a day already filled with heightened emotion. "My darling Elizabeth," he murmured, as she moved to kiss him. Eventually, they grew still and the sounds of the crackling fire replaced their whispers.

Their ease as friends and lovers was such that the new husband and wife agreed the failings and mistakes made by certain members of their families would not determine how they would live their life together.

"Our daughters," Darcy told Elizabeth on their second day of marriage, while still abed and delighting one another with caresses, compliments, and confidences, "will marry good men, not because of ultimatums or ill-conceived arrangements with other families, but because we shall raise them to know their own hearts and respect their own minds, and to recognise their worth."

She smiled, and continued tracing a lazy circle on his chest. "And our sons? You will teach them not to woo a girl with cheese or pretty compliments on how they cut their meat?"

He laughed, and drew her into his embrace. "I knew nothing of wooing and romance until I met you. You taught me, and you shall have to teach them as well."

Elizabeth touched his cheek, rough with his morning whiskers, and looked into his

soft, loving eyes. She could feel the power and strength in the arms, but the gentleness of his touch and his tender kisses revealed the other side of his true self, the side hidden to all but her.

For all her previous fears of being wed to the wrong man, here, with her beloved Darcy, she would always be safe and adored.

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A year later, returned to Longbourn for the first time since her marriage, Elizabeth Darcy needed little reminder that no matter how quickly the changes she felt in her own life, the pattern of life in Meryton would remain steady and slow.

Priscilla Lewis had found a husband. Mr Goulding was now a father, and Mr Lucas soon to become one. Of course, so would Darcy; the anticipation of it happening in only four months' time had her staid husband, already displeased to undertake the four-day journey from Pemberley to Hertfordshire 'even for your sister's wedding'—even more protective of her health, happiness, and sensibilities. His insistence on her need for tranquillity thus made it easy to decide to stay at Netherfield with the Bingleys rather than at Longbourn while Mrs Bennet busied herself with Mary's wedding to Mr Smith, the new vicar in Luton.

On their second evening in Meryton, reluctantly separated by well-wishers at Lucas Lodge, she watched from a few feet away as Darcy was approached by the youngest Lucases. Peter now had all his teeth and Edward was nearly half a foot taller than at their last meeting.

"Mr Darcy."

He turned and looked down at the boys, both of whom favoured their mother's winsome looks, but still had hints of their eldest sister's plainness. The older one's limbs were in that gangly stage as he moved awkwardly from boy to man. Darcy thought he might advise him on the ways he could alleviate the clumsiness certain to plague him in the next years.

"Mr Darcy," said Peter, "you still love Miss Elizabeth?"

“I do, very much,” he replied solemnly. He was impressed; Mr Bennet had never asked that question. “Mrs Darcy is the ideal wife for me.”

“She is, for everyone,” the younger boy said glumly. “Must you keep her for yourself, away from those of us who need her?”

Darcy bit his lip, trying not to smile. “Mrs Darcy will always return to Longbourn, but her home is now with me.”

“Well, you see, we would like her back here, in Meryton,” said Edward. “Our brother John was once to marry her and make her our sister, but then he went away to school.”

Peter eagerly added, “And he married dull old Susan, who never plays with us and talks only of London and dresses and hates pigs and dogs.”

“She is a stupid girl to dislike dogs,” Edward whispered loudly, “and Charlotte’s ridiculous husband agrees with her!”

“I am sorry for you, to have gained a sister and brother with such a terrible prejudice,” Darcy said gravely. “But they must have other traits you can admire.”

Edward shook his head. “You married the best of all the ladies in Meryton.”

Darcy could do nothing but offer his agreement to such a discerning young man. “Like your elder brother, you must attend school. You will meet another lady when you are older.”

Edward looked longingly at Elizabeth, across the room laughing with some other young ladies. “I suppose.”

Darcy crouched down in front of the boys. “I promise to always make her happy and

bring her back to Meryton to visit. Perhaps we shall come to your weddings someday, when you are men with whiskers and educations and careers.”

Peter’s nose wrinkled with distaste but his older brother said resolutely, “I will dance with Miss Elizabeth.”

“You will dance with Mrs Darcy ,” he replied. “As to your own futures, I can only advise you to never pepper a lady with too many proposals—make sure of her affection and whether you are worthy of her before you ask.”

“And whether she likes cake?” said Peter.

