



# Body and Soul (Darcy and Elizabeth Variations #8)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Shes in her mothers body. Hes in her fathers body.

Elizabeth Bennets tolerance for her mothers poor behavior has reached its peak. When Mrs. Bennet enumerates the benefits of her second daughter marrying Mr. Collins, Elizabeth confronts her, declaring a disinclination for the match and pleading with her mother to show sense. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Bennet does not comply, and the pair go their separate ways for the rest of the evening. Resolved to face the matter on the morrow, Elizabeth is shocked to awaken in the mistresss chambers—trapped in her mothers body!

Darcy returned to Netherfield Park with his friend Charles Bingley, hoping his presence will prevent the gentleman from making any rash decisions regarding his latest angel. Instead, his attention is once again seized by Elizabeth Bennet, the entirely unsuitable miss with fine eyes and pert opinions. Finally resolved to pursue the lady, he is dismayed to awaken in her fathers body, and to learn the lady he had courted for the past few weeks was not herself.

The two couples must resolve their differences in hopes of restoring their souls to their respective bodies. As time passes, worry the situation will never be rectified presses each party to repair all that is broken.

In this Darcy and Elizabeth low angst Pride and Prejudice variation, two couples must overcome their past misunderstandings whilst in search of their happily ever after. All MJ Strattons books are clean Pride and Prejudice variations.

**Total Pages (Source):** 21

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## Chapter One

November 26, 1811 Netherfield Ball Elizabeth

Elizabeth Bennet stayed in her chair, her smile frozen on her face as she watched the guests file back into the ballroom. Mama and Lady Lucas lingered, gossiping as matrons are wont to do, and she wished them gone so she might have a moment to compose herself. How could anyone have misinterpreted her family's actions this night? From Kitty and Lydia's wild behavior to Mary's ill-timed and ghastly performance on the pianoforte, almost every Bennet had left themselves open to the derision of their neighbors. It was appalling!

She could not blame her father for stepping in to remove Mary from the instrument, though Elizabeth thought he could have handled the situation better. Then again, if Mr. Bennet had taken an active interest in his daughters, Mary might have known that monopolizing the instrument showed ill-breeding. Not only had she claimed her spot on the bench before their hostess had invited her, the most oft-forgotten Bennet sister's performance was wanting, her weak voice warbling as she attempted to present beyond her capabilities. And then, to make matters worse, the polite applause spurred Mary to begin a second piece!

It was, in every way, dreadful. Mr. Darcy, stationed on a wall directly in Elizabeth's line of sight, had scowled disapprovingly. The minute shake of the gentleman's head as Mr. Bennet urged his daughter away from the pianoforte told Elizabeth all she needed to know about his feelings. He disdained her and all her family; of that, she felt certain.

And why is it I care so much for what the proud, disdainful Mr. Darcy thinks? she wondered. She knew the answer, even as she asked herself the question. He was quite the handsomest man she had ever met, and the wealthiest—if she could not win his good opinion, what chance did she have with a lesser mortal? A man with ten thousand a year surely did not need a woman with a large dowry, but his position in society meant he was destined to marry far above the penniless daughter of a country gentleman. And if he could not bother with Miss Elizabeth Bennet, then surely those of less fortune would not bother either.

Elizabeth smothered a shuddering sigh. This evening could not be over soon enough.

“Lizzy, why are you still in here? Why are you sitting there, looking as though the world has come to an end? No, you had much better go dance.” Mrs. Bennet bustled up to her second daughter. She tapped Elizabeth’s shoulder with her fan. “Come, now. Let us go in together.”

“I thank you, no, Mama, I am not yet ready to return to the others.” Elizabeth spoke evenly and hoped that her mother would accept the reply and go. It was not to be.

“Not ready?” Mrs. Bennet repeated. “What can you mean by that? The room has been empty for almost five minutes now. Goodness, I have never met a more missish girl in all my life. Let us go immediately—Mr. Collins is waiting for you. He may even ask you for another set!” Mrs. Bennet concluded her speech with a motherly grin and held out her hand to her daughter.

Elizabeth ignored it, shaking her head. “I have no interest in Mr. Collins, Mama,” she said stiffly. “I do not wish to dance with him again tonight, nor do I wish to be his wife. If he proposes, I shall decline.”

Mrs. Bennet’s face went red. “You will do no such thing, Miss Lizzy! Mr. Collins is the heir to your father’s estate. In marrying him, you will save us from genteel

poverty if Mr. Bennet meets an untimely death. And he is the best you can hope for. You have not Jane's beauty or Lydia's liveliness. Why, even Mary is more accomplished! You had much better accept Mr. Collins when he asks, for you will get no other offers."

"How can you be so cruel?" Elizabeth stood. "Am I worth so little to you that you would barter me away in exchange for security? Trade my future for a home when your husband dies? I think not! I would not have him even if Papa was already gone. Mr. Collins is nonsensical and sycophantic. That you think he is the best I can do is insulting! Nothing you can say will induce me to accept his offer when it comes—even the risk of being thrown to the hedgerows when my father meets his end."

"Unfeeling, selfish girl!" Mrs. Bennet came forward, standing toe to toe with her second daughter. "You only think of yourself when you make these pronouncements! How can you consign me and all your sisters to a life of limited means when your father dies? Have you no compassion?"

"I mean only to act in a way that ensures my long-lasting happiness." Elizabeth huffed in irritation. "If that means that you and my sisters will need to be more circumspect in your spending when my father dies, then so be it. Besides, what have you to worry about? There is every indication Mr. Bingley will propose to Jane. Then your future will be secure, for he is far too amiable to see you suffer." And he was. Mr. Bingley had a heart as big as Jane's and would allow none of his relations to suffer needlessly.

"We cannot rely solely on that chance!" Mrs. Bennet's shrill voice echoed around the drawing room. "What if he does not marry her? Jane is beautiful, and it is clear he likes her a great deal, but so have others! She is two-and-twenty and has never had an offer. It is possible she will not get one from Mr. Bingley."

“He is besotted! Any fool can see that!” Elizabeth’s voice rose as she protested her mother’s foolish worries.

“And many a besotted man has played with a lady’s affections, only to abandon her later.” Mrs. Bennet looked stricken, as if the statement applied to her personally. “It is best not to take the chance. Nothing is final until the register is signed, and even then, disaster might strike.”

“How can you live your life seeing doom around every corner?” Elizabeth sighed, exasperated. “Can you not find pleasure in anything?”

Mrs. Bennet swatted her daughter with her fan. “Enough! You will come to the ballroom and use your wiles to secure Mr. Collins. I shall have nothing less from you!”

“Never! You cannot make me, and I refuse to oblige you in this manner. It is my life— my future—and I will not spend it tied to a hapless fool!”

Her mother reached out and wrapped a hand around her wrist. “Enough,” she hissed. “Come with me now!”

Before she could make a reply, thunder rocked the entire house. The candles flickered in the room and Elizabeth feared they would be plunged into darkness. The rumble continued for an immeasurable amount of time, and when it concluded, she felt off kilter. Her mother had released her at some point and blinked fearfully as the room stopped swaying and rocking in time with the thunder.

Mrs. Bennet shook her head in disappointment. “Whatever happens, the blame shall rest on your head, child,” she murmured sadly. She turned on her heel and left the room, leaving Elizabeth alone at last.

Sighing, she dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands. Elizabeth felt strangely nauseous, but anyone would feel ill after arguing so fiercely. Mama will never see things my way, she thought mournfully. And though she hated to disappoint the woman who had given birth to her, Elizabeth refused to exchange her happiness for security. She wanted more in a marriage than what her parents could boast. Papa barely tolerated his wife, and Mama tried her best to vex her husband regularly. No, Elizabeth wanted a marriage of mutual accord, affection, and respect. She would not have that with Mr. Collins.

Her father's cousin was not an intelligent man. He displayed a strange mix of servility and superiority. His pomposity and overt arrogance made him all the more objectionable. And he could not be called handsome, either. A man of five-and-twenty ought to take better care with his appearance. She could overlook his lack of physical attributes if he took better care with his ablutions and cleanliness. Mr. Collins' brown hair often lay plastered to his head from too long a time between washings. He was tall as well, but heavier about his middle than he ought to be. With an active profession such as a clergyman, it should not have been so. Then again, his enthusiasm for his food explained that.

None of it mattered. Every natural feeling rebelled against the thought of uniting herself with so objectionable a person. She would much rather have to make her own way in the world than succumb to her mother's wishes. Elizabeth had every reason to expect her father to refuse his consent. She knew herself to be his favorite child, and he would do nothing to force her into a marriage she did not want.

Finally, she stood. She could hear the orchestra playing a reel. Thankfully, she had promised no one this set, so she could avoid sitting out the rest of the evening in consequence of staying so long in the drawing room. Elizabeth wobbled as she made for the door. The feeling of being off-kilter had not waned whilst she sat in contemplation. She felt as though she could trip over a flat surface. The feeling of vertigo made her uncertain she could walk and not collapse, but she made the

attempt, anyway.

The lights reflecting off the mirrors in the ballroom did little to ease her discomfort. Determined to enjoy the rest of the evening, she ignored how the flickering candles made the sensation worse. Adding to her discomfort, she watched Lydia prance around the room, holding Mr. Denny's saber high over her head. Kitty followed along as she always did, laughing and giggling with Mr. Sanderson. She even pecked the man on the cheek in full view of the entire party.

Jane and Mr. Bingley were happily oblivious to the spectacle, though Mr. Darcy was not. He glowered at the entire assemblage and she wondered why he bothered to attend if the thought of dancing through the night so displeased him. His company did not add to the evening, for he had not danced more than a few sets. He had, of course, stood up with Mr. Bingley's sisters, and only one other set after; that set he had danced with her. Why he had bothered, she knew not. Perhaps he had done so only to assure himself of his superiority. Whatever the cause, she felt certain his presence lessened other's enjoyment of the event. How could anyone take pleasure in the evening when a foreboding man glared at them as they made merry?

Elizabeth looked around for the rest of her family. Mr. Bennet spoke with Sir William Lucas and Mr. Goulding in a far corner. He seemed completely at ease and unaware of the impropriety displayed by his wife and younger daughters. Papa's disinterest had always bothered her, but in her present state, Elizabeth felt his lack of concern even more acutely. She wished she had the power to make him see the folly that his behavior could bring upon them. Their neighbors already judged them, though they remained tolerant given the Bennets' standing in the neighborhood.

Mr. Denny came to solicit a dance then, his saber returned to his side and Lydia nowhere in sight. Elizabeth accepted gratefully, desperate for some other occupation and hoping to turn her thoughts in a happier direction.

“This evening has been quite the treat,” Mr. Denny said as they began the steps for their dance. “I have been an officer in the militia for two years now and private balls are a rare occurrence.”

“Mr. Bingley is everything polite and amiable to have extended an invitation to the officers,” she replied. “Having more gentlemen at a ball is always preferable to having too few.”

“A situation I understand has occurred far too often in Hertfordshire of late, or so I have been told.” He smiled amiably, and she chuckled in reply.

“Yes, there has been a dearth of dancing partners for some time. Many of our young men have gone away for some reason or another. The war on the continent has drawn more from the area than our fair share.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Whilst I appreciate their patriotism, they are very missed.”

“I am happy that we—my fellow militiamen and I—could provide some relief in that quarter. I have never met with such a welcoming community.” The steps of the dance separated them, and it was a few moments before they could resume their conversation.

“I shall tell our mutual friend how much we missed his presence tonight,” Mr. Denny said when the conversation resumed. “Wickham loves a ball and was sorry our colonel sent him to London.”

“Duty must come before pleasure, of course. I have no doubt I shall be able to enjoy Mr. Wickham’s company again soon. There will be many opportunities for revelry with the Advent approaching.” Elizabeth imagined pairing with the handsome lieutenant. He had singled her out from the first moments of their acquaintance, and she wished to know him better.



Another strike against Mr. Darcy's character, she thought acidly. How horribly that man had treated Mr. Wickham! No one deserved to have their future utterly stolen from them! Her head spun and Elizabeth shook it minutely to disperse the dizziness.

"Wickham is a handsome devil," Mr. Denny agreed. "I only hope he will leave us less well-favored men some ladies to woo."

Something about Mr. Denny's reply unsettled Elizabeth. She could not say what it was, but she sensed some other meaning to his statement than what could be readily discerned. The feeling persisted, and her nausea grew with each step of the dance. She tried valiantly to continue making conversation with Mr. Denny, but it grew increasingly difficult as the set went on.

Finally, the music ceased. She curtsied unsteadily and then allowed him to lead her from the floor. Elizabeth leaned heavily against his arm, unsure if her feet would hold her or not. Mr. Denny thanked her for the dance and she sank into a chair. I must have had too much punch, she thought. Nothing else could explain her complete inability to be steady on her feet. She believed no one had noticed, but still she felt mortified. Never had she over indulged to the point where she could not maintain a standing position. Resolved to dance no more that night, Elizabeth moved shakily to another chair, partially hidden behind a large potted plant. No one would disturb her there.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur. Guests trickled away one by one, yet still the Bennet carriage had not been called. Finally, just before dawn, their conveyance awaited them. It was all that Elizabeth could do to get herself into their coach without stumbling. Exhausted, she leaned against the squabs, praying that their journey would be quick so she could find her bed.

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### Chapter Two

November 27, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

She knew something was not right even before her eyes opened. Her chambers smelled different, like her mother's perfume. The coverlet on her bed felt heavier, and even her pillows had lumps in the wrong places. Blinking blearily, Elizabeth opened her eyes. Heavy curtains surrounded the bed that she recognized as belonging to the mistress's chambers.

Why am I in Mama's room? she thought, sitting up slowly. She reached out and pushed the curtains around the bed aside. The room was dim. Heavy drapes pulled across the windows had obscured all natural light. Elizabeth could not see well enough to light a candle, so she put her legs over the side of the bed, surprised when they touched the floor without dangling. As she stood, the feeling of vertigo from the night before returned and she swayed.

Every movement felt foreign as she groped her way to the window. Still partially asleep, she yanked the curtains open and blinked in the bright light. Much better. Elizabeth turned back toward the bed, determined to find an explanation for her presence in her mother's chambers. As she stepped forward, she paused. The last vestiges of sleep fell away from her thoughts and she took inventory of her person.

The nightgown she wore did not belong to her. It was trimmed in an excessive amount of lace and made of the softest cotton she had ever felt. Reaching a hand up, she touched her braid where it hung down over her shoulder. It did not feel as thick as it usually did. Lifting it so she could see it, she gasped. Gone were her dark brown

locks and, in their place, a golden rope with a few strands of gray.

“It is not possible!” Elizabeth moved with all haste to her mother’s full-length mirror and peered at her reflection in dread. Staring back at her was Mrs. Bennet’s countenance. Immediately, she began screaming. Panic overwhelmed her, and she touched her face in mortification.

The door connecting her mother’s rooms to her father’s opened and Mr. Bennet stumbled in dressed in nothing but a nightshirt. “Fanny?” he cried. “What is the matter?”

Elizabeth screamed again and covered her eyes. Never had she seen her father in such a state of undress, and she wanted to blush violently.

“Look at me!” she cried, dropping her hands and spinning to face him. The sound of her mother’s voice issuing from her mouth caused a new wave of panic and her breathing sped again. “What has happened? Why do I look so old? ”

Papa chuckled and shook his head. “My dear, you are nine-and-thirty! It is natural that a lady appears older when she is older. I cannot imagine why you thought to wake me in such a manner after our long night, and for something so inconsequential. I believe I shall go back to bed now. Best wishes with your wrinkles and gray hair.”

Stupefied, Elizabeth watched her father leave the room and close the door firmly behind him. His remarks smarted, even though she knew they were not directed at her. He would be no help. Shaking her head, she looked around for her mother’s robe and hastily donned it, tying the sash tightly around her waist. Every movement felt foreign. Everything about how she thought, how her clothing fit, and the shape of her body felt just as strange.

Logic prevailed. If she was trapped in her mother’s body, then Mama was most

assuredly trapped in hers. Elizabeth slipped her feet into her mother's slippers and left her rooms, walking a few paces down the hall to her own bedroom door. She opened it without knocking and closed it firmly behind her.

"Mama," she hissed. "Mama, wake up."

"Leave me alone, Lizzy. Goodness, it is far too early to be up and about. Whatever you wish to say can wait." How very strange it was seeing herself lying in the bed, hearing her voice coming from another.

"Wake up this instant," she said, poking her prone form sharply. "We have something we must discuss, and it cannot wait."

"If you mean to go on about refusing Mr. Collins again, I shall hear you later." Elizabeth's body rolled away.

"Enough!" She yanked the coverlet aside, exposing her mother to the chilled air. The figure in the bed shrieked and sat up.

"What is the meaning of this...?" she trailed off, blinking stupidly. "Why am I in your room?" Mama asked. Her eyes widened, and she looked down at her hands. She went through the same motions Elizabeth had in the other room, even going so far as to look at the braid lying over her shoulder. Gasping, Mama/Lizzy shot out of bed and rushed to the mirror. Elizabeth followed, clamping a hand over her mother's mouth before her screams woke the entire house.

It was very odd, watching her movements in the mirror and seeing her mother's form move instead of her own. The expressions on what should have been her face went from anger to fear to panic before she fainted. Elizabeth's new arms were not strong enough to support her old form's weight, and they collapsed in a heap.

How embarrassing. She had never swooned in her entire life! Mama's nerves seem to have accompanied her to my body, she thought bitterly. There was nothing to do but wait for her to rouse. Elizabeth could not get up, pinned as she was beneath her own body.

It did not take long for Mrs. Bennet to awaken. She groaned and rolled over, pushing herself into a sitting position. Elizabeth likewise shifted until she could lean against the wardrobe.

"What is going on?" her mother whispered. She flinched and touched her face. "Why am I... like this?"

"I hardly know. I awoke in your bed and in your body." Elizabeth hoped she sounded calm and sensible and not at all like the nervous wreck she felt inside.

"And I am in yours! How can this be?" Elizabeth's mama put her hands to her cheeks.

My cheeks, she thought. She put her hands to my cheeks. Oh, I hope I never have such an expression on my face ever again. The vapid incredulity there reminded Elizabeth too much of Lydia. "What can we do to right this?" she asked. "I have no desire to be trapped in this manner for the rest of my life."

"How am I supposed to know?" Mama snapped. "You are supposed to be the intelligent one." She tossed her head as she often did, but Elizabeth's much heavier braid did not cooperate and go obligingly over her shoulder.

"We might try forcing it," Elizabeth said haltingly.

"Yes! A jolt. Let us try colliding with each other." Elizabeth's mother came to her feet easily, unencumbered by age. Elizabeth, on the other hand, had to struggle to her

feet.

“Is it always so hard for you to stand?” she complained.

“Yes, my dear.” Her mother patted her hand. “I never sit anywhere uncomfortable now if I can help it. Oh, what a wonderful thing to be young again!”

Elizabeth frowned. “Do try your best not to get used to it. I am sure we can put this to rights in no time. Now, you go stand over there, and I shall stand here. Let us run at each other. The jolt might shock us back into our own bodies.”

Thankfully, her mother did not argue. They positioned themselves at opposite ends of the room. Elizabeth counted to three, and they ran toward each other. They collided forcefully and fell backwards. Groaning, she tried to roll over and found it impossible.

“Help me,” she hissed at her mother. Mama obliged, her strength in Elizabeth’s body aiding her efforts. Elizabeth struggled to her feet and stumbled to the bed. “Well, that did not work,” she groaned. “Perhaps there is some other reason for this travesty.”

They both pondered for a moment before Mama gasped beside her. “It is because of your stubborn refusal to have Mr. Collins,” she said enthusiastically. “As you, I can accept a proposal! When your foolishness has been corrected, we shall exchange places.”

“That is absurd!” Elizabeth struggled to her feet and rounded on her mother. She placed her hands on her hips. “You will do nothing to jeopardize my future!”

“And why should I not?” Mrs. Bennet huffed angrily and folded her arms. She pouted very much like Lydia did, and Elizabeth cringed to see such an expression on her own features.

“That is my body!” Elizabeth cried. “This cannot be permanent. If either of us does anything we would later regret, it could be ruinous!”

“I am still your mother, Miss Lizzy.” Mama stood and came toward her. “You will obey me in this matter.”

“You may be my mother in spirit, but not in person. I will do everything I can to prevent you from tying me to that bumbling buffoon, even if it means locking you in here until he departs!” Elizabeth whirled away and made for the door.

“You would not dare!” Her mother grabbed her arm as she had the night before, but Elizabeth’s new, larger stature proved to her advantage, and she wrenched her arm away.

“I have warned you, Elizabeth,” she said with relish. “Do anything contrary to what I would, and you will regret it, especially if we remain trapped thus for an extended period of time. Everyone else will see me as your mother, Mrs. Frances Bennet, and I intend to play my part to the fullest.”

Her mother scoffed. “It will not be hard to be you. All I need to do is judge others without knowing them and put on a show of knowing better than anyone else!”

“I do not behave like that!” Elizabeth protested.

Mama laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, yes, you do! You sketch characters without truly looking at a person’s motives. You question everything I have done for years in an attempt to see you all well settled and secure. I hope as Mrs. Fanny Bennet you learn more than you have of human nature than as Miss Elizabeth Bennet!”

Enraged, Elizabeth stormed out. She would not hear anything more. Glancing down at her attire, she resolved to change before going to the breakfast room. She needed

sustenance. This new form's stomach already protested how empty it was. This felt strange to Elizabeth. She never liked breakfast, choosing a light repast after one of her morning walks. Mama's body, though still handsome, had more curves and a soft stomach. Likely from over indulgence, she thought grimly. I shall have to rectify that immediately. I wonder if Mama has any gowns suitable for a morning walk.

She opened the mistress's suite door and entered, closing it behind her. The rage she had felt moments ago had cooled. Her heart beat erratically, and in a way that felt unfamiliar. Were these the nervous flutterings her mother so often complained about? If so, she could understand why Mama seemed distressed when they happened. The rapid beats of her heart made Elizabeth's breathing speed and a strange feeling of anxiety stole over her. Determined to ignore it and go on a walk, she went to the closet and threw it open.

"Lace, lace, lace," she muttered darkly. Finally, at the back of the closet, she found a serviceable gown. The dark blue color would flatter her new complexion, and only a few ribbons adorned it. How silly of me to think of my looks, she chuckled to herself. Mama is already married, after all. I need not put unnecessary effort into looking handsome. Papa will behave as he always does, regardless of what I wear. Her father had disdained her mother for so long that it seemed only natural that he would continue to behave in a like manner.

Elizabeth called for Sally. Her mother's gowns were more complicated and would require help to get into. The maid appeared quickly, seemingly surprised by the summons. "Help me into this gown, Sally," she said kindly. "And find my walking boots. I intend to take a stroll before breaking my fast."

"C-certainly, mistress," Sally stuttered. "Are you sure you want this gown?"

Elizabeth turned and frowned at the maid. "Is there anything wrong with it?" she asked, confused. It was a perfectly suitable gown., not overly adorned with no holes



or torn hem.

Sally looked nervously away. “It is very different from what you usually prefer, mistress,” she said hesitantly. “You usually favor one of these for mornings.” The maid removed three gowns from the closet and Elizabeth grimaced in distaste. All three gowns were dripping with lace and ribbons. The colors flattered Mrs. Bennet’s complexion, but the over adornment hid her mother’s handsome figure, lovely even after having five children. Except for her stomach, Elizabeth thought, placing an unconscious hand there as she examined the gowns.

“No, the blue will do fine. And I believe I shall have you alter those for use later this week. Let me see. You can take off all the lace but what is at the neck. The ribbons at the sleeves and the hem are enough. On this one, I want all the lace gone. The embroidery on the bodice will suffice. When you have completed those, we can move on to the others.” She may have to look like Mrs. Bennet, but she did not have to dress in the same manner her mother preferred.

“Very well, madam.” Sally draped the gowns over a chair and moved to help Elizabeth disrobe. Off came the robe and the lacey night gown and after her ablutions, she donned a clean chemise. Sally assisted with her stays before slipping the blue gown over her head. Mama preferred an older style of gown with a lower waistline. Elizabeth thought the silhouette flattered the figure very well when not smothered by excessive adornment. Yes, this gown would do nicely for now.

She sat at her mother’s dressing table and allowed Sally to arrange her hair. “No, that is far too elaborate for the day!” she protested as the maid attempted to style her locks in an unsuitable way. “Style it in a chignon.” Sally looked even more perplexed as she did as she was told. The finished product made Elizabeth’s reflection—her mother’s face—look elegant and refined...and sensible. Mrs. Bennet had always been a handsome woman, though her erratic nerves and poor choices in attire often drowned out her beauty.

“That will be all,” she told the maid. “Thank you, Sally.” The girl curtsied and gathered the gowns set aside for alteration before hurrying from the room. Elizabeth found her mother’s walking boots and put them on. It was difficult bending over and tying the laces, but at last she succeeded and made her way out of her bedroom. She went downstairs and secured herself a scone from the sideboard before donning her cloak and bonnet and setting out for a leisurely stroll.

Elizabeth soon learned that her mother’s stamina did not equal her own in any way, and she was compelled to slow her pace even further. A walk to Oakham Mount seemed out of the question, and so she stayed close to home, walking the paths around Longbourn for a half an hour before returning to the house. Mr. Hill took her cloak and bonnet, his normally expressionless face awash with shock. He made no remark, however, and she made her way to the breakfast room. The scone she had consumed on her walk had done little to satisfy the hunger gnawing at her stomach, and so she filled her plate with eggs, bacon, and another scone before settling into her mother’s chair at the foot of the table. No one else had risen yet, and so she tucked into her breakfast, pleased with the surrounding silence.

### Chapter Three

November 27, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Her solitary moment ended when her father entered the room. Elizabeth smiled widely at him as she did every morning, only to be met with a confused expression. He shook his head, scoffing, and filled his plate. Grimacing, she recalled she was not herself, and that her father saw only his wife. His reaction made sense; Mr. and Mrs. Bennet had not got on well in many years. Father, far too intelligent for his foolish and nonsensical wife, could hardly be blamed for avoiding her company. Fanny Bennet's histrionics and nervous flutters were enough to drive anyone insane.

Another sound came from the doorway, and Elizabeth looked up to see herself walking through the door. This will take some getting used to, she mused as the shock settled into understanding. Her mother had dressed in one of Elizabeth's more elaborate gowns, one of her least favorites. The gauzy pink fabric was overly adorned with lace and ribbon and had been a present for her last birthday. Elizabeth had hated it on sight and, rather than hurt her mother's feelings by tearing it to pieces and adorning it anew, she had put it in the back of her wardrobe. Of course, her mother had discovered it and put it on immediately.

"All dressed up and nowhere to go this morning, Lizzy? Pray, what is the occasion for donning such a fashionable gown?"

Elizabeth could hear the sarcasm in her father's voice, but her mother, trapped in her daughter's body, still lacked the ability. "Oh, Mr.—Papa, you are such a tease. I do not need anywhere to go to look pretty." Mama giggled inanely, sounding very like

Lydia, and Elizabeth put a hand over her eyes in despair.

“Elizabeth? Are you quite alright?” She opened her eyes and noted Mr. Bennet’s concern. Nothing of the sort had been present in his demeanor this morning when she had been distressed. How could he show his daughter more care than his wife? Shaking away the disturbing thoughts, Elizabeth focused on her mother’s reply.

“Never have I felt more rejuvenated—I feel remarkably well after our late night. Much better than I have fared in a long time.” She bustled to the sideboard, and Elizabeth watched in horror as her mother filled a plate with scones, bacon, eggs, and fruit. She then took her plate to the end of the table where Elizabeth sat, and realizing another had taken her seat, she sat to the right of the mistress’s seat.

Mr. Bennet watched it all with confusion—Elizabeth usually sat next to him. Obviously, Mama had not anticipated that such strange behavior would be noticed. Elizabeth cleared her throat. “I would like to speak to you after the meal, Lizzy,” she said in her best impersonation of her mother.

“Can it not wait?” The whine emanating from her mouth made Elizabeth frown in displeasure. Did she often sound so like Lydia, or was it because her mother’s soul was trapped in her body that made the difference?

“No!” she snapped, her patience waning. “I have a matter of great importance, and you will attend me directly.”

“Neither of you are yourselves this morning, it seems.” Mr. Bennet stood and tossed his napkin onto his now empty plate. “I believe I shall retreat to my library before something else happens to disturb my equanimity.”

As soon as they were alone in the breakfast room, Elizabeth turned to her mother. “You need to act more like me,” she hissed. “Papa has already noted a difference.”

“And what of it? I shall behave precisely as I always have.”

“You will ruin my reputation whilst you are at it!” Elizabeth snatched the second scone from her mother. “And have a care what you eat! I would wager you will not walk out as often whilst you are me, and I shall lose my figure if you continue to consume more than I usually do.”

“What a novel idea, to eat without consequence!” Mama picked up a piece of bacon and bit into it, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

“Your stomach is already too soft,” Elizabeth huffed.

Mama froze, and Elizabeth’s heart squeezed at the hurt look on her face. “I have born five children, Elizabeth,” she muttered. “When you have done the same, you may judge my figure.” With that, she stood and left the room, leaving her daughter alone with her thoughts.

Elizabeth felt strangely guilty for her words. Never had she picked at another’s appearance as she had done to her mother’s that morning. Or rather, her appearance, for she was trapped in her mama’s body. Yet, she had had no issue picking and prodding and muttering about Mrs. Bennet’s disregard for her health. Clearly, it was a sensitive subject, and she resolved to apologize immediately. How often has my mother been subjected to similar remarks from my father? she wondered as her mind drifted to Mr. Bennet’s complete disregard for her wellbeing that morning.

Before Elizabeth could depart, Mr. Collins entered the room. She immediately groaned internally before remembering he would pay her no mind, since she did not look like Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Now was her chance to turn him away from proposing.

“Good morning, sir,” she said carefully. “You are an early riser despite our late

evening.”

“Yes, I cannot escape my schedule, no matter how hard I try. I should have liked to lay abed, but duty calls and I wish to secure my happiness as soon as may be.” He grinned idiotically, and she almost rolled her eyes.

“I am afraid I must tell you that Elizabeth is not herself today,” she replied. “I would not recommend proposing just yet. Perhaps wait until your next visit.”

“My next visit? My dear Mrs. Bennet, it cannot possibly be so, for my noble patroness has instructed me to marry as soon as possible. To go against her wishes would not do at all! No, I had best ask Miss Elizabeth for her hand as soon as I finish my meal.” Mr. Collins came to the table with a plate nearly overflowing with food and promptly began to stuff his face.

Elizabeth grimaced, but attempted to persuade him to her way of thinking. “No, sir, you are certain to be refused if you make your proposal today. Pray, allow that I know my daughter better than you do at this time. I only wish to prevent your embarrassment.”

“It is my understanding that ladies will sometimes refuse a man in order to increase his love by suspense. A refusal will not deter me in the slightest.”

Of all the idiotic, nonsensical ideas! “Wait until Friday, I beg you,” she said imploringly. “Would it not be more flattering to secure her acceptance of your suit on the first asking? What man would wish to tell his friends that he had first been refused?”

Mr. Collins frowned as he chewed, clearly considering her words. He swallowed and took a sip from his teacup before replying. “I see sense in what you say, Mrs. Bennet,” he finally said. “I shall delay until Friday. Perhaps my leaving might be put

off for a few more days as well. I should like to receive congratulations from my future neighbors.”

Elizabeth smiled and nodded, pleased he had been made to see sense. “I believe I shall go see to the household accounts,” she said to excuse herself. Standing slowly, she made her way from the room, disliking how her back hurt after sitting for so short a time. Her hands also ached. Did her mother feel this dreadful constantly?

At least she had no fear that Mr. Collins would propose today. Her mother may play the coquette all she wanted. Elizabeth would be safe from an unwanted marriage. For now.

The benefits of being Mrs. Bennet had yet to be realized. Mama usually ate breakfast and then retreated to the parlor for the morning. Elizabeth did not know what she did during that time, for she usually went on a walk or saw to her own pursuits until the noon hour. She wished to maintain her mother’s schedule as much as possible, and so went in search of...well, herself.

She found Mama/Lizzy in the sitting room with a work basket at her feet and a torn shirt in her hand. “Your father tore this the other day,” she said quietly as Elizabeth took a seat next to her. “He is always tearing things. His shirt, his breeches... Once he managed to tear a perfectly good cravat because he did not remove his pin before tugging on it.”

“Do you always see to the mending first thing in the morning?” Elizabeth asked. “I wish to keep to your schedule. As I noted earlier, Papa is already suspicious.”

“I visit Hill to discuss the menu right after breakfast.” Mama was subdued and did not look up from her work. “As you know, my days at home are Tuesday and Thursday. Wednesday and Friday are calling days. I would not go out the day after a ball, however—remember, the Lucases always come to call after such an evening of

entertainment.”

“What do your Mondays entail?” Elizabeth asked.

“You—my daughters, rather—do tenant visits in the afternoon,” Mama huffed and stabbed the fabric with her needle. “I usually look over the household accounts on that day whilst you are out.”

She frowned. “I did not realize Papa allowed you to—”

Her mother cut her off. “I am mistress of this estate, Lizzy! The household accounts are in my purview and I take that responsibility very seriously.”

Elizabeth bit her tongue to prevent the reply that wished to spew forth. She wished to accuse her mother of frivolous spending and a lack of economy. Mrs. Bennet spent money as if they had an excess, and they did not. Instead, she simply nodded. “I shall see that I keep to your schedule,” she murmured. She had known most of what her mother’s week looked like. It was the little things that concerned her. What did Mama do in her free time?

“I take a walk every morning,” she told her mother. “My breakfast is usually simple—an apple or a scone. Correspondence and sewing takes up the rest of the morning, playing the pianoforte, or assisting my sisters where needed.”

“I think I can manage that,” Mama replied. She sounded odd, part sad and part sarcastic. Elizabeth shrugged it off and stood. Mrs. Hill likely awaited her. As she left the room, Mr. Collins shuffled past, and she groaned. There was still a slight chance she would end up engaged before the day was out, and she would need to rely on her father to refuse his consent.

Mama did not know that she had already discussed the issue with her father. When



Mr. Collins's attention became clear, she had come to him asking for his aid. He had only promised that if the man proposed, he would refuse his consent. It had relieved Elizabeth, and the same knowledge did so now, until she realized she did not know how her father would respond if Mr. Collins came to him with an agreeable Elizabeth at his side. Her heart squeezed, and she forced herself to continue walking.

Providence must surely be punishing her for some sin, and she resolved that she would discover what she had done to deserve this immediately.

Fanny

"It is good to see a woman so industriously engaged." Mr. Collins sat down heavily next to her and examined her work. "Such fine, even stitches," he remarked. "I have never seen the like. Well, except for my noble patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. None could compare to her except those who might outrank her. And there are not many, at least in Kent, who can compare to her in any way."

Fanny blinked, confused at his ramblings. Did he mean to flatter and compliment or make her feel wanting? It felt strangely like the latter, and she did not like it. It reminded her too much of her feelings every time Mr. Bennet said something cruel. She might not fully comprehend the insult when her husband was unfeeling, but his remarks always stung, anyway. He found her wanting, and she despaired she would ever have his good opinion again.

Her husband may not have seen to the future, but she would not be so lax. She would secure Mr. Collins and marry him—as Elizabeth, of course—as soon as she could manage it. All she needed to do was induce him to propose.

"You are too kind, sir," she said, trying to put as much feeling into her words as she could. She smiled charmingly and batted her eyes. He swallowed hard in response, his gaze roving her face.

“My patroness would approve of you,” he said firmly. “Yes, that is in your favor. Tell me, have you any skills of a practical nature?”

“As you see, sir.” She held up the shirt again, wondering if he was daft. A stupid husband is preferable to a witty one, she told herself. More easily led and less offensive.

Mr. Collins shook his head. “I mean beyond that, my dear cousin. As a parson, I have a modest income. Lady Catherine has commanded that I take a wife who is capable of making my income stretch. We will have limited staff, of course. Have you any skills in the kitchen?”

Fanny’s mouth dropped open in shock. “Mr. Collins!” she said shrilly, “I thought I—I mean my mama made it clear when you first arrived that Longbourn is able to keep a cook. My daugh—I mean, I and my sisters have nothing to do with the meals in our house besides helping to plan them.”

The man frowned, clearly disappointed. “I understand that cookery is not a ladylike accomplishment, but if I am to extend an olive branch, then you will need to learn the skill.”

Aghast, Fanny stood. Her hands shook and her heart dropped. She had worked too hard to overcome her roots in trade and be a proper gentleman’s wife. Never would she or any of her daughters slave away in the kitchen like common women. Like the Lucases! No, it would not do. “You cannot keep a cook on your income, sir?” she asked desperately.

“Perhaps your fifty pounds a year would be enough to hire one,” he mused. “I confess I have no notion of what a cook would cost. Lady Catherine has graciously employed the parsonage servants. I have a maid of all work and a man for heavier chores.” He puffed up. “Her condescension knows no bounds.”

“That sounds very much like interference to me,” she snapped, heedless of how her words might affect his suit. “A woman likes to manage her own household, sir.” Fanny began to see Lizzy’s perspective. Such oversight of her every action would drive her most willful daughter mad.

“Not to fear, dear cousin Elizabeth.” Mr. Collins stood and came toward her, taking her hand in his. “We shall resolve it all when matters are settled between us.”

His hand felt strange in hers, and she tugged it away. “I am afraid I have a headache,” she murmured. “Pray, excuse me.” Without a backward glance, she hurried from the room and upstairs. She opened the door to the mistress’s suite out of habit before remembering that she ought to go to Lizzy’s room.

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### Chapter Four

November 27, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Elizabeth relished her position as mistress of the house. In her mother's shoes, she could order whatever meal she wished. She happily simplified the menu with Mrs. Hill, ignoring the perturbed and confused expressions on the housekeeper's face. She instructed they have the entire meal served at once instead of in two courses. The dining room table was plenty big to accommodate the array of dishes. Instead of three meats, she settled on two. Pheasant and a beef roast would be more than enough. Two vegetables and a soup would also be served.

"What about dessert, madam?" Mrs. Hill asked. "Cook planned to make a spiced cake."

She pondered her reply. Mama had a dreadful sweet tooth, and though Elizabeth inhabited her body, the cravings for something sugary persisted. "Have Cook serve it with tea after the meal," she finally said. Satisfied she had done her work, Elizabeth departed. Her sisters had yet to rise. That was unsurprising, given their late night. They ought to be up soon. The Lucases would arrive for tea to discuss the previous evening, and the others would not wish to miss the call.

Frowning, she realized she would be forced to speak with Lady Lucas instead of Charlotte. Elizabeth knew the lady to be as nonsensical as her mother and did not look forward to spending an afternoon partaking in gossip.

"Give it back, Kitty!" Lydia came careening around the corner, running at full speed

just as Elizabeth stepped out of Mrs. Hill's office. Lydia's elbow nudged her as she passed, causing her to stumble. Not a word of apology was uttered as the youngest Bennet grabbed the stair railing to aid her in taking a sharp turn down another hallway.

So much for peace and quiet. Sighing, she followed Lydia, ready to separate the two before the argument grew too severe. She entered the parlor where her mother had last been, only to find it empty.

"Mama, make her give it back!" Lydia shouted. Kitty stood on the pianoforte bench, her hand lifted high above her head, a pretty blue ribbon dangling from her hand.

"It is mine!" she wailed. "I spent a week embroidering it and now that it is done, Lydia wishes to claim it for her own."

"I gave it to you!" Lydia shouted in reply. "And I want it back. Give it to me! Mama, make her give it to me. It is mine! I paid for it."

"As I recall, I— Elizabeth paid for the ribbon." Elizabeth folded her arms and frowned. "Lydia, your behavior is unseemly. You gave it to Kitty, and you will not take it back simply because she made something out of your discarded belongings. And you, Kitty! Do get down this instant. You are a young lady, not a monkey."

Lydia gaped, surprise written all over her countenance. And she would be—Mrs. Bennet always sided with her youngest, even against Jane. "But, Mama..."

"No! Do not argue, young lady. Another word and you will remain in your chambers whilst the Lucases are calling. Kitty, take your ribbon upstairs. If I see you acting like a hoyden again, I shall know how to act! Both of you, begone!" The girls scampered away, confused looks on both their faces. Elizabeth wondered how long it would be until they tried some other mischief. No matter. She would ensure they experienced

consequences if they misbehaved again.

“You need not have scolded them so.” She turned, once again bemused at seeing herself standing in the doorway.

“I did,” she said firmly. “Kitty and Lydia are wild and out of control. They need to be taken in hand and taught to behave better. In fact, maybe I ought to send them back to the nursery.” Yes, that sounded like a fine idea.

“No! They are out. Such lively girls will certainly draw the attention of eligible men.” Mama shook her head forcefully. “They must marry if their future is to be secure.”

“Surely you see their manners are wanting. Their impropriety and poor behavior drives men away rather than what you intend. And it cannot benefit older sisters to have the younger out before they are settled.”

Mama kept shaking her head. “It is the only way,” she murmured. “You will all be destitute if I do not secure your futures.”

“Why are you so concerned?” Elizabeth asked. “Jane is hardly on the shelf. I have not reached my majority. And Mr. Bennet is as hale and hearty as ever.”

“I am concerned because no one else seems to be!” Elizabeth’s voice pitched up, sounding frantic and somewhat shrill. It sounded so odd. She knew her mother’s personality controlled it all. Mama’s nerves seemed to be just as prevalent, no matter whose body she inhabited.

Elizabeth shook her head. “You are not the only concerned one,” she said. “Be that as it may, whilst I have some influence over my youngest sisters, I intend to wield it. If Kitty and Lydia cannot behave, they shall not have their share of amusements.”

“My best wishes in seeing it done once they start wailing.” Mama folded her arms and smirked. That look Elizabeth was familiar with. She employed it often enough.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Shaking her head, Mama departed without another word.

The Lucases arrived with their usual fanfare. Lady Lucas bustled into the room, her expression eager. Charlotte followed at a sedate pace, moving away from Elizabeth toward Jane and her mother. She felt a pang of disappointment that she would not be able to speak to her friend as she wished, but turned a welcoming smile to Lady Lucas, anyway.

“Where is Maria?” she asked politely, pouring the tea.

“Oh, she is still abed. It seems she over indulged last night and is suffering the effects. You know how it is.”

Yes, she did. Lydia and Kitty did so often enough, though they seemed to have escaped the effects of the punch last night. The pair had scampered off as soon as they saw Maria would not be present and had likely resolved to spend the afternoon in each other’s company.

“Your daughters did very well last night. Kitty and Lydia danced every set. Jane danced three sets with Mr. Bingley. I confess to some surprise that there was no announcement in the offing last night.” Lady Lucas gave Elizabeth a knowing look. “I am certain it will not be much longer,” she insisted. “Do not despair, my dear friend.”

“I am not at all distressed, I assure you.” Elizabeth patted Lady Lucas’s hand awkwardly. “Jane is as besotted as Mr. Bingley. I understand he had to go to town for

a few days for business, but will return within a week. Jane is certain to have a proposal, then.”

“She will make an excellent mistress of Netherfield Park. And how happy you will be to have your daughter settled so near to you! You may visit whenever you please.” Lady Lucas tittered.

Elizabeth took a sip of her tea. She had no doubt that her mother’s constant calls at Netherfield Park would drive Jane and Mr. Bingley away. No newly wedded couple liked to entertain so often, and Mrs. Bennet would not likely reserve her calls for Wednesdays and Fridays. Jane would be driven to distraction, and though she was restrained enough not to show it, such interference would stretch even her limits.

“What of Mr. Collins?” Lady Lucas said, leaning close. “I was under the impression that he meant to propose to Elizabeth this morning. Tell me, will your second child be the next mistress of Longbourn?”

Elizabeth could not stop the look of distaste that spread upon her face. Naturally, Lady Lucas misinterpreted it.

“Oh, my dear friend! I did not mean to be insensitive. Though, you must admit, your life might improve with the passing of your husband. Heaven knows, you are unhappy enough with things as they are.” The pitying look the lady gave her made Elizabeth bristle.

“I am quite content in my life, I assure you,” she said testily. “As for Elizabeth and Mr. Collins, I have begun to second guess if they will suit. She is too headstrong for his patroness. They would make each other miserable.”

Lady Lucas looked puzzled. “Did you not say the other day that they would muddle along just fine despite their different temperaments?” she asked.



“Am I not entitled to change my mind?” Elizabeth frowned. The aforementioned gentleman sauntered into the room and sidled up to her mother, plopping onto the settee beside her. Mama had the temerity to look pleased with it, if only for a moment. Mr. Collins said something to the group, causing her expression to change to displeasure.

“She looks happy enough with his presence for the moment. Pray, forgive me for assuming all was as it was when last we spoke.” Lady Lucas sounded a little hurt, and Elizabeth felt guilty for being so waspish.

“I am sorry, dear Lady Lucas,” she said contritely. “Please forgive me for my pique. I am afraid the late night has affected my mood.”

“Lady Lucas?” What is this nonsense? I have been Susan to you for years, Fanny.” Tittering again, Lady Lucas picked up a biscuit and nibbled it.

Elizabeth closed her eyes slowly, groaning internally at her error. “A formal apology seemed necessary,” she said weakly, hoping the lady would accept her excuses and her apology.

“Oh, you know you have my forgiveness. If Lizzy is not to be Mrs. Collins, will you push another daughter in his direction? Mary might suit.”

She could hear the longing and jealousy in Lady Lucas’s voice. If Mr. Collins offered for one of the Bennet daughters, her friend would have two children well married. Lady Lucas could not boast of such. Even her sons were yet unwed. John Lucas was five-and-twenty, and his younger brother was four-and-twenty. Neither seemed inclined toward marriage. And dear Charlotte was almost on the shelf.

“Mary has the disposition to be a clergyman’s wife,” Elizabeth mused. The idea had merit. She would have to ask her mother if she would be amenable to turning Mr.

Collins' attention in that direction.