The younger boy’s earnest question earned Darcy’s smile. “Oh, I would not marry a woman who did not like cake.”

Edward nodded his head. “Miss Eliz—Mrs Darcy likes cake and is not scared of toads and can skip stones and”—he lowered his voice—“she was clever enough to refuse Mr Collins. He talks an awful lot, and always takes the largest slice of cake.”

While Kitty and Lydia had grown more sensible, and Darcy could take some pleasure in their conversation, he was as surprised as Elizabeth when her youngest sisters followed them out of Longbourn the day before the wedding and asked to sit with them in the gardens. Both supposed the girls shared their weariness of the solemnity of Mr Smith and Mary’s courtship. After all, they had been rather vocal about the lack of a ball.

Lydia sighed heavily and got quickly to the point. “You and Jane and Mary have chosen such different husbands, and not to insult you, Mr Darcy, but Lizzy had her choice of husbands and likely heard every kind of proposal.”

Elizabeth’s attempt at solemnity failed as she laughingly replied, “Until Mr Darcy, the most acceptable offer I had received came from a suitor who was twelve years

old.”

Lydia rolled her eyes but was too earnest to laugh. “It is obvious when a man is a terrible prospect—he drools or is fat or poor or cannot understand Casino. But if Papa’s judgment was so clouded for you, how will Kitty and I know a man is all he seems, not simply handsome or good in offering pretty words?”

Elizabeth squeezed her husband’s arm. “A man who feels deeply and yet who cannot summon pretty words easily is the best sort of man.”

Kitty’s face lit up as she strove to understand. “So a man who is glib and charming cannot feel deeply? Are Lieutenant Wickham and Mr Nugent shallow in their professions of love in spite of being handsome?”

“Yes.” Darcy’s quick reply, rather loud and decisive, startled all three women. “Yes,” he said again, albeit more calmly. “You can enjoy flattery but trust is something different.”

Kitty nodded. “Then I was correct in never walking alone with Mr Nugent, and Lydia was correct not to meet Mr Wickham at the boat-house.”

“At the boat-house?” Elizabeth did not need to look at her husband to know his thoughts.

Lydia shrugged. “Once word got out of it affording privacy and a romantic atmosphere that led to the only proposal you have accepted, well, yes, the boat-house has gained some renown.”

The Darcys glanced at each other, mortified. “I shall speak to Mr Bennet about replacing the lock on the door,” he said.

“You will spoil everyone’s fun,” cried Lydia.

“And yet safeguard your reputations,” Darcy replied smugly.

Before Lydia could protest further, Elizabeth held up her hand. “Both of you are pretty girls, who easily catch a man’s eye. When I thought of the husband I wished for, it was for a man who was good, kind-hearted and intelligent, one who I could laugh with, someone I could talk to all day long, and never tire of—and who would never tire of me. A handsome face cannot be the only inducement for affection.”

She gave her husband a fond look before continuing. “Twice in our acquaintance, Darcy said he would do all he could to protect my reputation. His promise, to care for me even if I did not need his help or wish him as a husband, affected me more than any sweet flattery could have. It showed me that he is the best kind of man, willing to put aside his own wants for mine. Is there any greater way to love someone than to put their good over your own?”

Kitty appeared awed. “An unselfish love.”

Lydia appeared more doubtful, and looked between the couple, no doubt seeing Darcy’s desperate desire to kiss his wife. “Come, Kitty. We have had our lesson for the day. Perhaps we should talk to Mary and make certain she understands about kissing.”

The girls had scarcely disappeared around the hedge when Darcy pulled Elizabeth into his arms and kissed her soundly. “You are my heart’s delight, a wonderful sister, and a sound giver of advice.” He kissed her again.

“I meant every word, my love, but did you mean your promise to have the boat-house locked?” She arched an eyebrow. “Think of the romantic beginnings that will not flower there.”

He shrugged. “It is where our beginnings took root.”

“Ah, and Fitzwilliam Darcy does not like to share.”

“Not when it comes to you.”

“I saw those glum expressions on Edward and Peter Lucas. You scared them off, too.”

“Minx.” He kissed her nose.

Elizabeth laughed. “It is an unselfish love that tolerates all my teasing, argumentative ways.”

“A man can find an argumentative wife readily enough, but to find a woman he can respect and admire, and who challenges him to be a better man?” He shrugged and gave her a small smile. “That, it seemed to me, was a hopeless business—until you.”

The End