"If Mary will not have him, pray, send him to Lucas Lodge!" Lady Lucas sounded as if she were joking, but one glance told Elizabeth that the lady was entirely serious. Surely, Charlotte would not appreciate having the bumbling parson thrust in her direction.

"I shall keep that in mind," she said weakly, picking up her cup of tea to take a sip, hoping to regain some equanimity.

Fanny

"Three sets, Jane! That is tantamount to a proposal!" Fanny crowed excitedly, grabbing Jane's hand and squeezing it. "When he returns, he will be at your side and offering you his hand! Mark my words." Three sets were tantamount to a proposal. She had every reason to believe it spelled an imminent proposal for Jane.

"Lizzy, you speak in haste. Mr. Bingley has not declared himself in any way." But Jane blushed and Fanny could see the hope on her face. "I only hope that our family's behavior has not driven him away. Caroline and Louisa did not look happy last evening, and we both know Mr. Darcy disapproves of us."

Fanny blinked, confused. What was Jane speaking of?

"If your Mr. Bingley is not strong enough to make his own decisions, then he is not worthy of you," Charlotte cut in. "I take it you are concerned that his relations and his friend will attempt to turn him away from you? That is very unlike you, dear Jane."

It is very unlike Jane, Fanny mused. Her eldest saw only the best in people. In many ways, she was the opposite of Lizzy, who criticized first rather than looking for the good. Should I be concerned that even Jane is speaking of behavior ?

“I saw nothing of which to be alarmed,” she hedged. Both ladies gave her incredulous looks.

“Were you at the same ball as us?” Charlotte asked, chuckling. “Goodness, Lizzy, I noted you did not feel well after supper, but I know you saw the same things we did!”

“Perhaps her illness has caused her to forget,” Jane said gently. “Did you not see Lydia running around and flirting with the officers? And Kitty followed along, tugging on Mr. Sanderson’s belt.”

But they are lively, Fanny thought, still baffled by their observations.

“I did not think you noticed, absorbed as you were with Mr. Bingley,” Charlotte teased. “Never have I seen a couple more suited to each other. Your temperaments are perfectly matched!”

Finally, something Fanny could agree on and speak on at length. “Yes, Jane will be the perfect bride!” she cried enthusiastically. “She will be a wonderful mistress of Netherfield Park and be the leading lady of the area!”

Jane looked at her strangely. “You know none of that matters to me, Lizzy,” she chided gently. “I would marry Mr. Bingley if he could not offer me any of that. It is not his fortune or position that matter, but his character.”

“Yes, of course,” Fanny replied awkwardly. “I was only teasing.” Lizzy often teased. It would be a good excuse to cover any unexpected behavior.

Jane and Charlotte chuckled. “You looked very much like Mrs. Bennet just now, Eliza.” Charlotte sipped her tea. “You might make a career on the stage if you are not successful in marriage.” The three ladies fell silent as Mr. Collins lumbered into the room and plopped down next to Fanny. She tensed as he sat too close—she was a

married lady, after all, and his behavior discomfited her.

He thinks you are Lizzy, she reminded herself. It is natural for him to try to cozy up to you...her... Oh, how very confusing this all is!

“What are you all speaking of?” he asked. “I thought I heard you mention last night’s superb entertainment. It has been many a year since I enjoyed such hospitality and such pleasing company. Why, I danced every dance! Each partner was as agreeable as the last. You, however, Cousin Elizabeth were the most excellent companion. I foresee many such evenings in our future, for surely Lady Catherine will host many when her daughter unites in holy matrimony with her cousin, Mr. Darcy. I met the man last night, if you recall. He was as condescending as his noble relation.”

Fanny frowned. He does rattle on, does he not? she thought. How does one get a word in edge-wise when he continues to speak without drawing breath? “Mr. Darcy is engaged?” she asked, interrupting him.

“Yes.” Mr. Collins nodded excitedly. “His engagement is of long-standing, according to my patroness. He and Miss de Bourgh were intended for each other from their infancy. It is a splendid match on both sides, I assure you.”

“None of us could doubt it, sir,” Charlotte said kindly. “I am certain you enjoy the best of circumstances in your position as the rector of Hunsford.”

Fanny recognized that their intimate conversation had come to an end and resolved to sit silently rather than say anything else that might reveal that all was not as it should be. Instead of speaking, she thought about how comfortable the discussion between the three of them had been. She felt for the first time in a long while that she could speak without fear of reprisal from her husband or scornful looks from her second daughter. Why, it had even been easier than speaking with the other matrons. The ladies of the area were always seeking to assert themselves above another, and Fanny

always joined the fray. As the elevated daughter of a tradesman, she felt the need to prove herself. Now, comparing those instances with the complete acceptance offered to who they thought was Elizabeth, she found she vastly preferred the latter situation.

### Chapter Five

November 28, 1811 Longbourn Fanny

She tossed and turned the entire night. Elizabeth's bed was not as large as her own, and she found herself almost rolling off the side more than once. Being shocked awake in such a manner was not enjoyable at all, and it made it difficult for Fanny to fall asleep again. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, she rose and went to the window. It was still dark outside, and the room was chilly. Even with the rug under them, her feet were frozen. Bending down, she ran her hands over the pile of the rug, only to discover that it was practically threadbare.

"Why has Lizzy not said anything?" she murmured aloud. She knew why. Her daughter thought her mother was a spendthrift and likely did not wish to add to the family's financial burdens. Fanny put a hand to her face and groaned. How could she have been so oblivious? Jane's room had been refurbished on her eighteenth birthday. Kitty and Lydia had both requested the same when they came out, and she had not hesitated to fulfill their wishes. But what of Lizzy? And Mary? Had either of them asked for anything? She could not recall.

I shall see to it that Lizzy has a new rug before winter's end, she vowed. And new drapes. These are threadbare. Fanny held them up to examine them, nodding firmly. She had not redone this room in years. The only thing Lizzy changed was the bed coverlet; she moved into the room as it was. Little personal touches dotted the room, but otherwise, the furniture and decor were sadly outdated.

Fully awake now, and with dawn creeping closer, Fanny felt restless. She had never

been one to sit idly. Always flitting about, as her father used to say. She went to the wardrobe and picked through Elizabeth's gowns. They were all under adorned, in her opinion, but she could do nothing about that. Grabbing one at random, she hastily performed her ablutions and changed.

Elizabeth's harsh words about walking echoed in her mind as she tugged on her walking boots. How often had she heard the same? First, it had been her mother and father.

"Do stop eating, Fanny. I do not want to purchase yet another walking gown," Mama said. "Oh! Let us try a tighter corset. That ought to work."

Papa had always taken her biscuits or cake. "That is enough sweets for you. You will never catch a husband if your face has a blemish."

Her relationship with food had ever been fraught with anxiety. As a married woman, she need not be so concerned with her appearance. And she had tried after each of the children to maintain her youthful figure. She was still a handsome woman, but with more generous, softer curves. Fanny applied the same excuses she had made for years. Despite it all, each time she indulged, those horrid voices in her head scolded her, and guilt consumed her.

Mr. Bennet had said things, too. After Lizzy, he had assured her he liked her new figure. Then she had believed him. She still had hope of an heir. And then Mary came to them. She was by far the fussiest baby yet. She cried all the time and nothing could satisfy her. To make matters worse, Fanny had been unable to feed the girl herself. This had created a strange sort of distance between her and her child. Then, a few months after the baby's birth, something had shifted within her.

It became harder to get out of bed in the morning. Everything looked gray, and the world felt completely devoid of happiness. Mr. Bennet had tried faithfully to cheer

his wife, but her thoughts of destitution and her fear for the future consumed her. She became frantic with worry, often waking in panic. “We need an heir,” she would tell her husband amidst her tears. And instead of helping her through the worst moments of her life, Mr. Bennet had withdrawn.

“I cannot comprehend her,” he had told Edward Gardiner, Fanny’s brother, one day. She stood outside his study, hand poised to knock. It was the first day she had felt equal to getting out of bed since Mary’s birth. She had bathed, donned her favorite gown, which was a little tight but manageable, and decided to surprise him.

“She is so changed, Edward. I hardly know her. Being around her is frustrating and infuriating. How can I compete with her fears?”

“Be patient with her,” Edward replied. “She will come back to you.”

“I cannot love this stranger,” her husband had replied bitterly. “She is not my Fanny any longer.”

And just like that, her world had shattered. Fanny remembered stumbling back to her room and forcefully removing the gown rather than calling a maid. Thoughts of how to regain her husband’s love consumed her. First, she must beget an heir. And then if she only dressed better, made herself lovelier, then he would love her again.

Fanny sighed and returned to the present. This body was not hers. She would do as Lizzy said and walk. Perhaps that would allow her to eat a biscuit or two without the ever present guilt that accompanied indulging her desires.

The morning air bit her cheeks and almost sent her scurrying back indoors. Oh, how she hated the cold! Wrapping her cloak tighter around her, she hurried down the path. Her breathing remained even. Her legs did not protest the quick movements. So, this is what it is like to be young again, she thought. I quite like it. She walked at least



half an hour before turning around. Tomorrow she would attempt Oakham Mount. It had been many years since she walked that path. It was a favorite prospect, but the hill was too steep for her usual out-of-shape form.

After returning to Longbourn, she encountered Mr. Collins. He seemed to be watching for her, for he met her at the door.

“Good morning, Cousin!” he cried far too loudly for the quiet morning. “I see you have returned from a walk. Your habits do you credit. It behooves a lady to take care of her figure through proper exercise, lest she be seen as slothful. My patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, assures me that walking is the best way to maintain one’s figure. ‘Ladies,’ she says, ‘ought to take care with their appearance. A willowy figure is preferred, and curves are acceptable as long as they are not too plentiful.’ I completely agree with her. A light and pleasing figure is perfectly suitable.”

Fanny’s heart froze. Her hands came involuntarily to Elizabeth’s flat stomach. She felt sick. I cannot condemn Elizabeth to a life of that, she thought, horrified at the idea of one of her daughters being so maligned. Though Mr. Bennet had never made direct remarks regarding her figure, she often saw him watching her with disapproval, even when she was not speaking. His gaze would go from her head to her toes, and then he would shake his head in disappointment. He could only be thinking about her appearance. No, she would never have Elizabeth experience the same—she would save her daughter from such a fate if she could.

“I thank you for the information, Mr. Collins,” she said coolly. “Now, if you will excuse me, I need to go inside.”

“Yes, of course.” He stepped aside. “Please, do not let me detain you! We shall see each other in the breakfast room.”

Not if I can help it, she thought. She needed to find Elizabeth.

After removing her things, Fanny hurried up the stairs, once again marveling at her speed. It was certainly nice to climb the steps without aching knees. She went to her chambers and opened the door without knocking, just as Elizabeth had done the day before.

Her daughter sat at the dressing table, Sally putting the finishing touches on her coiffure.

“You may go,” she commanded the maid. Sally blinked in confusion and glanced at Elizabeth, and Fanny realized her mistake. She had taken the mistress’s role instinctively.

“I think we are finished here, Sally,” Elizabeth/Mrs. Bennet said kindly. Sally bobbed a curtsey and hurried away. Fanny thought she heard her muttering about fairy mischief as she went.

“Good morning, Mama,” Elizabeth said, standing from her seat.

Everything Fanny wished to say vanished completely. “What have you done to that gown?” she shrieked. It was a favorite! Jonquil, with lace and ribbons. She had purchased it the last time she attempted to draw Mr. Bennet’s attention. “You have completely ruined it!” Fanny wanted to cry. She had added no adornment to Lizzy’s gowns. Sally must have worked all night to remove the lace.

“I think it looks rather better now.” Elizabeth smoothed her hands down the front of the gown. “Mama, look how much more obvious your figure is! It is very fine, despite you having had five children.” Her daughter glanced away. “I am dreadfully sorry for what I said yesterday. Please forgive me.”

Fanny bit her lip. Elizabeth did not apologize. She teased, mocked, chastised, and smirked. Glancing up, she fully looked at her daughter—trapped in her body—and

took in her appearance. Startled, she realized Elizabeth spoke the truth. Without the lace, one could clearly see her figure. It felt very strange to see herself as others saw her. She always thought she looked very well in her gowns, but now she wondered.

“Did I look so dreadful?” she asked weakly.

“You are still a handsome woman,” Elizabeth said, taking her hand. “Lace will only detract from your beauty.”

“You did not answer the question.”

Her daughter bit her lip. The expression made her look much younger than Mrs. Bennet’s nine-and-thirty years. “I believe your gowns are overly adorned. It made you look a bit...ridiculous. Please do not hate me for my words! I meant what I said. You are a very handsome woman. I have no cause to repine when I look at my present reflection.”

Fanny took a deep breath. “Very well,” she said. “I forgive you for your words—and for destroying my dress—as long as you help me with the others.”

The look on Elizabeth’s face was comical. Perhaps more so because it was Fanny’s face sporting the expression. Chuckling, she sat on the stool by the dressing table. “We have something else to discuss. I have decided you and Mr. Collins do not suit. We need to redirect his attention.”

She laughed as her own face showed abject relief. “Do you truly mean it?” Elizabeth came to her side and looked as though she might kneel before she thought better of it. Her daughter took her hand and squeezed, staying on her feet. Fanny rose so that she, too, was standing. She led Elizabeth to her settee and sat.

“Yes, I mean it. I have received enough of the man’s attentions to last me a lifetime.

How have you managed for almost a fortnight?"

Elizabeth chuckled. Fanny listened with pleasure. Not only had she made her most difficult daughter laugh, but hearing it come from her mouth reminded her of what true joy sounded like. Too long, she had only politely tittered. Why, she had not laughed in...well, Mr. Bennet always used to make her laugh. He had not done so in a long time.

"Shall we turn him toward Mary?" Elizabeth asked.

"No!" Fanny responded instantly and with vehemence. "I shall see none of my daughters married to that man. He will not do at all."

Her daughter narrowed her eyes. "Will you not tell me what changed? Only yesterday you insisted I must have him."

She did not know how to respond without telling her daughter her deepest secrets. "It is only that he professes certain views I find distasteful. And it would be a sore trial to see any of you give way to a lady who does not even dwell in your household."

That worked, and Elizabeth nodded. "I am pleased we are in accord!" she said with genuine enthusiasm. She fell silent, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Lady Lucas said yesterday that we might direct him to Lucas Lodge. I believe she wanted me to believe she jested, but I do not think she was."

"Oh, he would be perfect for Charlotte!" Fanny clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes, it is just the thing. Now, how are we to redirect him? He seems determined to stay his course."

"The first thing to do is pen a note to Lady Lucas, informing her we wish for our guest to visit her home for a few days—she will understand what it means. Ask her to

send Charlotte here to collect Mr. Collins. And you must tell Charlotte then that you will not have him.”

“Why me?”

“Because you are me! “ Elizabeth said, exasperated.

“What of Mr. Collins?”

“I shall handle him. Allow me to speak to his self-importance.” Elizabeth stood and paced, her face wreathed in smiles and anticipation.

Fanny stood, too. “He said something about kitchen skills yesterday. Speak of that! You might tell him I—you—came to him, concerned that I—you—could not be a proper wife. Oh, goodness, this is so difficult! Do you comprehend my meaning, child?”

How odd that sounded, calling her daughter ‘child’ when she stood before her in the form of a nine-and-thirty-year-old woman.

“I understand you completely, Mama,” Elizabeth replied. “Shall we go to our tasks?”

“Yes. Let me pen the note now. Wait. What if our handwriting has changed?” Fanny looked panicked. She had worked for many years to perfect her script. Her handwriting was one of the things she felt most proud of.

“No way to know except to try.”

As it turned out, Elizabeth’s body remembered Elizabeth’s handwriting and vice versa, so it proved necessary for Elizabeth—in her mother’s body—to pen the note to Lady Lucas. She sanded it and sealed it, handing it to her mother. “You see that this

note is sent with a footman to Lucas Lodge whilst I go in search of our problem,” she said. Fanny nodded and took the note, hurrying out of the room.

How nice it felt to be of an accord with Elizabeth! They always seemed to be at odds, almost from the time the child had turned fifteen. Always arguing and protesting, that girl. It was very vexing. But now, they worked together effortlessly, their purposes aligned. It made Fanny giddy, and she fairly skipped down the stairs, an action that in her real body would have sent her tumbling. She found Simon, one of their footmen, and handed him the missive.

“Take this to Lady Lucas immediately,” she said, trying to mimic Elizabeth’s kind ways with the servants. “Thank you very much, Simon.”

Simon nodded and left directly. Fanny had no wish to see Mr. Collins before Elizabeth—pretending to be Mrs. Bennet—spoke with him, so she took herself off to her chambers to wait.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:50 am*

### Chapter Six

November 28, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Mr. Collins waited for Elizabeth at the breakfast table. Mr. Bennet looked up as she walked in before shaking his paper out and holding it higher before his face. "I see your early rising was a simple fluke yesterday," he said caustically.

Elizabeth frowned. Did her father often speak to his wife that way? "On the contrary, sir," she replied airily. "I went on a short stroll before changing and coming down for breakfast." She went to the sideboard to fill her plate.

She heard a rustle and as she turned to go to her chair, Mr. Bennet watched her with narrowed eyes and a frown. He looked her over from head to toe. "Is that a new gown?" he said disapprovingly.

"No. Sally refashioned it for me." Elizabeth felt distinctly uncomfortable. Though she looked like her mother, she was very much Elizabeth Bennet, the second daughter of the house. But Mr. Bennet said nothing more. He returned his newspaper to its customary spot before his face and finished his breakfast in silence.

Kitty and Lydia came in next, followed by Mary. Jane was the last of the sisters to come and looked somewhat discomposed. Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Collins, who entered after Jane, and rightly guessed why Mama had not entered the room.

"Lydia, you cannot have all the bacon!" Kitty griped, elbowing her sister. "You have half a pig there if you have a slice!"

“I have only six pieces,” Lydia snapped. “Look, there are two left on the plate. Take one of those.”

Mr. Bennet said not a word. He folded his paper and left the room. Elizabeth felt irrationally furious. Her father had always behaved thus, so why did it make her so angry when he did so now?

“Enough of that.” She stood and crossed the room. “Lydia, you may have two pieces of bacon. Mary and Jane have not eaten, and I believe Lizzy has not either. If you have two, then there is enough for everyone.” She plucked four pieces off Lydia’s plate and put them back on the sideboard. Her younger sister gaped at her in shock.

“But, Mama—“ she exclaimed.

“No buts, Lydie. I know you are a growing girl, but even growing girls must be considerate of others. Here is your bacon, Kitty.” She put two pieces on Kitty’s plate, ignoring her sister’s dismayed stares. “Do you want anything else, my dear?”

Kitty nodded, hurriedly adding an apple scone to her plate and some eggs before hurrying to her seat. She chose the seat to the left of Elizabeth’s own chair, the mistress’s spot, as she customarily did.

Grumbling under her breath, Lydia put scones and eggs on her plate before making her way to her chair. She glowered as she ate, and Elizabeth was once again struck with how very juvenile Lydia behaved. Returning to her seat at the foot of the table, she finished her meal, enjoying the lack of argument emanating from the two youngest Bennets.

“Mrs. Bennet, if you would be so kind as to speak with me after you have finished eating?” Mr. Collins had been quite forgotten during the disagreement between Kitty and Lydia.



“Of course, sir. Pray, let us go now if you are ready.” Elizabeth dabbed her mouth with her napkin and stood. Mr. Collins followed, and they left the room, going to the parlor at the end of the hall. Out of the corner of her eye, Elizabeth saw herself ducking into the dining room. She chuckled at the oddity of the situation, shaking her head when Mr. Collins turned to her questioningly.

Once they were in the parlor, he turned to her and put his hands behind his back. “I have done as you asked, Mrs. Bennet,” he said solemnly. “It is now the second day following the ball, and your daughter should no longer be out of sorts. I have every confidence she will be amenable to my suit and we will be very happy together.”

This was her moment. “I regret to inform you, sir, that you are mistaken. Elizabeth is such a dear girl, so thoughtful and considerate. She came to me last night, full of worry! After much self reflection, she has resolved to refuse you if you ask, for she cannot be what you need in a wife and companion.”

Mr. Collins looked shocked. “Why would she think such a ridiculous thing?” he spluttered. “We are designed for each other! Cousin Elizabeth is the perfect example of feminine beauty and accomplishments. She will make an ideal wife for me.”

She ought to have known he would persist. “But your words to her yesterday about being a useful sort of woman... They struck her most forcefully. Elizabeth cannot cook or clean, and whilst you have a maid and mentioned hiring a cook, she feels it would be best if you found a lady who can do that which you require. It would save you a considerable amount of income, sir, and the trouble of finding a cook on such short notice.”

“My purpose for selecting amongst your daughters, madam, is to heal the breach that has existed between our families for so long. If I do not marry Miss Elizabeth, then I suppose your next daughter, Miss Mary, ought to do.” He sighed. “She is not as handsome, but she is pious.”

Elizabeth gulped. Mama did not want him for any of her girls. “Mary, sir, cannot cook, either. And we would not consider there to be a breach. You have made a valiant effort to heal our family lines. We see them as quite repaired, I promise you.” She paused, an idea blossoming in her mind. “There is another impediment, sir,” she continued. “If one of my daughters were to accept your hand, we would cause another breach. You see, Elizabeth does not wish to wound her dearest friend. The lady has formed a tendre for you, and it would be a betrayal of the worst sort if she—or any of my girls—were to marry you in her stead.”

Mr. Collins frowned. “And who is the lady?” he asked testily. He doubtlessly disliked that his aims were being so undone.

“Miss Charlotte Lucas, Mr. Collins. She is a lovely lady and has the skills my daughters do not possess. I understand she is a dab hand in her mother’s kitchen, practicing cookery and baking every week. I have enjoyed her mince pies. They are everything delightful! Oh, and her bread is heavenly! So light—quite perfect for toast in the mornings.”

She could practically see Mr. Collins’s thoughts whirling. The man unconsciously licked his lips as his eyes grew wider. “Truly?” he said. “Is she so gifted?”

“Certainly. Why do you not ask her yourself? Look! She just walked by the window.”

“But,” he spluttered, “but the olive branch!”

“Sir, Miss Lucas is Lizzy’s dearest friend, and our connection to that family is of long standing. She would never see us destitute. Nor would you, for you are a good, Christian man whose conscience would not allow it.”

His expression transformed at the praise, and he beamed. “Quite right, Mrs. Bennet, quite right. Yes, there is still time before my departure! I shall show Miss Lucas her

affections are not misplaced. Thank you for helping me see the way forward. I do hope that I shall always be welcome at your door.”

Elizabeth could not help herself. She grinned. Her happiness at being free from the obsequious parson could not be contained. “You are most welcome, sir. Now, you had best go to it as soon as Hill shows her in.”

Charlotte came in and Elizabeth winked at her. Her friend looked somewhat confused for a moment, smiling hesitantly back. “Good morning,” she said, addressing the two people in the room. “My mother has sent me with an invitation, Mr. Collins. We have a day of activities planned and would like it if you would attend.”

“Oh, that sounds delightful!” Elizabeth said, clapping her hands as she had seen her mother do. “Mr. Collins, does that not sound a treat?”

“Indeed, madam. If I will not be missed at Longbourn, I shall prepare to depart with Miss Lucas directly.” Mr. Collins puffed up and smiled ingratiatingly at Charlotte. “If you will excuse me.” He hastened to leave the room.

“I thank you for your note to Mama,” Charlotte said, turning to Mrs. Bennet. “I confess to some surprise, though I cannot repine your decision.”

“It is nothing, my dear.” Elizabeth patted her friend’s hand. “Elizabeth wants a love match.” In truth, she disagreed with Charlotte’s desire for only a comfortable situation, but she could not say so as Mrs. Bennet.

“Yes, I do.” They turned. Mama—as Elizabeth—stood in the doorway. “Mr. Collins thanked me for my consideration. I take it he is to go away with you, Charlotte?”

“Yes, Lizzy.” Charlotte embraced her friend. “I know you cannot approve, but this is what I want. I shall have my own home at last...and maybe children as well.” She

fairly glowed with happiness, causing Elizabeth's heart to ache a little.

"We do not all want the same things," Mama said, taking Charlotte's hand as she pulled away. "Make the most of this chance. If anyone can thrive in a marriage of convenience, then it is you. Always practical and prudent, you make the most of every situation you are in."

How very astute of Mama to see that! Elizabeth had never looked at Charlotte's pragmatism in that light. She felt rather humbled that her mother, whom she had always seen as nonsensical and oblivious to what happened around her, had pointed it out.

Mr. Collins appeared, and the pair departed. Elizabeth and Fanny watched from the window until they rounded the bend and could no longer be seen.

Mama sighed and moved away. "Well, that is over," she said gratefully. "None of you will be doomed to his company for the rest of your lives."

"I appreciate your efforts on my behalf," Elizabeth replied. "And it is delightful to be one in purpose as we now are." She grinned and took her mother's hand. It felt familiar, yet so foreign. "What do you make of our situation?" she asked after a moment.

Mama shook her head, Elizabeth's curls bouncing as she did. "I cannot say. It is very peculiar and can only be an act of God. Perhaps our discord has angered him beyond tolerance."

"Then we are being punished?" Elizabeth did not like the sound of that. "How, then, are we to fix what has happened?"

"I can only tell you my musings." Mama shifted and leaned her head against

Elizabeth's shoulder. She wrapped her arms around her and sighed.

Elizabeth returned the sentiment, kissing her own head with her mama's lips. "Tell me, then," she said softly. "Perhaps we might make something of it."

Mama sighed again, sounding very forlorn. "My musings began this morning after we sent the note to Lucas Lodge. It has been years since you and I did anything other than argue. You are such a headstrong, stubborn creature, and I have not known what to make of you for so long. And then this morning we were of one mind, and we got along famously. I concluded that righting the wrongs and healing the breach between us must be the way to change back."

Once again, her mother surprised her. Lizzy had not thought her mama capable of rational thought, yet here she presented a solution that was not only logical, but made sense. "I believe you have the right of it," she remarked. Her shock must have been evident in her voice, for Mama scoffed.

"Always the tone of surprise. I wish you did not take after your father in that way."

She bristled. "I am afraid I do not comprehend you," she said coolly.

Mama wilted where she stood. "He does not think I am at all intelligent, either," she muttered, pulling away. "I may not be as clever as you and he, but neither am I stupid. I am capable of rational, intelligent thought, and though it may take me longer to puzzle out a solution to my problems, I can do it."

Elizabeth felt terrible. "I am sorry," she whispered, appalled. She thought herself so clever in her disparagement, believing her mother had not understood her disapproval and scorn. To find out the opposite hurt in ways she had never experienced. Guilt, anguish at having been the cause of so much pain, and remorse consumed her.

“It is all forgiven.” Mama reached up and touched her cheek, and Elizabeth closed her eyes, picturing the image she now saw in the mirror instead of the one her mother currently possessed. “Promise me, my dear, that when all of this is over, you will not return to how things were. I like this new us rather well, and would hate to lose it as quickly as we found it.”

“I like it too,” Elizabeth confessed. “I thought you misunderstood me, but I see now you did not. What you said to Charlotte was inspired!”

Mama chuckled. “It was, was it not? I think she and Mr. Collins will do well together. Though it does cause me to worry about our future again. Whatever will we do when your father dies?” Her hands fluttered, and Elizabeth panicked as she watched her body perform the actions she had for so long associated with her mother.

“Jane will marry Mr. Bingley, Mama, and they will see to everything.”

Mama frowned. “Jane behaved rather oddly before she went into breakfast. Did you notice? I wanted to follow her, but I wished to avoid Mr. Collins.”

She nodded. “Yes, she looked rather discomposed when she came into the room. I was distracted preventing Lydia from eating all the bacon.”

“She would not do any harm!” Mama protested. “She is the tallest of you all—not at all too plump or curved.” She sounded incredibly defensive, and two twin spots of pink appeared on her cheeks.

“It had nothing to do with that. There were others who wanted some, and she was not inclined to share.” Elizabeth suspected her mother was rather sensitive to the subject of food and appearance and wondered why. “I made her give some to the other girls. She did not like it.”

Her mother relaxed, looking visibly calmer after Elizabeth's explanation. "I am certain she did not." Mama sighed. "It has always been easier to give Lydie what she wanted. Her tantrums as a child were a sight to behold! Goodness, she made the house shake with her wails. It drove your father to distraction." She laughed again, shaking her head. "I can see my indulgence has done no good. Did you know I tried to correct her for something yesterday and she called me a rude name and stormed off?" Mama huffed angrily. "I think it was my first inkling that I have spoilt her fiercely."

Elizabeth concurred. "And Kitty follows wherever Lydia goes. If we do not correct their behavior, it will be impossible to do so."

"If you can convince Mr. Bennet that we need a companion, then I will not gainsay you. But I warn you, your father thinks they are beyond hope." Mama looked so distraught and miserable at the thought of it that Elizabeth's heart ached. If anyone could convince him, it was her, but could she do it whilst in her mother's body?

"There is nothing for it but to try," she finally said. "Can we not find the funds in the household accounts?"

Mama looked speculative. "Yes, I suppose we might. And if we remake a few of my gowns, I might dedicate some pin money to it as well."

"I shall try to speak to Papa first," Elizabeth resolved.

"Best wishes, my dear." Mama shook her head sadly and left the room.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 5:50 am*

### Chapter Seven

November 28, 1811 Longbourn Fanny

As much as she hoped Elizabeth would succeed, Fanny doubted it would be possible. Mr. Bennet had ceased listening to his wife long ago. Now he only teased and mocked her. She was required to harp on him incessantly in order to get anything accomplished—just like when Mr. Bingley arrived. Oh, how she had begged him to call! But, alas, he had refused, and then gone and done it behind her back so he could torment her later.

Perhaps I ought to ignore his jibes, she thought. She had considered it before. He could not torment her if she did not respond, but his actions upset her dreadfully. Despite everything, she still loved him, and that made it hurt all the more.

Resolved to think no further about it, Fanny went in search of Jane. She was not blind to her eldest child's distress that morning. Gone were the smiles of pleasure and the dreamy look on her countenance, replaced by hunched shoulders and a peculiar tightness around her eyes.

She wandered the house in search of Jane, finally locating her in her chambers. "What is wrong?" she asked without prelude. "I noted your distress earlier this morning."

Jane turned to look at her, eyes red from tears. "I received a letter from Miss Bingley before breakfast," she said, offering it to Fanny. She took it as if it would bite her, slowly unfolding it and scanning the words.



“This is ridiculous!” she declared. “What a load of tripe. Mr. Bingley loves you! Think of all the fine things you will have when he comes back for you.”

Jane frowned. “If you are teasing, Lizzy, it is in poor taste. You sound very much like Mama, and she mortifies us both.”

Fanny’s heart dropped. Did Jane really think that way? Her eldest child had never kept her heart on display as Lizzy did. Hesitantly, she said, “I know she is a tad much, but do you not think we have misjudged her?”

“Oh, Lizzy, do you remember what we spoke of yesterday? I fear it was her behavior that drove Mr. Bingley away. I saw how she acted at the ball, even absorbed as I was with Mr. Bingley’s attention. And our sisters! It was a great deal more embarrassing than I let on in front of Charlotte. Our neighbors tolerate our sisters because they have known us for years, but the guests at Netherfield Park have not. They judge through the eyes of society, and we have been found wanting. Our youngest sisters lack the maturity to be out, yet Papa does nothing and Mama encourages them! How can we compete with their mischief and mayhem? Even Mary was not above reproach, though she professes to behave with the most propriety amongst us sisters.” Jane finished her rant and buried her face in her hands.

Fanny did not know what to say. Each word was like a knife to her heart, and she despaired. Had she been the cause of Jane’s potential heartbreak? Had her actions driven away the most eligible man who had ever given one of her daughter’s attention? Oh, what can I do? she wondered. Is it too late to fix this? She did not know, but she wanted to try.

“Dearest,” she said tenderly, placing a hand on Jane’s shoulder, “do not give in to despair yet. We have only the word of Miss Bingley here. Did he not promise to return?”

Jane sniffed. "He did. But surely his sister knows him best. If she says he has an attachment to Miss Darcy, then he must."

"You have ever seen the best in people, dear sister," Fanny said. "Miss Bingley has held herself above our company since her arrival." Even she had noticed the lady's haughty behavior, all the while admiring her costly London-made gown. "She wants a wealthy, connected wife for her brother. And it is clear from her letter that she wishes to have Mr. Darcy for herself." Best wishes in that area. Mr. Darcy was as haughty as the lady.

Jane wiped her eyes. "Thank you, Lizzy. I shall have faith. Only, it is so hard. I have always been told my beauty will ensure my future, yet countless gentlemen have slipped through my fingers. And this is the only one who I have..." she trailed off, looking away biting her lip.

"The only one who you love?" Fanny finished. "I understand completely. Wait a little longer. If he does not come, I shall eat my bonnet." That sounded very much like something Lizzy would say. It worked; Jane laughed and wiped her eyes again before sticking the letter in her pocket.

She rose and hugged Fanny, leaving her wondering when she had last embraced her daughter. "Thank you, Lizzy," she said again, breaking away. Fanny's heart broke. She dearly wished Jane knew it was her mother who had comforted her and given her sound advice. With a brittle smile, she only nodded and excused herself.

In Lizzy's room, she brooded over how her behavior might have cost Jane her suitor. Worse, their security might be forfeit, too, for Mr. Collins had gone off to Lucas Lodge with her blessing. Not that she regretted sending him on his way. Her girls did not need that sort of man in their lives.

I never learned to be a proper lady, she mused. How might things have been different

if I had the knowledge? Mr. Bennet had made no attempt to curb her inappropriate behavior. But wait. In the beginning of their marriage, he had corrected her gently, she recalled. It was only after Mary, when she started having flutterings and spasms in her heart, that he had ceased his efforts. She had set aside all his lessons, behaving as the uncouth daughter of a tradesman that she was.

So now how do I proceed? she wondered. Lizzy . That was it. I ought to act like Lizzy and Jane. They are admired wherever they go. Surely, they are a good example of ladylike deportment. And I can practice now, whilst I still look like Elizabeth. People are likely to forgive her more readily than they would me.

Resolved, she left her chambers. Such heavy thoughts deserved something light and pleasing. Cook was happy to give her a few biscuits, and she hid away in the gardens as she devoured them one by one. I ought not to feel guilty, she told herself as she ate the last bite. Yet, her father's words resounded in her head as they always did. Sighing, she pushed them away and stood, determined not to let ghosts of the past control her any longer.

Elizabeth

Lydia's shrieks reached her ears as she tried to focus on the account books. Sighing, Elizabeth rose and put down her quill. She had tolerated the noise for long enough.

"You do not look half so handsome in it," Lydia shouted, taunting Kitty with her new bonnet, and holding it high so that she could not reach it.

"That is mine, Lydia! I purchased it with my pin money. You snuck into my room and stole it. Give it back to me!" Kitty looked ready to cry. Elizabeth knew Mama had forced the dear girl to give up many of her belongings to keep the peace. How she managed to spend time with Lydia without lashing out showed she had admirable self control.

Quietly, she walked up behind her youngest sister and plucked the bonnet out of her hands. Though Lydia was the tallest of the Bennet girls, she was not as tall as Mrs. Bennet. I wish I had more height, Elizabeth thought mournfully. I shall have to enjoy it while I can.

“Mama!” Kitty cried. “Mama, please give it back. It is mine.”

“I look much better in it. Tell her to give it to me, Mama!” Lydia stuck her tongue out at Kitty and smirked, seemingly confident that Elizabeth—or rather, her mother—would side with her.

“Did you go into your sister’s room and take this?” Elizabeth turned and confronted Lydia. Her sister seemed confused not to have her desires granted immediately.

“I did,” she said, “but it is only fair that I have it. I look better in it.”

“How does that make your actions fair?” She frowned, hoping beyond hope she could get through to her sister.

Lydia blinked, her face a study of perplexity. “It is fair because...” she trailed off, thinking. “It is fair, for the bonnet ought to go to the lady on whom it looks best!” she declared at last, triumphant.

“I am afraid that is not how life works,” Elizabeth said. “Every moment, you demonstrate your lack of maturity and your selfishness. How am I to trust you in society if you cannot behave in the privacy of our own home? As of this moment, you are no longer out. Kitty, you will be restricted to small, private gatherings. Now, both of you be off.”

She handed the bonnet to Kitty amidst Lydia’s wails. “That is not fair!” she screeched. “I have been out since June! How can you do this to me?”

“Very easily. I am not impressed with your conduct, and so you shall be confined to the house until it improves. Kitty, if you wish to be spared further consequences, I suggest you depart.” Elizabeth turned to her sister and raised an eyebrow.

“Th-thank you for my bonnet, Mama,” she said quietly before fleeing the room.

“What is the matter with you?” Lydia shouted. “You are not my mama! You are some sort of witch masquerading as her! My mama would never behave so coldly!”

“You have been reading too many novels, my dear,” Elizabeth replied, laughing merrily. Lydia’s suppositions hit a little too close to the truth of the matter for comfort, but she did not fear her sister so discovering. No one would believe her. “Off to your chambers, now. I believe it is time that you are more engaged in your studies.”

“No! You cannot make me.” Lydia crossed her arms stubbornly.

All humor fled Elizabeth’s face. She narrowed her eyes. “I am still taller than you, Lydia,” she said in a quiet, dangerous voice. It sounded truly frightening. Never had she heard her mother speak so, and doing it in her stead made Elizabeth feel like a naughty child. “You can either go by yourself, or I shall escort you. And if you choose the latter, I shall take with me all your gowns, bonnets, shawls, and pretty things when I depart.”

Lydia gasped dramatically. “You would not dare!” Her voice rose louder, and she stomped her foot.

Elizabeth’s hand came out and clasped around Lydia’s arm. Despite the weakness that came with the age of her present body, she found strength somewhere, dragging the spoiled girl from the room whilst calling to Simon to bring a trunk from the attic. Lydia protested the entire way, grabbing onto the railing and trying to prevent herself

from being hauled upstairs. Her protests went unheard, and Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief when they came to her bedchamber. She opened the door and pushed Lydia inside first before following and standing in the doorway.

“Enough, Lydia Marie Bennet!” she said loudly. “You are acting like a spoilt child and I will not have it in this house a moment longer. I have lately been made aware of how damaging your behavior could be to this family and our reputation, and I will no longer blind myself to just how badly you act! My goodness, child, what are you thinking? Wailing and throwing a fit because I returned your sister’s belongings to her? How much of what is in your room is Kitty’s? What about your other sisters?”

Simon appeared with a trunk, and Elizabeth began removing gowns from the closet. “This is Jane’s,” she said testily. “It is too short for you. Why do you even have it?” She laid it across a chair and added more gowns to the trunk. “This shawl is mine—Lizzy’s!” she cried angrily. “And I know this bonnet used to be Mary’s.”

“It was too lovely for her.” Lydia folded her arms petulantly and dropped onto her bed.

“Mayhap that is why your sister wears her dull gowns,” Elizabeth cried, suddenly comprehending Mary’s choice of attire. “She fears you will steal them as you did this bonnet.” She remembered when Mary had opened that bonnet, a gift from their Uncle Gardiner. She had touched the flowers reverently and thanked him. But Elizabeth had never seen her sister wear it.

Into the trunk went gowns, bonnets, gloves, ribbons, and more. She left four gowns hanging in the closet, all modestly cut and unadorned. A large pile that contained things that belonged to others graced the chair. Scooping it up, Elizabeth went to the door and nodded to Lydia. “When your behavior improves, I shall return your things,” she said. “And until I say so, you are no longer out in society. I will see that Sally knows to leave your hair down.”

As she closed the door, Lydia wailed. A shattering sound on the back of the door made Elizabeth cringe. Simon stood nearby, trunk in hand. "See that it goes to my chambers," she said, sighing loudly. Lydia would certainly search the attic if she got a chance. Best not leave the trunk where she could find it.

Mama appeared, and by the look on her face, Elizabeth knew she had heard the entire thing. "Lizzy," she said, winking at Mama, "will you come help me sort through all of this?" She held up her arms, hoping Mama saw her gesture as what it was, a peace offering.

Mama smiled timidly and nodded, following Elizabeth down the hall to the mistress's suite. They laid everything out on the bed and sorted it. Kitty's was the largest and Mary's the smallest. The items belonging to the two eldest sisters were few since everything in those two piles had been stolen without Mrs. Bennet's sanction. Elizabeth bristled in anger that Lydia had got away with her nonsense for so long.

"I am very sorry," her mother said mournfully. "This is all my fault."

"We have all indulged her dreadfully," Elizabeth said soothingly. "And we will correct it now."

"But what if she is like this forever?" Mama whimpered. "How will I atone for my sins, then?"

"If Lydia chooses to stay as she is, it will only be on your head if you do nothing." Elizabeth took her mother's hand. Had Mama's hands always been so large? Her own seemed so small in comparison. "We shall weather this together. And even if my father complains, we shall stick to our decisions. Lydia will behave herself or not see a stitch of society until she comes of age. And I think Mary and Kitty will improve naturally away from her influence."

“I wish to be closer to both,” Mama whispered. “Especially Mary. She is as foreign to me as you.”

“Then let us do it together.”



### Chapter Eight

November 28, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

“M rs. Bennet.”

Elizabeth looked up from the ledger in front of her. “Yes, Mr. Bennet?” she asked, smiling warmly.

“May I ask why Lydia remains in her chamber? She is stomping about, and I can hear all manner of odd noises emanating from within.” He frowned. “It is disturbing the peace.”

“Lydia will stay where she is until she can behave in a more ladylike manner,” Elizabeth replied bluntly. She dipped her pen into the inkwell and recorded the total from the sums she had just performed.

“Can you not find some other punishment? The racket is beyond my tolerance.”

He sounded rather petulant and enough like Lydia that Elizabeth grinned. Papa would not like that comparison, she thought amusedly. “Our youngest daughter has behaved like a hoyden long enough,” she replied aloud, carefully closing the ledger.

He scoffed. “You have never cared in the past. Why now? They are nearly grown and it would cause upheaval to insist they behave.”

“What would you have me do?” She turned and looked at him pointedly. She could

never challenge him like this as Miss Elizabeth Bennet, but as Mrs. Fanny Bennet, Elizabeth hoped to have more influence over Mr. Bennet's actions. She had to try, even if Mama thought she would fail.

"If you are so set on this path, find another way to achieve your aims. Lydia cannot continue destroying everything around her!"

"Because it disturbs your peace?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly at him. "Then let us hire a governess or a companion. Having someone who can resist Lydia's fits of temper would be a prudent course of action."

"Hire a governess? Have you gone mad? I recall you saying ten years ago that there was no one better to raise our girls than you! What has possessed you to consider the notion now?" Papa threw his hands in the air and began pacing the small space.

"Does it bother you I have now seen the need? Is it so dreadful that I can admit when I am mistaken and seek to correct my behavior?" Elizabeth stood and did her best to work her mother's expression into a stern look. She frowned minutely.

Papa ceased his pacing and turned to face her. He looked at her—really looked—for the first time since Elizabeth woken to find herself in her mother's body. "Something is different," he murmured.

"Perhaps something is." She moved around the desk. "With your permission, I shall send out inquiries."

He frowned. "We will need to cut spending." His tone sounded scornful.

"I have already done so. We are saving enough in various places to afford a governess."

“It will be far too much trouble for me to manage everything,” he said begrudgingly. “If you pen the letters, I shall give you the funds. Maybe in six months or so—”

“No,” she cut in. “If you are unwilling to help me now, I will do it myself.” Elizabeth felt more frustrated with her father than she ever recalled in her entire life. Why did he resist change when it was good? Why did he treat her mother with dismissal and disdain?

Lydia was still in her room when teatime came. Elizabeth knocked lightly on her door and entered. Gasping, she looked around, shock and dismay coursing through her. “Lydia,” she breathed. “What have you done to this room?”

The drapes were pulled down and shredded. Great scratches marred the front of the wardrobe. Her mattress had been slashed and all the bed linens, too. The coverlet lay in two pieces on the ground, ink dumped in a puddle on the bright blue fabric. The destruction grew worse everywhere Elizabeth turned. Her dismay slowly changed to simmering anger.

“Very well,” she said evenly. “I know how to act.” She turned and left the room, closing the door and then locking it behind her. “Simon!” she called, walking as quickly as she could down the stairs. “Hill!” Both servants appeared, looking a little nervous at their supposed mistress’ agitation.

“I want the nursery opened,” she said stiffly. “Pull a cot from the attic and have it made up for Miss Lydia. She may have a pillow made of stuffed rags and a rough woven blanket. No comforts of any kind. When the room is ready, please inform me and we shall move my daughter there directly.”

Hill blinked. “Y-yes, madam,” she said uncertainly. “Mistress, may I ask... what has happened?”

“You will know soon enough. Her room is in complete disarray. We shall have to redo the entire thing, such is the damage! Foolish child!” Elizabeth threw her hands in the air and began to pace. Her mother’s body could not move as swiftly as she liked, but the back-and-forth movement calmed her a little. “Simon, you will need help to move the damaged furniture. Oh, how will we afford a governess if we must replace expensive furnishings?” She felt genuinely distressed.

“If I may, madam.” Simon stepped forward. “We may be able to repair some of the damage. I can bring Jones in from the stables. He has some woodworking experience.”

She nodded, grateful they may have a way forward that did not require expensive purchases. “Thank you both. Please complete your tasks as quickly as possible.” They both nodded and departed. Sighing, Elizabeth walked slowly away in search of her mother.

She found Mama/Lizzy in the parlor with Jane. “Lizzy,” she said quietly, “I need to speak to you. Will you come?” Jane frowned in confusion as Mama came to her feet instantly. She supposed her sister’s confusion made sense—never had she—as Elizabeth—obeyed their mother so readily and without complaint.

When they were out of the room, she turned to Mama. “Lydia has destroyed her chambers,” she whispered. “I have arranged to have her locked in the nursery. We need assistance. Papa has reluctantly approved hiring a governess. It is certain we shall need someone that can handle a willful, disobedient child. Oh, Mama, it looks terrible!” Elizabeth buried her face in her hands, shaking her head. “What have I done? Have I pushed for too much too soon?”

Mama patted her arm soothingly. “We knew this would happen. Why do you think I have not made the attempt all these years? I admit, I saw only what I wished to see in her behavior. I encouraged it! Now we must reap what we have sown. Or rather, what

I have sown. Lydia will settle when she sees she will not get her way.”

“How can you be so certain?” Elizabeth asked desperately.

“Because when I employed the same methods on you and Jane, it worked beautifully. Although you were both much younger than Lydia.” Mama smiled sadly. “Let us hope we can make things right.”

Readying the nursery did not take long. Elizabeth examined the work with satisfaction. A lumpy cot sat in one corner, covered with a scratchy blanket and boasting a pillow stuffed with rags, just as she directed. A fire had been lit, warming the space. There were two doors in the room. One led out into the hallway and the other led to the chamber that would house the governess. One window let light in. The nursery was on the third floor of Longbourn—Lydia could not escape through there.

“Very good,” she said approvingly. “Simon, come with me to Miss Lydia’s chambers.” She turned and left the nursery, and the footman followed. At Lydia’s door, Elizabeth withdrew a key and unlocked it. Stepping inside, she looked around at the disarray and chaos covering every inch of the room. Lydia stood defiantly in the middle of it all, her hair down and her arms crossed in front of her.

“Simon.” Elizabeth stepped aside and allowed the footman to enter. “Lydia, you may go of your own accord, or Simon will... escort you. What will it be?”

Lydia stomped her foot and stuck out her tongue.

“So be it. Simon, take one side.” Elizabeth marched up and took hold of Lydia’s other side. They pulled her from the room. She dug her heels into the ground and struggled.

“I will not go!” she screeched. “It is not fair! This is my chamber! Let go!” Her

protestations continued as they climbed the stairs and forced her into the nursery. Lydia's cries of ill use ceased as she looked around the room. "I cannot stay here!" she cried. "I shall die! Why, there is not even a proper bed!"

"You ruined your 'proper bed,'" Elizabeth replied firmly. "Here is where you will stay until your behavior improves. The door will be locked. Simon or Hill will bring your meals. If you waste your food, you will get nothing else."

"Why are you doing this?" Lydia's cries seemed genuine now, albeit confused. "What has happened? Mama, you have never been so cruel!"

"That is perhaps my greatest folly," Elizabeth whispered. She felt a little guilty speaking for her mother, even though she simply repeated sentiments already discussed between them. "Lydia, your poor choices have led to this conclusion. I hope you learn to appreciate what you had now that you have lost it." She turned on her heel and shut the door, locking it behind her. Sagging against the frame, she sighed deeply.

"If I may, madam, you are doing right by Miss Lydia." Simon looked nervous, head bowed and looking at his feet as he spoke.

"Thank you, Simon." At least Papa cannot hear the chaos now that she is on the third floor, Elizabeth thought.

She spent the afternoon with Simon, Hill, and Sally, sorting through the disaster in Lydia's chambers. The drapes and coverlet were completely ruined. Hill took the fabric away, promising to salvage what she could. "I am certain I could repurpose the larger pieces," she assured her mistress. "The smaller bits can go in the rag bin."

Ink had seeped into the rug. Despite Sally's best efforts with a brush, the thick, plush carpet remained permanently stained.

“If you reposition it, you could hide the stain under the bed, madam,” Simon pointed out.

“That is an excellent idea. Thank you.” Simon asked Jones to come inside and together they shifted the bed. Before they could reposition the rug, Mama came in, gasping as she took in the destruction wrought by Lydia.

“Oh,” she moaned, shaking her head. Coming closer, she pointed at the rug. “That was purchased less than two years ago! And now it is ruined!”

“Never fear. We will hide the stain under the bed.” Elizabeth explained their plan and her mama smiled approvingly.

“Lizzy,” she whispered, leaning close, “I would like to replace the rug in your room, eventually.”

Elizabeth flushed. Her rug was incredibly threadbare, but she had avoided saying anything. “My room is fine,” she whispered back. “At least until we have the funds to replace it. For now, Lydia must be the focus.”

“As you wish.” Mama patted her hand affectionately. “Lydia will likely be in the nursery for some time.”

“We need it. Jones says he can repair the wardrobe and the other furniture. This chamber is hardly fit to live in right now.” Elizabeth shook her head in disgust.

“Not that you need it, my dear, but I approve of your actions. Thank you for being brave when I could not be.” Mama patted her arm again and then left the room.

Elizabeth knew Hill and Simon watched her curiously. She pretended not to notice, giving her last instructions before leaving the room. She needed a rest. Emotionally

exhausted, she went to her chambers to lie down for a time. She still had to pen inquiries for a governess. Thirty minutes, she thought. Then I shall get up.

Her short nap turned into a long rest, and she awoke an hour and a half later. Disoriented, she tried to make herself wake up faster. It would seem her mother's body did not work that way, and so after another half hour, she finally felt equal to moving around. Elizabeth wasted no time penning a few letters, sanding and sealing them to take downstairs with her. It was almost time for the evening meal!

Dinner that evening was subdued. No one commented on Lydia's absence. Mr. Bennet gave his fifth daughter's normal seat a pointed look but made no other remark. Kitty looked nervous, as if she were afraid that she would be punished next. She need not have worried. As long as she behaved, she would be free of consequences.

"You have had a busy day, Mrs. Bennet."

Elizabeth jumped a little at her father addressing her. She shared a glance with Mama, who sat at her right in Lydia's usual place. "I believe we accomplished much," she said hesitantly.

"I understand Lydia has been banished to the nursery." He frowned. Surely he did not disapprove!

"She has." Elizabeth tried to keep her tone neutral. She could not guess what her father thought of the situation. He seldom approved of anything his wife did.

He grunted. "I hope you know what you have got yourself into," he said stiffly. "At least I cannot hear her anymore. Tell me, how much will you require to replace all that she ruined?"



“Nothing, sir.” Elizabeth kept her eyes on her plate.

“What?” Her father sounded shocked and disbelieving. “Surely, you will want funds to refurbish the room.”

“I do not need to do so,” Elizabeth said lightly. “Lydia does not require the room, and Jones assures me he can repair the damage to the furniture. We have fabric for drapes and a coverlet that can be put on the bed.”

Silence prevailed. She waited for his response with bated breath, certain that he would make some cruel remark.

“I did not believe you had the self control, Mrs. Bennet,” he said scornfully. “It appears even an old dog can learn new tricks.”

It stung. “John Fitzherbert,” she replied, burying her hurt beneath her words. If his remarks made her feel this small, how had her mother felt for so many years? And Elizabeth had laughed along with her father, commenting on her mother’s ridiculousness. I am as bad as he is, she thought miserably.

She happened to glance up. Her father gaped at her in complete shock. Oh, she thought. I cited his little quip. That is not something Mama would do. Well, all the better. He has underestimated his wife for too long! She smiled an unaffected smile and returned her attention to her meal. Perhaps a few more incidents such as this would teach him to appreciate his wife again. Elizabeth was certainly learning to do so. There was much about Mama to admire. And it was no wonder she behaved as she did! Being attacked daily by the man who vowed to love and honor you was no easy thing to bear.

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### Chapter Nine

November 28, 1811 London Darcy

“Y ou are wrong!” Mr. Charles Bingley stood up and began to pace the room. Darcy watched expressionlessly. Bingley’s sisters, Mrs. Louisa Hurst and Miss Caroline Bingley, scoffed and shook their heads.

“Miss Bennet is a sweet girl, Charles, but she can be nothing to you. She is the penniless daughter of an insignificant country squire. Her relations are ill-bred and gauche. How can you think of uniting our family with someone so beneath us? Everything our father worked for would be lost!”

“In marrying Miss Bennet, I would be elevating our family! Lest you forget, she is the daughter of a gentleman. Fortune or no, she outranks you and me!” Bingley shook his head violently. “You are wrong to disparage her so, especially after you claimed a friendship with her!”

“She was a diversion whilst we rusticated in the country. Nothing else.” Miss Bingley sniffed disdainfully. “She would never survive London.”

“And you, Darcy?” Bingley turned to him. “Do you agree?”

“Your sisters make valid points. Marrying Miss Bennet would lessen your position in society greatly. Her family is never in town. She is an unknown and would do nothing for your efforts to distance yourself from trade.” Darcy shook his head. Bingley would overcome his fascination with this new blond angel before too much

time passed. He needed to drive the point home. “Besides, I do not think Miss Bennet’s affections are the equal of yours.”

His friend stopped pacing, his face falling. “She loves me,” he replied. His voice wavered, and Darcy saw his opportunity to put an end to his friend’s obsession.

“I watched her most carefully,” he said, imbuing his voice with pity. “She smiles the same at everyone. I am sorry, my friend, but I do not believe Miss Bennet holds you in any real regard. She would accept an offer at the behest of her mother. Of this I am certain.”

Bingley’s face fell. “If you will excuse me,” he said firmly. “I believe I need time alone to think.” He stalked out of the room without another word.

“Well done, Mr. Darcy!” Miss Bingley cheered. “I knew you were just the man to help us convince Charles to abandon his newest love. And with him staying at your townhouse instead of Hurst’s, he will have ample distraction. Oh, what a pleasure to be of one mind.” She walked up and slipped her arm through his, looking up into his face and batting her eyes. “I foresee many such happy moments in our future.”

Not if I can help it, he thought, disgusted. He slipped out of her clutches and stepped away. “I spoke only the truth as I saw it,” he said dismissively. “Your brother will make his own choices regardless of what I think he ought to do.” And yet, he hoped his influence was great enough to persuade Bingley to remain in town.

Darcy would not admit it to another soul, but he had other motives for keeping his friend away from Miss Bennet. The lady’s younger sister, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, had tempted him in a way no other lady ever had. The ploy Miss Bingley attempted in the Netherfield Park parlor only intensified his fascination with the captivating young lady. Her light and pleasing figure entranced him as she walked around the room.

Elizabeth's fine eyes and pert opinions had enthralled him. After a few meetings, he had been unable to forget her. Yet, she was entirely unsuitable! How could he, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, have fallen under the spell of a woman he could never have? His family—indeed, they expected him to marry a wealthy, well-connected lady of high society. Miss Elizabeth was none of those things.

And if Bingley married her sister, then they would be often in company and he could not escape. She haunted his dreams already. Perhaps he behaved selfishly, but it was for Bingley's—and his—own good. They could both do much better than the Bennet ladies.

"My brother has always valued your opinion, sir, and I have no doubt he will behave precisely as we wish." Miss Bingley smiled triumphantly. "Netherfield Park has been closed up and we will not return to that backwater if I can help it."

"Yes, it will be good to spend the winter in town," Mrs. Hurst drawled. "The country would have been so boring! Why, dining with the same four-and-twenty families sounded positively dull!"

"And the sport had ended," Mr. Reginald Hurst grunted. "Nothing else there to occupy us."

Darcy nodded stiffly, little though he agreed. He preferred the relative calm of the country to the bustling pace of the city, and he meant to retire to Pemberley as soon as he could. Georgiana currently resided at their aunt and uncle's estate, Matlock, and he wished to spend Christmas with her. He had a letter mostly written to inform her of his imminent arrival and had yet to send it.

"We shall depart now, sir." Miss Bingley came to his side again and attempted to ensnare his arm. "Pray, let us know when our brother has made his final decision. Perhaps we might have you at Hurst's townhouse to dine."

“I do not mean to stay in town for long,” he said curtly. “My sister awaits my arrival for Christmas.”

“Dear Georgiana! Christmas at Pemberley sounds divine!” She batted her eyes expectantly, and he had no doubt she wished him to offer an invitation to spend the season at his home.

“We will spend the festive season with my relations,” he said firmly, hoping to put an end to her pretensions.

Her face fell. “Oh, well, that sounds delightful,” she choked out, forcing a smile. “Louisa, are you ready to depart?” Miss Bingley stepped away as a footman entered the room and announced that their carriage awaited.

Mr. and Mrs. Hurst got to their feet and nodded their farewells to Darcy. He watched the threesome leave, grateful they were gone. He tolerated them for Bingley’s sake, but even that had become more difficult as time went by. Miss Bingley’s desires were no secret. Her ambitions were doomed to failure, for she, despite her fortune, was even more unsuitable than Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Such a comparison would devastate the lady if she knew his opinion, and he was too much a gentleman to discompose her in that manner.

Sighing, he poured himself a glass of port. Bingley would see their way of thinking in no time. Darcy could forgive Miss Bennet’s lack of connections and fortune if she esteemed his friend, but he had seen no evidence of the fact. She smiles too much, he recalled saying one evening. And she did. Jane Bennet gave the same serene, sweet smile to everyone she met. She drew everyone in with her calm demeanor, yet Darcy felt certain her heart remained untouched. A veritable ice queen, he doubted that anyone could truly earn her affection.

Her mother was the worst matchmaking mama he had ever had the misfortune of

meeting. Mrs. Bennet spoke in shrill tones, her voice carrying above the general din of any gathering. She made it abundantly clear at the Netherfield Ball that she not only expected Bingley to offer for her eldest, but that the connection would throw her other children in the path of rich men. No, it would not do. He could never let his friend fall prey to such mercenary motives.

Darcy shuddered as he recalled Miss Lydia Bennet racing around the room with some soldier trailing after her. Yes, it was good he had resolved to remove himself from the area. Miss Elizabeth presented a great temptation and he could not succumb. He congratulated himself for his self restraint.

The door swung open, and Bingley marched in. "I have made my decision," he declared. "You are wrong, Darcy. Jane loves me, and I intend to return to Netherfield Park and offer myself to her." Smiling in satisfaction, Bingley plopped down into an overstuffed chair.

Darcy's jaw dropped open in shock. "But," he said, "I observed her! Most carefully! She does not love you!"

"If that is what you saw, then she has behaved with more circumspection and decorum than many ladies in the ton," Bingley snorted. "It is not the thing for ladies to display their true feelings before a gentleman has declared himself. Yet, she has shown me the depths of her feelings in many ways. Each glance tells of her affection. Each touch of our hands tells a new story. As much as I rely on your observations and opinions, you are wrong in this case, my friend."

"If you go back, you will be trapped. If she does not love you, as I suspect, your marriage will be miserable!" He was well aware of the hypocrisy of his statement. The marriage that awaited him would be just the same. Marrying for convenience hardly ever resulted in a happy union. Was it so wrong to want to save his friend from that fate?

Bingley laughed. "You have spoken to Jane perhaps twice since being introduced. How can you claim to know her heart?" He chuckled again and crossed one leg over another. "I shall complete my business and return to my estate—engaged before Christmas!" Bingley sprang up and made for the door. "I must tell my valet to be ready to depart on Saturday!"

Darcy sighed and sank into his chair. There was nothing for it now. Bingley was decided. What would he do when he arrived at Netherfield and the place was closed up? I suppose I ought to warn him. He stood and made for the door, calling for his friend.

Two days later, they were on their way. Bingley was less than pleased to learn that Netherfield Park had been shut up prior to his sisters' departure. "They knew I was to return," he huffed. "You all must have been confident that you could persuade me to stay in town."

Darcy frowned but did not respond. They had been sure of their success. Bingley had decided not to inform his sisters he would return to Hertfordshire, instead writing to his aunt and asking her to come and act as his hostess. Another letter had gone to Netherfield Park, instructing Mrs. Nichols to rehire all the servants. Bingley was dismayed to learn that the staff had been let go without their quarter's pay and he meant to rectify it. There would be an additional bonus in their Christmas boxes that year.

After a moment's thought, Darcy had resolved to accompany his friend. Bingley was vulnerable if he went alone. If Darcy was there, he could prevent anything disastrous from happening. And he had great faith in his self-control. He would not fall for Elizabeth's wiles. Regretfully, that meant he could not spend Christmas with his dear sister. He would immediately send for her but for a certain villainous wretch in the area. No, Darcy would not risk Georgiana coming into contact with Wickham.

His sister would understand his need to protect his friend. Darcy had so few real friends these days, and Bingley was by far his best, save for his cousin Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. The former's life could be forever altered if he made a hasty decision, as he so often did. If Darcy could prevent him from making a catastrophic mistake, he would.

The carriage slowed to a stop in front of Netherfield Hall. The handsome building was impressive. As the principal house in the area, there were certain expectations of the master of the place. Darcy felt some guilt knowing he had encouraged Bingley to abandon his duties. Then again, it had not been his idea to dismiss all the servants without paying them for their trouble. That had been Miss Bingley.

Bingley clambered out of the carriage and straightened, tugging on his coat. "At last," he muttered. "I have only to refresh myself and then I shall be off!" Without waiting for his friend, he climbed the steps and entered the house. Following at a slower pace, Darcy contemplated what he must do. Bingley could not go to Longbourn alone. Mrs. Bennet would have him trapped in a room with her eldest daughter in a trice, and then Bingley would be unable to make an informed decision. No, Darcy would need to stay by his side. He had the fortitude to withstand Miss Elizabeth's lure whilst he did so. He would do it all in the name of friendship.

Entering the house, he handed his hat and outerwear to a waiting servant. The man's expression seemed a little hostile. Darcy could not recall him—Smith, if he recalled—ever looking so cross whilst he had been a guest there. Shrugging it off, Darcy made his way to the drawing room. Bingley was there conversing with Mrs. Nichols.

"Have you recalled all the servants?" he asked.

"Indeed, sir." Mrs. Nichols stood rigidly, appearing as disapproving as Smith had. Gone was the warm, inviting matron who had first shown them around Netherfield.



What could be the cause? Surely not their abrupt departure! There could be no hard feelings, especially since the servants had now been recalled.

“That is good. Christmas is near, and I wish for something extra to be in the boxes. Additionally, all the staff will receive compensation for their troubles. I did not give the orders to close the house, Mrs. Nichols. As master, it falls to me to rectify my sister’s presumptions. Please, give my apologies to the staff and assure them I shall see everything put to rights.”

Mrs. Nichols relaxed a little and nodded. “Your rooms are prepared,” she said. “Mr. Darcy is in the same chamber he occupied before.” She frowned as she said his name, carefully schooling her expression when she noticed him standing there. “I shall have Smith bring the trunks up.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Nichols. Please, tell me if there is anything I can do to make things right. Oh, my aunt, Mrs. Emma Bingley, will be joining us in a week or so. She will act as my hostess.”

“Very good, sir. Will the rest of your family be here for the holidays?”

“I do not believe they will, but best keep their rooms refreshed. Caroline and Louisa like to make unexpected entrances. I cannot predict what they might do.” He leaned close and whispered, “They do not know I left London, and I am pleased to have avoided their detection as I departed.”

That had been a simple matter, for Bingley had been staying at Darcy House. Nevertheless, his words caused Mrs. Nichols to smile, which was doubtless his goal.

“I mean to go to Longbourn as soon as I have changed,” he said, turning to Darcy. “You may come or not. I must see Miss Bennet. She has no doubt heard that Netherfield has been shut up. She must think me the worst sort of cad!”

Darcy nodded. Mrs. Nichols smiled approvingly, finally relaxing as she had when they first knew her.

The gentlemen left to change, ordering their horses to be made ready in anticipation of their departure.

### Chapter Ten

November 30, 1811 Longbourn Fanny

“Charlotte!” Fanny stood up, smiling broadly. As Mrs. Bennet, she had often criticized Miss Lucas’s unfortunate appearance. She had straight brown hair that would not hold a curl, a nose too wide for her face, eyes that were too close together, and a broad smile. Mrs. Bennet’s disparaging remarks had most certainly reached the ears of Miss Lucas and her family, yet they still endeavored to treat her with kindness.

Appearing as Lizzy, she was the recipient of far more warmth in that quarter. Fanny now knew the difference between politeness and real affection. Charlotte had always been kind to Mrs. Bennet, but she behaved with more openness and regard to Lizzy than she did to the former. In a few short days, Fanny had learned that Miss Lucas possessed a wry wit and a practical view of the world. She had sound advice and did not indulge in self-pity. Instead, she sought her own solutions to problems.

Now, Fanny felt sad that her new friend would depart for Kent in the new year. She would not have the opportunity to know the lady better as Mrs. Bennet. Not that there was any guarantee that she and Lizzy would change back. It had been three days—today was the fourth—and they were still trapped. Lizzy did as she always had, taking the changes in stride and trying her best in whatever form she possessed. Fanny tried her best to emulate her daughter and found that it was easier to be positive than she had ever imagined.

Lydia remained in the nursery. Elizabeth had sent inquiries for a governess by

express, but they had yet to receive any replies. Fanny waited impatiently. Now that she had resolved to pursue help for her two youngest girls, she felt eager to find the right lady and begin. Indeed, she wondered why she had protested for so long. Much self reflection revealed it was because she thought if she hired help it meant she, as their mother, was not enough. Raising five girls was a challenge. There was no shame in admitting extra hands might have made it easier.

“Good morning, Lizzy. I have come to say farewell to my betrothed.” Mr. Collins had announced his engagement to Charlotte last night at dinner. Only Mr. Bennet seemed surprised by the news. Fanny had told Jane about her plan to see Charlotte betrothed to the man and that Lady Lucas had agreed with the scheme. Fanny informed Kitty and Mary about it after the latter had asked about Mr. Collins’ whereabouts the previous day.

“He has been absent for two days,” Mary remarked. “Whatever could be keeping him away? I thought you, Elizabeth, had drawn his attention.”

Fanny swallowed hard. “At first I did. We will not suit, as you well know. Mama was convinced of my view and together we turned him to Charlotte.”

Mary looked a little disappointed, but said nothing more. No matter, Fanny thought to herself. Mary could do better than Mr. Collins. Her third daughter needed someone who would smooth out her rougher edges and help her be less severe.

When Mr. Collins had announced it, Mr. Bennet declared in a loud voice, “I thought your interest lay in another direction, sir. I so looked forward to refusing your suit.”

Elizabeth looked enraged. Seeing the expression on what he thought to be his wife’s face made Mr. Bennet smirk. “What is it, my dear? Have your hopes been utterly dashed?”

“On the contrary, Mr. Bennet.” Elizabeth had schooled her expression admirably and taken a dainty bite of her food. “I am very pleased for Mr. Collins and Charlotte. I assured him the other day that his olive branch has been accepted, and we were happy to have our family whole once more. Charlotte will make him a very fine wife.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet,” Mr. Collins said, attempting to bow from his seat. “My Charlotte and I will be very happy. Know you will always have a place in our home, for you have seen to it that we have our happiness!”

“I believe Papa is disappointed to have his fun curtailed,” Fanny spoke up. She felt angry at Mr. Bennet’s taunts, especially since they were directed at Lizzy and not herself. No one mocked her daughters! It was not to be tolerated, even if Mr. Bennet did not know who exactly he spoke to.

“That is very true, Lizzy. It promised to be an entertaining spectacle. I quite counted on relishing your mother’s hysterics as she demanded that I make you accept his offer.”

Fanny’s heart clenched. She could imagine it now, her husband’s sardonic grin as he declared he would not allow the marriage. She would have succumbed to nervous flutterings for a week.

“And pray, sir, what would you have said?” Elizabeth asked, glancing at Mr. Collins. The man seemed oblivious, steadily consuming his meal and ignoring the surrounding conversation.

“I would have declared that I should never know Elizabeth again if she married Mr. Collins. You, my dear, likely would have said the same, except that you would never know her if she did not.” Mr. Bennet shrugged. “I am quite put out that I shall not have my entertainment.”

“Perhaps you had best save your observations of folly and foibles for our neighbors.” Elizabeth spoke quietly, but there was something dangerous in her tone. Mr. Bennet noted it, too, and looked up in surprise. “Your family does not deserve to be the subject of your jokes, sir. Careless words cause wounded hearts.”

Mr. Bennet laughed as if what she said was the most humorous thing she had ever said. “And have I wounded yours, my dear?” he said, wiping tears from his eyes as he chuckled.

“Yes.” Elizabeth focused on her meal, and Fanny felt certain her daughter spoke for her mama and herself.

Fanny forced herself back to the present. “I am very happy for you, Charlotte,” she said enthusiastically. “Mr. Collins will be here directly. He is...overseeing the last of his packing.” She only felt a little bad for prevaricating, for the gentleman's trunks were packed, and he was still at breakfast.

“I have you to thank for my happiness. And your mother. I do not know how you managed to convince her to give him up! I shall never forget the sacrifice, I assure you.” Charlotte took her hands and squeezed. “At long last, I have an opportunity to make my own way!”

“And you will do very well.” Fanny believed it. Charlotte could do anything she set her mind to. She hesitated before continuing. “Mama has been harsh in the past. I know you have heard her remarks. She will not tell you herself, but she regrets it greatly and hopes you will forgive her.”

Charlotte looked surprised. “I had not thought your mother cared what I thought about her words. But she has my forgiveness.” Her smile was genuine, and it warmed Fanny’s heart. One more thing repaired, she thought happily.

Mr. Collins came into the room and led his betrothed outside. They bid each other farewell, and he climbed aboard a hired coach. Charlotte waved as he drove away before coming inside to say goodbye to Fanny and Jane.

“Jane’s spirits are rather depressed,” she remarked when the eldest Miss Bennet barely moved.

Fanny sighed. “I do hope Miss Bingley is wrong and Mr. Bingley returns.”

“It does not speak well of his character if he does not,” Charlotte said evenly. “I hope he does.” She departed, and Fanny went to find Mary, determined to come to know her middle child better.

Mary played on the pianoforte, attempting to learn a new song. “That sounds lovely,” Fanny said.

A scoff was the reply. “I know how I sound, Lizzy. No matter how hard I practice, I cannot get the notes right. There is something about how I play that makes it sound dreadful! I do not know what I am doing wrong.”

Fanny frowned. She had no experience with music. Suddenly, she had a brilliant idea. “There is a widow in the village, a Mrs. Bates. She is the daughter of a gentleman and knows how to play. Perhaps we can persuade her to give you lessons.” It would be more affordable than a master, and perhaps Mary’s talents would grow with gentle direction.

“You cannot make that decision!” Mary snapped. “I have thought of it before. Mama will not hear of it, and Papa cannot be bothered.” She paused, thinking. “Though Mama has behaved strangely the last few days. If I ask her now, she may agree.”

She would! Fanny wished to shout it to the world. “Let us go to her at once,” she said

encouragingly. "Mama is in the parlor sewing." She took Mary's hand and tugged her to her feet. Something stirred within her, an unfamiliar feeling she had never felt toward her third child, at least not in the recent years. Affection, her mind named it. Love. Oh, it was a pleasant feeling! Mary had been vexing for so long that Fanny had forgotten what it felt like to bestow love on her.

Hours of self reflection had painted an unattractive picture. Fanny resolved that if she ever became Mrs. Bennet again, she would do everything in her power to show her children how much she loved them, even if it meant bestowing consequences where she deserved.

Elizabeth's permission to engage Mrs. Bates was quickly granted, and Mary's face blossomed as she smiled. Fanny saw evidence of her daughter's loveliness there, more subtle than her sisters' but evident, nonetheless. "Shall we go there now?" she asked Mary, praying that she would acquiesce.

Mary nodded, and they departed thirty minutes later. On the walk, they spoke earnestly. Fanny listened as Mary quietly told her how she had long wished for a music teacher and could scarcely believe it was now finally to come to pass. "How can I believe it will last?" she asked. "What if Mama changes her mind?"

"She will not," Fanny promised. "And you will learn everything Mrs. Bates has to teach you!"

Grinning, Mary nodded. They found the widow in her home. The lady had no children. Her husband had died many years ago, leaving her in genteel poverty. She lived on a small income and her situation was one reason Fanny felt such fear of the hedgerows. Mrs. Bates accepted the offer gratefully, promising to come twice a week to assist Mary on the instrument. Fanny and Mary returned to Longbourn, the latter seeming much happier and lighter than she had been in some time.



Jane still sat in the window seat in the parlor when Fanny arrived. Her forlorn look quickly melted away when she noted her sister standing there. “Dear Lizzy,” she said. Fanny could detect a falseness in her cheer and frowned.

“Do not look at me that way,” Jane said. “I am well. It is only... Today is the day Mr. Bingley promised to return. I have tried to have faith, as you said, but with every passing hour, it grows more difficult.”

Fanny’s heart ached for her daughter’s pain. “Anything could have delayed his arrival,” she protested weakly. She came to Jane’s side and hugged her gently. “Perhaps if we both wish him here, he will appear.”

Jane chuckled. “It would not hurt to try.” She leaned back and took Fanny’s—Elizabeth’s hands in her own. “Let us wish together.” She closed her eyes, and Fanny followed suit. I wish Mr. Bingley would come for Jane, she thought desperately. Let this error of mine be resolved!

A noise from the front of the house made them open their eyes, and they turned in tandem to the door. The window where Jane sat did not face the drive, and so it was impossible to see what caused the commotion.

Hill appeared in the doorway, and they turned to look at her as she entered. “Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley,” she said, stepping aside to admit the gentlemen.

Fanny gaped and looked at Jane. Her expression went from disbelief to hope to a polite mask in a matter of seconds.

“Show him you are happy to see him,” she hissed before they came fully into the room. Jane swallowed and nodded.

“Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth came gliding into the room. She made an

impressive entrance as Mrs. Bennet, especially in her newly unadorned gowns. Fanny smiled appreciatively, grateful that Elizabeth's entrance allowed Jane to collect herself for a moment.

"Good day, Mrs. Bennet!" Mr. Bingley stepped forward and bowed. "We have only just arrived from London this morning and hastened over to greet you as soon as possible."

Elizabeth frowned slightly. "I understood Netherfield had been closed for the winter," she said coolly.

Fanny almost groaned aloud. Not now, Lizzy! Mr. Bingley needs encouragement, not an inquisition! A moment alone with Jane and Fanny was certain there would be a proposal.

Bingley's expression darkened. "There has been a misunderstanding," he said firmly. "I had no plans to spend the winter in town. Why should I wish it? The country holds more attraction." His gaze strayed to Jane, and she granted him a shy smile.

Fanny breathed a sigh of relief as Elizabeth/Mrs. Bennet relaxed and smiled warmly. "That is good news. We shall have to invite you to dinner, as we discussed. I shall send you an invitation next week."

"That sounds lovely," Mr. Bingley agreed.

Fanny beamed happily as she watched the gentleman go to Jane's side and take her hand. Mr. Darcy's appearance at her side interrupted her observations.

"Miss Elizabeth," he said by way of greeting. "How do you do?"

Fanny did not like Mr. Darcy. He had insulted Lizzy dreadfully, and she refused to

forget the insult to her daughter. “I am well, sir,” she said, hoping she sounded as coolly dismissive as she wished. “I hope you had an easy journey from London.”

“The roads were dry and free of ruts,” he replied. Fanny looked up into his eyes. Her heart skipped a beat as she recognized the particular look a gentleman gave a lady whom he admired. She swallowed.

Mr. Darcy does not dislike Lizzy, she realized. He likes her! Oh, my dear girl! But how could she forward the match? She would have to ascertain if he would treat Lizzy well. Mr. Collins would have crushed her dear child’s spirit. Would Mr. Darcy do the same? Lizzy would cast this chance away without a thought, she mused. Perhaps I can work to discern Mr. Darcy’s true character. If he is worthy of my daughter, I shall then attempt to convince her.

Lizzy’s threat to lock Fanny in her chambers echoed in her ears. It is not as if I shall accept a proposal without her consent. And Mr. Darcy may not propose anyway. He thought of himself as above the locals—one of their daughters might not be good enough for him.

He cleared his throat and looked away. “Bingley was eager to see Miss Bennet again.”

Ah, here was one place she could help. “My sister is scarcely less eager. Miss Bingley’s letter was designed to wound her, I think.”

Mr. Darcy’s brow furrowed. “I do not know the contents of the missive,” he said, “only that she meant to tell Miss Bennet of our departure.”

Fanny frowned. “Then you are not aware she has been promoting your sister as a match for her brother?”

He turned sharply. "Surely you have misunderstood."

She laughed hollowly. "Do not impugn my intelligence, sir," she said mirthlessly. "I read the letter myself. Miss Bingley has great hopes that one marriage will bring about another." She raised an eyebrow as she had seen Elizabeth do. "Tell me, when am I to wish you joy ? "

"I am not engaged." Mr. Darcy looked positively panicked, and it made Fanny want to chuckle.

She did laugh aloud and patted his arm. "I did not think you were. I merely wished to convey why I disbelieved Miss Bingley's letter. Jane's spirits have been very low."

Mr. Darcy turned and watched the couple. "I see no sign of distress. She looks much as she ever did."

"Pray, allow me to know my sister and her feelings better than you, sir!" Fanny knew she sounded very like Elizabeth. Good.

"Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. You are correct." He continued to watch them, brow furrowed.

"Will Miss Bingley and the Hursts be joining you?" Elizabeth spoke from the mistress's chair. She kept her eyes on the sampler in her lap. She had said nothing since greeting the gentlemen, and Fanny worried she behaved differently enough to raise suspicions.

Mr. Bingley looked up. "No, my aunt will be my hostess instead. I expect her next week."

"Then we must postpone having you for supper until she can join us." Elizabeth

looked up and smiled. Fanny marveled at the change in her appearance. Fewer trimmings and a less frantic expression did wonders.

Will I be able to be so peaceful when I return to myself? Fanny wondered. She resolved to do everything she could to maintain the positive changes occurring around Longbourn, if only because it made those she loved so happy.

### Chapter Eleven

December 5, 1811 Meryton Fanny

Fanny walked to Meryton alone. She found she enjoyed going out every day, especially in a younger body that did not ache intensely. Mary and Jane had declined accompanying her, claiming it was far too cold to venture out of doors. Wrapped in her pelisse and cloak, Fanny barely felt the chill in the air. She hummed as she walked, swinging her basket back and forth.

Her design was to purchase a length of pale yellow ribbon for Mary. Her daughter had a plain blue gown, and she had convinced Mary that it needed a little trimming. The yellow would wash out Mary's complexion if the entire gown were of that color, but a little on the sleeves and hem would be just the thing. With Jane's attention occupied by Mr. Bingley, Fanny eagerly spent more time with the middle Bennet sister, hoping to form a bond with her.

Elizabeth, acting as Mrs. Bennet, had joined the pair every day, forming a new bond with her mother and next youngest sister. She commented here and there on their conversations and complimented Mary's new hairstyle—another change attributed to Fanny's growing relationship with the most forgotten sister. Kitty joined in every so often. She sulked a lot, though she dared not voice her boredom or displeasure aloud. She missed Lydia, Fanny knew, but her behavior had already improved after a short time out of her younger sister's company.

They had hired a governess. The lady, a Miss Hortense Holt, was no simpering miss. She was thirty if she was a day, stood nearly six feet tall, and had a broader figure

than any lady Fanny had ever seen. She was perfect. Able to handle Lydia with ease, she had moved into the governess's quarters and begun her instruction.

"We do not condone violence," Elizabeth informed the lady. "Strict you may be, but do not strike my daughter."

"Yes, madam. I like to implement positive reinforcement strategies." Miss Holt nodded crisply.

Fanny worried Lydia would not do well, but within a few days, she had settled into a routine. Kitty joined her sister for lessons in deportment and household management in the afternoon. Being around Lydia again proved a trial, but soon she decided little rewards were worth attempting to behave. For the first time in her life, she did not follow along after her sister.

Fanny came to the haberdashery and entered. She walked amongst the ribbons, running a finger down the silken spools. She had only a little pin money. Elizabeth had given her some coin rather than have her mother raid her saved funds. It would be enough for several yards if Fanny chose wisely.

"Good morning, Miss Elizabeth." Trained now to respond to that name, she turned to see who greeted her.

Mr. Wickham approached, his handsome countenance wreathed in a wide smile. "How do you do, sir?" she asked, struggling not to bat her eyelashes. Oh, but he was a handsome man. It was a pity he had no money.

"Not at all well. A certain gentleman has returned to the area!" He moaned dramatically. Fanny frowned. He spoke of Mr. Darcy, of course. She had overheard Maria Lucas telling Kitty that the gentleman had been spreading tales since Mr. Darcy left Netherfield. People readily accepted them as fact. The area's general

disapproval of Mr. Darcy made it easy to believe the talk.

Fanny was not sure what she believed. The Mr. Darcy who visited with Mr. Bingley, while not overly loquacious, did not seem as disdainful. Perhaps it was because she knew he looked at Elizabeth with admiration.

“I am sorry Mr. Darcy’s return has discomposed you,” she said neutrally. She loved to gossip, but she would not risk Jane losing Mr. Bingley again by upsetting his friend.

“You are everything good. I fear he will attempt to ruin my happy situation. Especially now that I am courting Miss King.” He grinned, looking rather proud of himself.

“Miss King?” She had not heard that the young lady and Mr. Wickham had formed an attachment.

“Yes! We are very happy. Her fortune would see me able to resign or sell my commission! We would live in her father’s house, of course. It is hers now.”

It all sounded very mercenary. Miss King had a fortune? When had that come about? And though she tried to be kinder, even in her thoughts, Miss King was a freckled thing, thin as a rail and with wild red hair. She did not seem to be the sort of lady Mr. Wickham would pursue. Unless she had a fortune, her conscience whispered.

Had not Mrs. Bennet been very similar? Who cares what a man thinks, looks like, or acts like? If he wore breeches and had an income, he was good enough for one of her girls. Until Mr. Collins, she had believed just that.

“I wish you the best with Miss King,” she said, hoping the cheerful tone she employed masked her confusion. All these introspections were growing wearisome.



Could she not have one day where she could go about her business as if her whole world had not been jumbled?

He continued to speak of Miss King's many attractions whilst Fanny browsed. Finally, she found a ribbon she could afford. It was a shade of buttery yellow and would work perfectly for the blue gown. Nodding, she brought the spool to the clerk and requested four yards. Mr. Wickham continued to ramble in the background.

After purchasing her ribbon and tucking it into her reticule, she bid Mr. Wickham a good day and left.

"Perhaps I can walk you home?" Mr. Wickham offered.

"No thank you," she replied. "I would not keep you from your tasks."

"Do not be so dismissive," he cajoled. "Are you hurt that I have turned my attentions elsewhere? A man must have something to live on, Miss Elizabeth."

Had Mr. Wickham been paying Elizabeth attention? How had she not noticed? Fanny had likely been far too focused on Jane and Mr. Bingley. "I am not at all offended," she assured him. "I know you have a great many responsibilities. Pray, allow me to depart so you can see to them."

He grinned, looking relieved. "I do hope we can continue being friends," he said with great feeling. He scooped up her hand and caressed it with his thumb.

A single, innocent lady might have misconstrued his words and taken them at face value, but Fanny was no naïve miss. She stiffened and pulled her hand away. "It was a pleasure, Mr. Wickham," she said. A great displeasure. Is this the sort of man I have been allowing my daughters to consort with? If he did not mean his words as he said them, then I shall eat my bonnet. Had she not said the same thing recently? If her

perceptions continued to be overturned, she would be required to consume every bonnet in the house!

She left the haberdashery once again, chastising herself for her lack of parental oversight. Mr. Wickham seemed to be the type of man to take advantage of unexpected ladies. Miss King did not deserve that.

Fanny was halfway to Longbourn when she encountered Mr. Darcy. He greeted her and dismounted, leading his horse toward her. “Good day, Miss Elizabeth,” he said. He seemed almost cheerful, though his small smile made his eyes twinkle. “How do you do?”

“I am well, sir.” She frowned, recalling her encounter with Mr. Wickham. Impulsively, she said, “In truth, I am a bit discomposed.” Quickly she described the encounter and her impressions, hoping he would give her some insight, and praying she was mistaken.

“You judged accurately, I am afraid,” Mr. Darcy said sadly. “Mr. Wickham is not an honorable man. I had hoped my words at the Netherfield Ball would alert you to that fact.”

She did not know what Elizabeth had been told, but she nodded anyway. “He cannot hide his true colors for long,” she murmured. “And he is spreading all manner of tales about you. They began after you left and spread quickly. Half of Meryton knew the story before you returned. ‘How could a man of your position behave so abominably?’ they said. Something about it smacks of deceit, sir, and I would not see you harmed by his words.”

Mr. Darcy frowned and looked foreboding once more. Fanny remained unbothered by the look because it was not directed at her, though it might have intimidated her otherwise. She saw the wisdom of forming a friendship with Darcy on Elizabeth’s

behalf. Her daughter could not act, not trapped as she was in her mother's body. Perhaps she could convince Elizabeth to trust her enough to be courted on her behalf.

“While I appreciate your sentiments, Miss Bennet, many a wealthier gentleman has behaved in the same manner Mr. Wickham employs. I must ask—you were eager to defend him at the ball. What changed?”

She blushed, wondering what her daughter had said in defense of that reprobate. She floundered, searching for an answer. “Well,” she stuttered out, “he said a few things that made little sense. Oh, it is all so muddled in my head. I must trust my instincts, sir, and since your departure, they have declared that his faults are many.”

He turned to look at her, smiling kindly. “I can very well understand your sentiments. Wickham is adept at tying people in knots. His confusing manner often aids him in his schemes.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Fanny smiled in return. He was a very handsome man when he was not looking around disapprovingly.

“Allow me to tell you more about Mr. Wickham,” Mr. Darcy continued. “I have known him since my childhood. His father came to be steward of Pemberley when I was seven. I had never felt more fortunate, for George Wickham and I were of an age and I had no brothers or sisters to play with.”

He proceeded to tell Fanny about his shared history with Mr. Wickham, growing sadder as he progressed. She learned the militiaman had refused the promised living and accepted compensation for signing all present and future claims to it away. And then he returned, demanding it when it came available.

“But that is not the worst of it,” Mr. Darcy said quietly. “Last summer, he betrayed me and my family—my father's memory—in the worst manner possible. He

conspired with a trusted servant to persuade my sister to elope.”

Fanny gasped. Even she was not ignorant of the implications. “I take it he failed.”

“Thankfully, yes. I came to see her a few days before their intended departure, wishing to surprise her. Instead of a joyful reunion, she tearfully told me everything. I sent Wickham away after ensuring he knew he would never see a penny of Georgiana’s dowry. Afterwards, I dismissed the traitorous servant without reference.”

Fanny’s motherly instincts longed to hold Miss Darcy and tell her that none of the blame rested on her shoulders. “The poor dear. What an awful thing to have been treated so abominably!” she exclaimed, smiling tremulously at her companion. “I thank you for trusting me, sir,” she said. “And I promise, I shall use my knowledge to protect my daugh—sisters.” I almost misspoke, she thought to herself. And my daughters will no longer be in company with the officers. It is not safe!

He led her to Longbourn’s gate before departing. “I must return to Netherfield to dress for dinner,” he said.

“Oh, yes!” Fanny grinned. “I had forgotten. Good afternoon, sir!” She waved him away and went inside. Yes, he was perfectly acceptable and would take excellent care of Lizzy. Now she had only to convince her stubborn daughter!

Darcy

There seemed to be nothing for it. Darcy knew after only a few more moments in Elizabeth’s company that he could not resist her siren’s call. Their conversation as they walked from Meryton to Longbourn played over in his head. Of course, Elizabeth had enough intelligence to see the holes in Wickham’s tales! And her dismay on behalf of Georgiana—they would get on very well.

Dinner that night would be at Longbourn. He tensed at the thought, not looking forward to Mrs. Bennet speaking over everyone, or the two youngest girls fighting and giggling from their seats. He would endure it all for Elizabeth, though.

Darcy lost track of his reasons for coming to Meryton soon after arriving. He hardly paid attention to Bingley and Miss Bennet, and he did not care. His friend could take care of himself. Darcy's attention would be on Elizabeth alone.

His valet helped him bathe and change before they departed. Darcy paid more attention to his appearance, picking a dark blue waistcoat instead of his usual black. Elizabeth favored blue; many of her gowns were varying shades of the color. She also looked very well in cream and blush. She even had one dark rose gown that made her complexion glow with luminescence.

Bingley's aunt, Mrs. Emma Bingley, had arrived the day before. She was a diminutive woman who looked as though a stiff breeze would blow her away. And then she opened her mouth and began to speak. Goodness, the lady had a lot to say! She spoke in a booming voice that did not seem as though it belonged to her, gossiping about people neither he nor Bingley had ever met, perfectly content to continue without a reply.

"Even I have relations who are difficult, Darcy," Bingley muttered as Mrs. Nichols escorted the lady to her room. "She is my only other female relative, however, and she is better than Louisa or Caroline." He could not disagree.

Mrs. Bennet welcomed her guests warmly with none of the usual verbosity she displayed. Darcy did not know what to think. She looked different somehow, and it took him a moment to realize it was her attire that had changed. Gone were the ribbons and lace. With the bulk removed, he could see she was still a very handsome woman. She greeted Mrs. Bingley kindly, letting her rattle away with no signs of irritation.

“Where is Miss Lydia this evening?” Mr. Bingley asked, glancing around the room.

“My youngest child is indisposed,” Mrs. Bennet said. She pursed her lips and glanced away, informing Darcy that more had happened than he had realized. Had he even seen Miss Lydia when he and Bingley had last called?

Dinner and tea afterwards continued to undo all his impressions of the Bennet family. All the girls behaved well. The dowdy one, Miss Mary, looked different. Her gown, pretty and modest, was blue with yellow trim. It flattered her and made her look less sallow. Her sour expression also seemed to have melted away, and she spoke quietly to Miss Kitty on her left. Elizabeth sat next to her mother and across from Mrs. Bingley. She looked very comfortable where she was. He swore she had expressed a strained sort of relationship with Mrs. Bennet before.

Only Mr. Bennet seemed irritated. He glowered from his end of the table, speaking a little to Bingley and Jane before turning his full attention to his meal. Why he appeared so disinclined to enjoy himself, Darcy could only guess.

The food was excellent, and he had nothing of which to complain. And after the meal, he spent one exquisite hour with his Elizabeth, speaking about Pemberley. She asked a great many questions about his estate, focusing on the surrounding landscape rather than the size of his home or the number of carriages he possessed. Knowing her to be an enthusiastic walker, he happily indulged her curiosity.

By the time he returned to Netherfield Park, he knew he was well and truly lost.

### Chapter Twelve

December 5, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Mama snuck into the mistress's chambers late after they hosted the Netherfield party for dinner. Elizabeth reclined on the settee, a cup of chocolate in her hands as she stared at the fire. Her mother was tall enough that her legs stretched out and touched the other end. The chocolate warmed her inside and out.

Heavens, how she ached! The colder the weather became, the worse she felt. How did Mama function when every joint, every limb, every finger—they all hurt! Groaning, she leaned back and closed her eyes.

“Feeling well, Mama?” She opened her eyes to see her own face grinning cheekily.

“How do you do it?” Elizabeth groaned and sat up, patting the seat beside her. “Everything hurts!”

“Age has not been kind to me in that way. Lady Lucas and Mrs. Long do not seem to have the trouble I do.” Mama flopped down next to her, folding her legs underneath her and hiding them beneath her nightgown.

“What I would give to sit like that!” Elizabeth rolled her shoulders. “My preparations for this evening seem to have made me worse.”

“That often occurs in the winter,” Mama said pityingly. “I am sorry you are experiencing this aspect of being me.”

“And others as well. Oh, Mama, I am very sorry about how I have mirrored Papa’s treatment of you! It was very wrong.” She felt tears threatening. Setting aside her chocolate, she wrapped her arms around her mother’s smaller form. Such poor treatment would drive anyone to behave as Mrs. Bennet did. Elizabeth now realized their mother had hidden the worst from her and her sisters. Mr. Bennet often made little quips whenever he saw his wife, from remarking on her appearance in a way which seemed flattering... that is until one knew he hid insults behind them.

Mama sniffed and hugged her back. “I am glad someone understands now,” she murmured. “Now, we have happier things to discuss! Why, we have not had a moment to ourselves in so long.”

“Days,” Elizabeth agreed. “Often in the same room, but never alone. Goodness, your duties keep me busy!”

“Those responsibilities will make you well prepared for your own household.” Mama took her hand. “I wish to tell you something.”

Elizabeth listened aghast as her mother related her walk into Meryton, the encounter with Mr. Wickham, and her following conversation with Mr. Darcy.

“Is Mr. Darcy to be believed so easily?” she protested. “How can your opinion change so quickly? But how could we doubt it when he tells you of his sister’s trials?” She had seen nothing redeemable in the man!

“Yes, you have the right of it. Do not forget, Lizzy, that I am a married woman. There are things one can detect—subtle meanings—when one is no longer a maid. Mr. Wickham is not to be trusted. I will not have him in this house!” She softened her tone. “I have asked very little, and I have done all I could to behave in a way so as not to disgrace you. Please, trust me with this.”



“Very well.” She did not like the concession, but she recognized the fairness of her mother’s words.

Mama paused. “I have something more to say. Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy admires you.”

Elizabeth clapped a hand over her mouth to smother her laughter. “Oh, Mama, you do know how to tease!” she said, amused.

“I am not teasing, Lizzy.”

She turned. Mama regarded her with a serious stare. It looked so odd, seeing herself this way. “Why do you think he admires me?” she asked warily.

“He watches you very carefully. And that story about his poor sister! He would not have told that to just anyone. The information could damage Miss Darcy’s reputation—irreparably!”

“That might mean he sees me as a friend.” It could not be so. The gentleman had declared her tolerable, and not handsome enough to tempt him. Mama read her thoughts.

“I know what he said, dear child, but he clearly did not mean it. A man does not follow a lady’s progress around the room, gazing at her intently without cause. Nor does he seek her company and engage her in conversation...not unless he admires her.” She sighed. “I remember when your father and I were courting. Oh, how he stared! Always a quiet man he was, and it discomposed me! And then he asked for a dance and I knew. I knew he admired me, and since I liked him too, it made perfect sense to accept when he asked for a courtship.”

Elizabeth had never heard that story. She had long assumed that her mama had engineered a compromise, trapping her father into marriage.

“Oh, do not look so surprised.” Mama tut-tutted and swatted Elizabeth. “We were not always at odds. Once we were very much in love. At least I was.”

“Do you still love him?” She needed to know. Perhaps there was something else she could fix whilst trapped as her mother.

“I do. I suppose it makes his behavior toward me hurt all the more.” She sighed and shook her head. “I cannot understand him. I stopped trying to make him happy long ago.”

Heart aching, Elizabeth took her mother’s hand. “What would you have me do?” she asked gently.

Mama straightened. “I wish you to give Mr. Darcy a chance.”

Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open. “And how am I supposed to do that?” she asked. “I am you! And you are married! To my father!” Oh dear, this was a conundrum.

“You will have to trust me enough to allow him to court me in your place.” Mama said it matter-of-factly, as if it were nothing.

“We are nothing alike! He will fall in love with someone else!”

“If I were to wager, I would say he is already in love with you. I will do nothing that goes against your character. We can meet at night and I shall tell you everything I learned. Better yet, I will ensure when I speak with him you are there as a chaperone.” Mama grinned.

“You have considered everything.” In truth, Elizabeth felt impressed. Sighing, she said, “I do not know if I can trust him.”

“If you are still fixated on that situation with Mr. Wickham, I urge you to apply the same standard of judgment to both. One does not deserve all the censure whilst the other receives none.” Mama raised an eyebrow and waited for her to respond.

Elizabeth groaned. “I confess to some surprise, hearing that from you. Just two weeks ago, you lauded our red coats and declared that you once favored Colonel Millar.”

Mama chuckled. “And I have since seen the error of my ways. I am a silly woman, Elizabeth, but I am not completely devoid of sense. Anything that will threaten the happiness of my girls will not be permitted in my house.”

She tried once more to convince her mother to desist. “He is so proud and arrogant. Oh, Mama, must I allow this?”

“After the last few times in his company, I am inclined to like him. Do as I say—judge him by the same rule you use for Mr. Wickham. Allow for human error and the ability to correct wrongs. And if you decide you could like him...” she trailed off.

Sighing, Elizabeth nodded. “If I find I could like him, I will give you leave to befriend him. For now, maintain distance. It would not do for Mr. Darcy to fall in love with a married woman.”

Yawning, Mama stood. “I miss my bed,” she said regretfully, casting her gaze to the large, comfortable piece of furniture.

“It is definitely a benefit of being you,” Elizabeth confirmed. “I should say that such a great big bed is necessary, given your aches and pains.”

“Very true. I should hate to sleep in your bed whilst I am me. Other ladies do not seem to have the same trouble I have. It makes me wonder what is the matter with

me! Your father is older, of course, so he has some excuse for his pains.” They laughed together, and Elizabeth again relished the closeness they now shared. And it had taken such an event to bring it about.

“Goodnight, Mama,” she said, kissing her mother’s cheek. Or her cheek. Which was it? Mama hugged her and crept off to bed, leaving Elizabeth to ponder the idea of marrying Mr. Darcy.

He was an arrogant man, full of himself, even bragging about his pride being in good regulation. After his insult, she had resolved to have nothing to do with the man, yet he appeared at Longbourn almost daily.

He doubtlessly wishes to prevent Bingley from proposing. She stopped the bitter thoughts from going forward and considered each visit since Mr. Bingley had returned to Netherfield Park. Mr. Darcy typically found her—or Mama, as it was—and spent the entire visit speaking only with her. He ignored Mr. Bingley and Jane, leaving them to their conversation. Surely, if he wished to separate them, he would attempt to insert himself into their discussion.

I shall have to watch tomorrow, Elizabeth resolved. She wanted to see if she agreed with her mother’s assessment. If Mr. Darcy watched her—or who he thought was Elizabeth—in the way Mama described, she would be shocked. She would also be compelled to revise her opinion of his behavior.

The next morning, Elizabeth rose and dressed for her walk. She knew Mama still walked, though she did not rise as early as her daughter liked. It mattered not. It was not only her body that needed exercise. Elizabeth’s mind needed it desperately. With everything strange happening in her life now, the walks were even more important. The activity helped her to weather this storm and aided her in being happy.

“Up early again, Mrs. Bennet?” Her father stepped out of his study. “Whatever you

are up to, it will not work.”

“I do not know what you mean.” She tried to move past him, but he stepped in the way.

“Fanny, you are not yourself. Or you are yourself. I cannot tell. The woman I married is here and the strange changeling who possessed her body these last nineteen years has been banished. I know not what to make of it!” He reached for her hand, but stopped. “I cannot help but be suspicious.”

“Is it so difficult to believe I can change?” She asked it softly, hoping he would respond kindly.

“Yes,” he snapped. “One does not throw off almost twenty years of behavior in two weeks! Where are the hysterics? Where are the inappropriate comments and the demands? Why, I have scarcely heard from you in days! We see each other at meals, and you leave me undisturbed in my study. If you are attempting to get me to let down my guard, you will fail.”

Elizabeth bristled. “Whatever I choose to do with my day and in raising our girls is my choice. I believe you made it clear they were my responsibility.”

“Ah, there it is! Mr. Bingley’s almost defection worried you, did it? Tell me—who pointed out your behavior, and that of our girls, was likely to blame?”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” She threw her hands in the air. “I have, as you say, made no effort for years, and when I do, you have some objection! Why? Because our household is no longer a source of amusement? Stop hiding in your study and take an eager interest in your family!” She took in a deep breath. “More people besides Lizzy deserve your attention.”

He scoffed. "None of them are intelligent enough to warrant it. They take after their mother. And you have taken my Lizzy, too. She spends most of her time with you. I heard you both last night, visiting in the mistress's chambers."

Stung, she took another step back. "I believe I liked it better when you ignored me," she said dismally. Turning, she walked briskly out the door and out into the chilly morning air.

Heavens, I forgot I am not my mama, she thought. Am I losing myself? Will Lizzy Bennet fade away and become Mrs. Bennet forever? The thought terrified her and pushed her to walk as quickly as she could. She climbed Oakham Mount, and though she breathed heavily, she made it. These last days of walking had strengthened her mother's body so she could make the journey.

As she reached the top, her fatigue and her emotions overtook her. She stumbled to a boulder partially buried in the ground and collapsed upon it, weeping bitterly. Head bowed and shoulders hunched, she wept for her mother, her father, and herself. Oh, what a tangled web we weave if we practice to deceive, she thought. That was what she and Mama did. They lied to everyone every day, but they did not have any other choice.

"Madam, are you well?"

The voice startled her, and she whirled around. "Mr. Darcy!" she cried. "Oh, you startled me, sir."

He did not smile. Indeed, his face held no expression. "Forgive me," he said solemnly. "I confess I did not expect to find anyone here this early."

She wiped at her eyes, leaving tear stains on her gloves. "I needed the air today," she said quietly.

“May I escort you back to Longbourn?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “You are very kind, but I am well. I shall just rest here and then return home in an hour.” Tears threatened again, and she buried her face in her hands. Blast my mother’s foreign emotions. She could not stop the tears now that they had started.

“I do not want my daughters to marry for anything but love!” she cried impulsively. “I could ask none of them to bear being so ill-used. Cruel, unfeeling man!” Her father. Oh, she loved him dearly, but she saw clearly now that he did not treat his wife as he ought. Her disclosures might be highly inappropriate, but mayhap they would do some good. Mr. Darcy would know that Mrs. Bennet was not a fortune hunting matchmaking mama.

“My sis—my Jane is a good girl. She and Lizzy have always said they would marry only for the deepest affection. I cannot blame them, not after witnessing their own parents’ discord.” She glanced up. Mr. Darcy stood quietly, gazing out over the fields.

“It is hardly my business, madam,” he said stiffly.

“I know. And I am very sorry to burden you this morning. Pray, forgive me.” She stood. “I hope you find happiness, Mr. Darcy.” She turned and walked away, leaving him alone on the hilltop, her plans to remain for an hour discarded. Whether her words and actions had aided or hindered Jane, she did not know.

Another thought came as she walked back home. He had listened. Not once had he interrupted or tried to diminish her pain with trite words. If he judged her for her sorrow, he had not revealed it. As Mr. Darcy had gazed across the field, she thought she saw something more in his expression. Understanding, she thought. He understood something of her sorrow.

It warmed her heart. When the Netherfield party called later, she had no doubt he would pretend that nothing had occurred. She would do likewise, of course.



### Chapter Thirteen

December 10, 1811 Longbourn Fanny

Five more days had passed since she and Lizzy had spoken late at night. Their daily tasks occupied them, forcing them to converse only after everyone else went to bed. Elizabeth seemed subdued much of the time, and Fanny noticed she avoided Mr. Bennet with more purpose. When she asked her daughter for an explanation, Lizzy confessed it all.

“I have never felt as though I am losing myself,” she told her daughter. “This situation forces you into a more trying role than me.” Fanny’s attempts at comfort were not very successful, unfortunately.

She worried about how Elizabeth’s actions would affect her future when she once again became Mrs. Bennet. Would her husband treat her worse? She had not the wit to spar with him as her daughter did! Determined not to think on it until necessary, Fanny threw herself into learning everything she could about Mr. Darcy. He also questioned her, forcing her to be creative in her replies. She would tell stories about Elizabeth, things she had done as a child, all the while pretending to be her second daughter. And though Mr. Darcy did not touch Fanny’s heart, Elizabeth secretly listened to their conversations, and her interest grew.

In the evenings before she retired, she would compile a list of questions for her mother to present to the gentleman. Mr. Darcy did not seem to mind that Fanny read from a list. Indeed, it seemed to please him she put so much effort into their conversation. It reminded Fanny very much of her own courtship. She missed the Mr.

Bennet who had wooed her so carefully. She longed for the man who gave her flowers for no other reason than because the sun was shining. And for the first time in many years, she wished to understand how to earn his regard again. Now was not the time to dwell, though. There was entertainment aplenty tonight!

“Good evening, Charlotte!” Fanny walked over to Miss Lucas, though she wished to skip. Mr. Bingley had proposed to Jane, and both now accepted the well wishes of their neighbors. Sir William happily announced the engagement at his party, beaming with pride as if Jane were his daughter. Yes, today had been a marvelous day!

“Good evening, Eliza.” Charlotte squeezed her hand. “I am very pleased for Jane!”

“We all are. I believe she took your advice seriously and showed Mr. Bingley the depth of her feelings.” Fanny could see the wisdom in showing more than one felt. Charlotte had said something about it on a call a week ago.

Charlotte sighed. “Whatever will you do when both Jane and I are gone from Meryton?” she teased.

Fanny frowned. “I suppose I shall miss you both dreadfully, though Jane will stay at Netherfield, at least until the lease ends next year.”

“If they last that long. Your mother will certainly call every day and drive them to distraction.”

Charlotte sounded very serious. What is wrong with that? Fanny wondered. She turned an inquiring gaze on Miss Lucas. “Do you think so?” she asked, hoping her questions were not so contrary to what Elizabeth might say so as to raise suspicions.

“Oh, I do! Your mother is altered, but she will surely be overjoyed to visit her eldest in her fashionable home as often as possible. I do not envy Jane! I shall at least be far

enough away to prevent frequent calls.”

Fanny fell silent, considering Charlotte’s words. She would have called every day. Indeed, she already planned to, even if she remained trapped in Lizzy’s body. Was it so wrong? How many calls a week were too excessive? What about dining? Would it be proper to have Bingley and Jane to dine thrice a week? I shall have to ask Lizzy, she resolved.

“Have you heard the tales the servants are carrying?” Charlotte continued, not having noticed Fanny’s confusion. “Mama’s maid, Nora—her sister works in the kitchens at Netherfield Park. She reports that Miss Bingley dismissed all the extra staff without paying them a penny!”

“No!” Even Fanny knew that was in poor taste.

“Yes. And then, less than three days later, Mrs. Nichols received notice that Mr. Bingley would be returning. However, he has made it right. The staff were told to expect something extra in their Christmas box.”

Fanny sighed in admiration. “Jane is marrying a wonderful man,” she said satisfactorily. “I am very pleased for her.”

“She is, indeed. It is a very good thing he returned. We all feared he would not.”

“Jane would have been distraught,” Fanny agreed. “I did not believe Miss Bingley’s note for a moment! Spiteful woman.”

Charlotte chuckled. “What about you and Mr. Darcy?” she asked. “I urge you, Lizzy, to think long and hard before dismissing him out of hand. He has twice the consequence of Mr. Bingley and he shows you a marked interest.”

Fanny smiled. So, Charlotte saw it, too. Perhaps this will make Lizzy see! “I promise I will do nothing foolish,” she said. “At the very least, I shall take your advice and think before I decide.”

“Really?” Charlotte looked surprised. “I thought you would protest at least a little! What has come over the residents of Longbourn?” The lady looked baffled as she gazed inquiringly at Fanny.

She felt panicked. “What do you mean?” she asked, cognizant of how her voice pitched up in anxiety.

“Fear not, dear friend. I only meant to comment on your mother’s new resolve. No Lydia again tonight? And Kitty is so well behaved! She has not drifted to the officers once! Mary’s playing has improved, too!”

Fanny breathed a sigh of relief. “Lydia is no longer out,” she said. “She tested my—Mama’s resolve and is now exiled to the nursery. The peace at home is unprecedented. And Mrs. Bates instructs Mary.” She hoped Charlotte would not note her hesitation. She also did not mention how Elizabeth, posing as Mrs. Bennet, had threatened Kitty with Lydia’s punishment if she strayed even a little close to the officers. Fearful of being locked in the nursery with an unruly and petulant younger sister, Kitty had promised to behave.

“And Mr. Bennet? Is he not in attendance?”

Fanny grimaced. Elizabeth had asked Mr. Bennet if he wished to come, but he had replied that evenings of frivolity happened far too often in December and he would stay at home for the night. “He is unwell,” she replied. Mr. Bennet had taken to spending even more hours locked in his study, such was his discontent. Fanny suspected he knew something was not quite right, and it bothered him because he could not name it.

Charlotte's mother called her away, leaving Fanny standing alone, with a glass of punch in her hand.

"Refreshments, Miss Elizabeth?" Mr. Darcy appeared at her side holding a plate with two apple tarts. She hummed in pleasure. Lucas Lodge's cook made the best apple tarts!

"I thank you, sir," she said, selecting one and taking a dainty bite. "Apple tarts are my— one of my favorites." Pleased to have caught herself before making an error, she smiled at him. "Lemon is the best, though." Lemon was Lizzy's favorite.

"I believe I agree with your assessment. I find apple to be best in the autumn and winter. Lemon tarts are perfect for a summer afternoon." He smiled charmingly, and Fanny replied in kind.

"Do you prefer tarts or cakes?" she asked next, preparing to mentally record his words to tell Lizzy later.

"I do not know if I can choose one over the other. Like my preference for apple in the autumn and lemon in the summer, I prefer cakes for tea and biscuits with chocolate."

Fanny nodded. "That is sensible."

They continued speaking for half an hour, perhaps a little more, before Elizabeth beckoned to her across the room. "My mother has need of me," she said, hoping she appeared regretful. In truth, pretending to be Lizzy was exhausting! She knew her daughter's preferences, but Fanny lived in fear that she would say something wrong, destroying all chances Elizabeth had at winning Mr. Darcy's regard. This was certainly an odd way to conduct a courtship!

Elizabeth

Elizabeth walked around the room, greeting the matrons her mother spoke with regularly. Mrs. Long kept her by her side for half an hour, regaling her about her son's latest accomplishments at university. When she could break away, her attention was almost immediately seized by Lady Lucas. Her hostess sat with Mrs. Goulding and Mrs. Nielson, two of the foremost gossips in the neighborhood.

She felt relieved that her Aunt Phillips was not in attendance. Elizabeth did not think she could keep the truth from her mother's closest sister. Aunt and Uncle Phillips had lately come down with a cold and were not well enough for a night of revelry.

"Mrs. Bennet! How very fortunate your family is! Dear Jane deserves nothing less than the best. After all, you have often said she could not be so beautiful for nothing." Mrs. Goulding grinned, and Elizabeth thought she could see bitterness and jealousy behind her eyes. Mrs. Goulding had a daughter, Mildred, who at twenty-four years of age had not yet married. She currently lived with her elder sister in London, in hopes that she would find a husband there.

She smiled pleasantly, masking her irritation. "Yes, Jane and Mr. Bingley are well-suited. And so very much in love! I am very happy."

Mrs. Goulding's smile widened. "I heard tell that Mary King has inherited ten thousand pounds," she continued.

"There goes any chances for our girls!" Mrs. Martha Norris joined the conversation. "A dowry like that will draw every man in the county! Though I have heard Mr. Wickham pays her a great deal of attention."

"Does it not worry you, Mrs. Bennet, that Mr. Bingley might abandon your daughter? Such a sum is a considerable attraction." Mrs. Goulding looked very pleased with herself, and Elizabeth wondered how long she had spent crafting that argument in her mind.

“No amount of money can take the place of love, Mrs. Goulding,” she said evenly. She turned to her hostess. “Lady Lucas, have you set a date for the wedding? We are so looking forward to welcoming Charlotte into our family!”

Mrs. Goulding did not look pleased that the topic of conversation had changed.

“Oh, I think January,” Lady Lucas replied. “Mr. Collins will need to finish with his responsibilities until Twelfth Night, before Lady Catherine can spare him.”

“I find it difficult to believe you, Mrs. Bennet, let an eligible man slip through your grasp.” Mrs. Goulding’s pouting irritated Elizabeth.

“The happiness of my girls is paramount,” she said stiffly. “Mr. Collins and Charlotte suit each other wonderfully, and will do very well as husband and wife.”

“Yes, it has all worked out nicely for you! I am certain losing your husband’s heir is no trouble now that you have secured a wealthier alternative. Only I must ask what you would have done if Mr. Bingley had not returned. I heard a tale that Netherfield Park was closed up! And then Mr. Bingley miraculously came back. You almost lost that prize, my dear friend. It is clear his family does not approve! His sisters remain in London, or so I have been told.”

“I would not say it is so,” Elizabeth said, feigning little concern. “I understand that Miss Bingley and the Hursts prefer London in the winter and so returned to town. His aunt keeps house for him now. Mrs. Emma Bingley is a dear woman.” She looked fondly across the room at the elderly lady. She sat in a chair with others of a like age, speaking and waving her hands simultaneously. Her captive audience looked to be enjoying the conversation.

She turned back to Mrs. Goulding and smiled serenely. “If Mr. Bingley is worthy of the title of gentleman, then he will allow no one to persuade him away from his

inclination. He clearly overcame any concerns he may have felt regarding my daughter, for they are now engaged and the wedding articles are being prepared.”

Quite finished with the conversation, she once again asked Lady Lucas about her plans for Charlotte’s wedding, allowing her to detail everything. Elizabeth listened with half an ear, her focus looking around for her daughters— sisters. She really must remember the difference!

Mary played the piano with John Lucas, Sir William’s heir, at her side. He turned the pages carefully, leaning a little too close for Elizabeth’s comfort. Mary blushed prettily, and she thought she saw genuine admiration in John’s expression as he gazed at the third and most forgotten Bennet sister.

Kitty spoke quietly with Maria Lucas, both seated far away from the officers. Good, Elizabeth thought. I am pleased she is behaving herself.

Mama spoke with Mr. Darcy, keeping a proper distance between them as they had agreed. Elizabeth contemplated the gentleman. Everything her mother told her painted him as an honorable man, dedicated to taking care of everyone he loved. Her heart did not beat faster when he was near, but she found she liked what she learned of him. If she ever returned to her body, she would not be averse to knowing him better. When, she reminded herself. Not if. It is when I return to my body.

Still, a way to change back alluded her. Mama had no better ideas, either. They both felt their attempts to fix their problems with each other had been successful. Mr. Bennet still acted as he always had, and Elizabeth had a niggling suspicion that his behavior was the key to the entire thing. Yet, he was as stubborn as his second daughter and would not yield to change easily.

Elizabeth reflected on all she had learned from listening to Mr. Darcy’s conversations with her mother. She had misjudged him—she knew that now. He was an estimable



man—honorable and kind. His manner had softened since he began to call at Longbourn. Though he spoke to her mother, she imagined it was she to whom he directed his remarks. She would relive the conversations each night as she closed her eyes, picturing it as though she were in her mother's seat, sitting across from him. Mama was right. He is not objectionable.

Lifting a finger to signal her mother, Elizabeth excused herself from the gossip circle. Lady Lucas she had no issue being around. She had no ill intent and was a true friend. But Mrs. Goulding! No, Elizabeth had taken her fill of the lady and her mean-spirited comments.

Mama came to her side immediately. "Have you seen Jane and Mr. Bingley?" Elizabeth asked.

Mama frowned. "I have not seen them for over half an hour," she said slowly. A slow grin spread across her face. "Oh, naughty Jane! I never would have imagined her to sneak off!"

Elizabeth shook her head. "Never mind that! We need to find them. Go quickly and discreetly, if you will. See if you can discover where they have hidden themselves before someone else notices they are missing."

Mama went immediately, moving through the crowded room with ease. Elizabeth enjoyed being taller, for it allowed her to see across the parlor, but she also missed her body. She missed being herself. Suppressing a sigh, she moved toward the refreshment table for a glass of punch. As she drank, she wished it contained something a little stronger.

### Chapter Fourteen

December 10, 1811 Longbourn Mr. Bennet

Mr. Bennet watched the carriage drive away, regret filling his heart. Oh, how his soul ached. He was so tired! Tired of fighting with his wife, tired of feeling as if he were no longer wanted or needed in his own home.

Fanny had barred her door against him long ago. He could not blame her, really. How dreadfully he had treated her since Mary's birth! Thomas did not know why he had acted as he did. His wife's behavior had at first concerned him, then frightened him. Doctors told him she would improve, but she never did. Instead, she began spending money on lavish clothes, parading before him and begging for compliments. In truth, he detested her new attire. It hid her handsome figure and made her look like a decorated pastry or cake. His wife did not need adornment to look lovely. As the years plodded on, he retreated into his books. When he spoke to his wife, it was to disparage and mock. She had never been very intelligent, and he got a wicked sort of pleasure out of subtly insulting her.

Yes, it was wrong! He knew that. He had vowed to love and cherish her and he had failed miserably at that these last fifteen years and more. But though his wife was still alive, she had been dead to him for a long time.

Thomas thought he could be content with his life. He had his Lizzy, a bright, precocious child with a zest for life and a quick mind. He had trained her in his likeness, lavishing her with attention and teaching her everything he would have a son. It was easier to spend time with Lizzy. Out of all his children, she looked least

like his wife and reminded him less of what he lost.

His other girls he held at arm's length. Jane behaved properly, but she looked most like Fanny. It would be difficult to tolerate her at all if not for her serene disposition. Jane's influence permeated the house. She alone could calm her mother when she had a fit of nerves. And even Lydia sometimes listened to her eldest sister.

Yes, the status quo had been established. Or so he thought. After the Netherfield Ball, everything had changed. Overnight, Mrs. Bennet had emerged from whatever madness had held her bound for almost two decades. She came down to breakfast in a lovely blue gown, trimmed with just a little ribbon. Her figure on full display, his eyes had been drawn to her instantly. The manic look in her eyes was gone, and though she looked a little tired, she moved with grace rather than in jerky, nervous movements. He had discounted it as a fluke, of course. How could he do anything but? Too often he had hoped only to be disappointed. So, instead of complimenting his wife, he insulted her.

Sighing, he turned away from the window. The carriage was long out of sight, and he grew cold standing there. Thomas went to his decanter and poured a measure of amber liquid. He took the glass to the chair by the fire and sat, losing himself in the last few weeks again.

Stranger than his wife's abrupt personality change was his daughter's. His Lizzy no longer came to his study. She began to sit nearer to her mother at the table and did not come to borrow books anymore. Instead of joining in his humor, she had pointed out his tactics to his wife. Traitor, he had thought that day.

Though he rarely saw his wife outside of meals and a few hours in the parlor in the evening, she always came to him with household needs. More money! More food! More gowns for the girls! And then it had stopped. He suspected she thought he had not noticed the simpler meals and the replacement of his beeswax candles with tallow

ones. These were areas where Mrs. Bennet never economized. And now she was! Why? he wondered.

Each little change irritated him more. He began to fight with his wife deliberately, if only so she would speak with him. He hated it and loved it. And she was so tempting! Her new attire drew him in, made him want to hold her as she had not allowed in years.

“Stuff and nonsense!” he blustered aloud. She was the same as ever, and he would not fall for whatever scheme she sought to enact. Oh, yes, he could see it now. She would lure him in, beguile him, and then ask for fifty pounds. “Never.” Goodness, she even had him speaking to himself!

That evening, he had been fully prepared to go to Lucas Lodge. He had his clothing laid out, ready for his man to help him dress. As he walked upstairs, delaying until the last moment, Fanny came out of her chambers. She wore a red gown with fitted sleeves and a lower waistline than was fashionable. A gold ribbon adorned her waist, and her maid had woven a matching one into her hair. White gloves hung from her hands, and as she turned, he could see the pearl earrings he had given her for their first anniversary hanging from her ears.

“Dressing to impress, Mrs. Bennet?” he asked snidely, instantly regretting his words when her expression grew still and cold.

“I cannot imagine who you would think I have to impress,” she said stiffly. “I certainly do not have your regard. Pray, were you planning to come to Sir William’s soiree or not?”

“Would it please you if I remained?” he asked, answering her question with one of his own. “I cannot think why else you would undergo such a drastic change except to please another man!”

“How dare you!” Fanny swung her gloves at him, slapping him across the cheek. “If I were a man, I would call you out! Between the two of us, Mr. Bennet, who has kept their marriage vows?” She turned and stormed away, leaving him alone outside his chamber door.

Furious at himself and wondering if he had gone mad to attack his wife in that manner, he went into his room and shut the door. Hill came once asking if he was to accompany his family, and he declined.

He crept out of his room and to his study, waiting until the door closed behind his family to come into the hallway. A million regrets poured through him and he did not know what to do.

I should apologize when she gets home, he thought. But he had never been very good at admitting when he was in error. There is no time like the present to learn. He would do it. Fanny deserved better. He only wished he knew how to give it to her. Change comes from within, but he did not know if he had the desire or fortitude to alter his behavior.

He could not say how many hours passed before he heard the carriage approaching. He did not move, content to allow his family to come inside and remove their things before emerging from his sanctuary. When all was quiet outside his door, he stepped out of his study and almost collided with his wife.

“I beg your pardon,” she said stonily.

“I need to speak with you, Fanny,” he said. She nodded and brushed past him, going into his study and standing near his desk.

“No point in allowing the entire house to hear our quarrel,” she said after he had followed her and shut the door.

“What makes you think we will argue?” he asked.

“That is all we ever do these last few weeks, sir,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

She actually rolled her eyes at me! he thought, shocked. “I only wished to...” he trailed off, clearing his throat. She looked at him, a speculative expression on her face. Frowning, he continued. “I wished to ask how the evening went. Did Sir William enjoy announcing Jane’s engagement?”

The disappointment on her face was too much to bear. “Well?” he snapped when she did not reply instantly. She always replied quickly, eager to tell him about her night.

“The evening passed tolerably well until I returned to Longbourn,” she replied. “Goodnight, sir.” She turned to go away, and he reached out and grabbed her arm.

“I did not excuse you!” he cried, desperately wishing he could keep her here and speak about everything that was in his heart. His stubbornness stole his words, giving him only bitter ramblings. “I wish to know how the evening went. What lace did Lady Lucas wear? Did Mrs. Goulding gossip about her uncle and his new wife again? Blast it, woman! Tell me this instant!”

She did not move, did not try to remove her arm from his grip. “Why do you wish to know, sir?” she asked woodenly. “Always you have complained about lace, begging me to speak no more of it. Yet, when I abide by your strictures, I am censured. Tell me, Mr. Bennet, how am I to act?”

“Act like my wife!”

She shook her head. “I pray you will someday see,” she said. Carefully, she freed her arm and left the room, leaving him alone once more.

Thomas wished to cry out, such was his agony. He fell to his knees. “Lord,” he prayed, “what is wrong with me?” A strange vibration began beneath his hands, which rested on the floor. The thunder grew louder and louder, forcing him to cover his ears. And then, as abruptly as it started, everything stopped, and all was quiet again.

Shakily, he stood. Thunder in the winter was not common in England, but it happened occasionally. Wobbling a little, he stumbled from his study. He felt ill. Thomas tripped a little on the stairs as he made his way to his chambers, falling into his bed without even summoning his man to help him change. Sleep was infinitely preferable to wakefulness now, and he welcomed it.

Something felt different the next morning. Thomas rolled over in his bed, reaching for his spectacles. His hand brushed something unfamiliar, and he opened his eyes. Blinking to clear his vision, he pushed himself into a sitting position. Immediately, he panicked. Nothing was as it ought to be. The damask curtains that hung around the bed ought to be red, not dark green. The table where he put his spectacles should be round! And his pillows... there were far too many.

Where am I? he thought, looking around. Absently, he ran a hand over his head, stopping when, instead of a receding hairline, he touched soft locks. Curls, if he had a guess. Am I dreaming? He pinched himself. No, definitely not dreaming. He looked down and gasped. My hands! They were attached to him, yet they belonged to someone else. Strong with black hair on the back instead of gray.

Truly confused now, he stumbled out of bed and looked around the room for a mirror. One hung near a washbasin and he made his way there, cursing as his toe struck a footstool. It is too dark, he thought, detouring to the window to open the drapes. Once he had light, he went to the mirror.

It was all he could do not to scream. Mr. Darcy stared back at him. Aghast, he

reached up and touched his face. The stubble felt real, and his reflection copied his movements.

“What devilry is this?” he said. Mr. Darcy’s reflection spoke his words.

No, no, no, what happened? The last thing he remembered was arguing with his wife and then stumbling into his bed. Then this!

I have to get home, he thought. Nothing else mattered. If I am home, I can put this to rights. Determined to be off at once, he rifled through Mr. Darcy’s clothing, looking for something that he could put on himself. All the coats were too tight, so he settled on a lawn shirt, a cravat, trousers, and a waistcoat. He pulled on hessian boots and then searched for a hat and gloves. He would need them to ward off the chill.

“Darcy’s great coat is likely in the closet near the entrance,” he muttered.

“Sir?” a voice came from behind him, startling Mr. Bennet. He whirled around.

“Yes?” he asked, hoping he sounded uncaring.

“You have misbuttoned your waistcoat.” Thomas stood, mortified, as the man stepped forward and assisted. This must be Darcy’s valet, he thought.

Clearing his throat, he said, “I wish to go on a walk. Fetch my things, please.”

“Yes, sir.” The servant obeyed without complaint. How very novel.

Minutes later, Thomas walked briskly across the lawn. He had no wish to call for a horse. If— when— he figured this nonsense out, he had no wish for that dour, haughty man to accuse him of stealing. He would make his way across the fields and over Oakham Mount. It was the fastest way home.



As he crested the summit, he saw a figure picking her way across some fallen branches. He recognized the lady as his daughter Lizzy and rushed forward.

“I am very glad to see you this morning!” he cried, relieved.

She looked at him quizzically. “Are you well, sir? You look as though you have had a fright.”

“I am not myself, Elizabeth,” he said. “Come, you must take me home. Your mother will help.”

Lizzy took a step back, the fear in her eyes making him pause. “I am afraid my mother is not ready for callers, sir,” she replied, her voice wavering.

“Oh, stop being missish, child!” He stepped forward, hoping to embrace her. He needed his dearest daughter. She would comfort him in his confusion. “Come to me at once or I shall leave my books to another.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Books?” she repeated. “What books? I have heard tales of Pemberley’s library, though I have no interest in its dusty tomes if it comes with a madman.”

“I mean my books, Elizabeth! Poppet, please! I do not know what to do!” She thought him mad, certainly. Oh, what would he do if she ran away and did not listen?

Elizabeth’s face lost all color. “Impossible!” she cried. Immediately, she began laughing, doubling over and clutching her stomach. “Oh, this is too unbelievable! Lizzy will be vastly amused!” Tears streamed down her face as she straightened, and she reached into her pocket for a handkerchief. “You, too, Thomas? Well, well, well.”

He gaped at her. “Fanny?” he choked. “Wh-what has happened?”

“Providence appears to have punished you, as it punished Lizzy and me. Our daughter has been Mrs. Bennet since the 27th of November. And I, dear husband, have been your favorite child.”

Suddenly, everything made sense. Fanny’s changed behavior, her clothing, Lydia being locked away, a governess. “Elizabeth is... you! I ought to have known. You would never have sent Lydia back to the schoolroom. Nor would you have dressed so elegantly.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I will have you know I have approved the changes Lizzy has made. She respects my position as mistress of Longbourn.”

“I shall believe it when I have heard it from her.” Suddenly, his heart sank. He had directed all his cruelty for his wife at Elizabeth. “Oh dear,” he said softly.

Elizabeth—Fanny—frowned. “I see you have realized just how badly you have wounded her,” she said softly, though without sympathy. “I held her as she cried last night. Goodness, she is not your wife and your words hurt her more than they do me! I steeled myself against your barbs long ago.”

“I did not know!” he cried.

“Does that excuse your behavior?” She shook her head. His shame compounded, for it felt as though Elizabeth were disappointed in him—not his wife. When did my daughter’s good opinion start to hold more value than Fanny’s? he wondered. He had much to atone for.

Fanny gasped. “If you are Mr. Darcy,” she said, trailing off. “Oh, we must go to Longbourn at once!” She whirled away and began running down the hill.

“Fanny!” he cried. “Wait! Why are you running?”

“If you are here,” she said, panting, “Mr. Darcy is in your chambers. Elizabeth is in the connecting room!”

Horried, Mr. Bennet began to run, easily catching up to his wife. “Bless Mr. Darcy’s long legs,” he muttered as he went.

“Let us hope the rest of the house still sleeps,” his wife replied.

### Chapter Fifteen

December 11, 1811 Longbourn Darcy

Darcy moaned and stretched. Never had he felt so stiff, not even when Horace had thrown him. That great beast had refused to jump the fence. Father declared it a miracle that Darcy had not been killed.

He opened his eyes slowly, blinking to clear his vision. Yet, it did not clear. Everything remained blurry. He rubbed a hand over his face and into his hair. Freezing as he touched skin instead of curls, he brought his hand down in front of his face. Gray hair adorned the back of his knuckles. Spots and blue veins covered the back of his hand.

“What in the world?” He tried to swing his legs off the side of the bed, only to find they did not move as easily. Darcy squinted and spotted a pair of spectacles on a table next to one of the four posts. He donned them, wondering if they might help, and felt pleased when they did. His vision cleared, and he examined the surrounding chamber.

Red bed curtains replaced his green ones. A writing table sat near a window and a door graced the far wall. Standing, he groaned. Something was definitely not right. He walked slowly to the washstand, hoping the movement would loosen his muscles. Before he stooped to splash his face, he looked in the mirror. Gasping, he stumbled back, his hand clutching his heart. Slowly, he came forward, touching his nose, his head, his cheeks... Somehow he had become Mr. Bennet overnight!

“I am dreaming,” he said aloud. “This is a dream!” But no matter how hard he hit

himself or pinched himself, nothing changed. He was still Mr. Bennet, dressed in a wrinkled shirt with a loose cravat and unbuttoned waistcoat.

Hearing a noise from behind the closed door, he moved there directly, throwing it open, hoping to see someone who could help him.

Mrs. Bennet shrieked, whirling to face him. Her robe she hastily tied shut.

“I beg your pardon, madam,” he said, bowing and backing from the room. Before he could close the door, another opened and Elizabeth rushed in.

“Lizzy!” she cried, “Oh, you will never guess!”

Lizzy? But...

“Elizabeth,” Mrs. Bennet said pointedly, nodding toward the door.

Elizabeth turned and looked. “That is what I came to tell you. That is Mr. Darcy!”

Mrs. Bennet turned and looked at him in surprise before turning back to her daughter. “And how long has he been Mr. Darcy?” she asked evenly.

“Since this morning.” He stepped into the room. “I woke up here. Like this. Mrs. Bennet, Elizabeth, what has happened?” They appeared to know more than he did.

“It would seem, Mr. Darcy, that we have switched places.”

Another entered the room and Darcy gasped in shock again. He , or rather his body, closed the door tightly. “Shall we sort out this mess?” the man wearing Darcy’s appearance asked.

They agreed that once Mrs. Bennet... or whoever she was, was presentable that they would meet in the woods. "There is a cottage there, abandoned," Mrs. Bennet said. "I used to walk there often. We will not be disturbed."

And so Darcy returned to Mr. Bennet's chambers and called for his man. He was older than Darcy's valet and not nearly as gifted. With a simply tied cravat and an ill-fitting coat, Mr. Darcy emerged, anxious for answers.

Elizabeth joined him in the hall. "Good morning, Papa ," she said, smirking.

"You look very much like Miss Lydia when you do that," he teased. Oh, how he loved her! His ardor had only grown since returning to Hertfordshire. But now he wore her father's body.

The others joined them, and they left the house. No other occupants seemed to be awake, and so no one questioned them. Mrs. Bennet led the way. No one spoke. It was as if speaking would make it all feel real.

The cottage came into view, and Mrs. Bennet quickened her pace. Elizabeth followed, leaving the gentlemen behind. Once they were all inside and sitting round a table, Elizabeth spoke up.

"Well, since this mess began with us, we had best tell them everything. Lizzy, would you like to begin?"

Darcy blinked. "Who are you, madam?" he asked, confused once more.

"I am Mrs. Bennet," she replied. "Do let us explain before you judge too harshly."

The woman who looked like Mrs. Bennet was Elizabeth, then. She opened her mouth and began to weave a fantastical tale that began the night of the Netherfield Ball.

When she finished detailing the last weeks, she fell silent.

“I recall thunder last night,” Mr. Bennet said. How odd to think of him that way, looking as he did like Darcy! “And I felt positively ill afterwards.”

“My prayer seems to have been answered,” Mrs. Bennet—Elizabeth said frostily.

“Lizzy, I am very sorry...” Mr. Bennet began.

“Save it for when you mean it,” came the harsh reply. “You had no business speaking to me like that, even if you thought I was your wife! Especially since you thought I was your wife!”

Darcy cleared his throat. “So, in short, Mr. Bennet now appears to be Mr. Darcy—me. And I have taken his place. And you, madam—” he turned to who looked like Elizabeth, “—you are Mrs. Bennet. Which means the lady I thought I was courting for weeks is not Elizabeth.”

He did not know whether to laugh or to cry.

“I wished to be, sir,” Mrs. Bennet—Elizabeth—said. “Mama and I had to make the most of it. She tried her best to be me, bringing you all my questions. I sat near so I could listen. Please, do not despise me for it.” She looked desperate and apologetic.

His heart softened. How could he condemn her for a situation not of her making? This debacle was not in her control. “I shall not,” he promised. “But we must find a way to fix this!”

“We have tried,” Elizabeth’s form cried. “Lizzy and I believe that to change back, we are required to fix that which is broken. And we have done our best to repair the relationships we have with those around us. We have worked together and things

have improved...mostly.” She glanced at Mr. Darcy’s figure, glaring.

“Then how should we proceed? Mr. Bennet will need to stay at Netherfield Park. And you have said his handwriting will be mine as long as he is in my body. That means he must handle all my correspondence. I shall have to show you what to do. Pemberley is a great deal larger than Longbourn.”

“One estate is the same as another, boy,” Mr. Bennet said disdainfully. “I can manage.”

“Be that as it may, I wish to review anything you do before it is sent. I have worked hard to improve my income and will not see all my efforts destroyed because you will not ask for my help.”

“I have been managing my estate since you were in leading strings!” Mr. Bennet stood, anger pouring off him in waves.

“Enough, both of you!” Mrs. Bennet, trapped in Elizabeth’s form and looking rather fearsome—stood, the scowl on her face silencing the men. Darcy felt a little fearful of her wrath, despite the petite body she wore. Her fine eyes flashed, and she glowered. “Arguing does nothing. We learned that. It is our responsibility to work together. Mr. Darcy, you will stay at Longbourn and you will behave yourself. I shall be there, keeping an eye on you both.”

Elizabeth flushed, the expression making the face she wore—that of Mrs. Bennet—appear younger. It pleased Mr. Darcy to know he affected her even when she was not herself. But goodness, this is growing confusing!

“Mr. Bennet, you will take over Mr. Darcy’s responsibilities with his oversight until you know what he expects. That means that when Mr. Bingley comes to call, you will come, too, bringing all his letters and papers. Mr. Darcy, you will help Elizabeth



manage Longbourn. We exchanged duties weeks ago and have become rather good at our respective responsibilities. If we have a pressing need to discuss things openly, then we will meet here. Are we agreed?"

"If I—that is, Mr. Darcy, who is, in fact, me, at the moment—call on Longbourn every day, people will think he courts Elizabeth." Mr. Bennet did not sound pleased about that.

"Goodness, Thomas!" Mrs. Bennet's laughter emanating from her daughter's body sounded oddly like Elizabeth, yet there was something of the matron's vapid giggling woven into the sound. Oh, how Darcy loved hearing Elizabeth's laugh, even this altered version. "What do you think the gentleman has been doing all these weeks? I suppose you might have missed his intentions, given your seclusion in your study."

"Courting? Mr. Darcy and Lizzy? Preposterous! We all know he does not look at a lady but to see a blemish!"

Darcy felt rather offended. "I beg your pardon!" he cried. "I have the highest respect for your daughter."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Bennet makes a valid point. Out of necessity, it will appear to everyone that Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth are courting. Our neighbors will expect the courtship will lead to its natural conclusion. If there is any hesitation on either of your parts, it must be discussed now." Elizabeth put her hands on her hips and looked at them expectantly. Darcy had to remind himself once again that she was currently Mrs. Bennet.

Darcy cleared his throat. "I expect I can court Miss Elizabeth in whatever form we possess. She is still herself in all the ways that matter."

Elizabeth nodded. "Very good," her mother continued. "Now, it is Elizabeth's usual

habit to walk out in the morning. She occasionally meets Mr. Darcy—or rather, I have recently. He walks me back to Longbourn before returning to Netherfield Park. I suggest we continue that pattern. Lizzy has been walking too, whilst she has been me. Mr. Darcy, you and my daughter will return to Longbourn together as if you were on a stroll.”

“Given the current state of affairs between the master and mistress of Longbourn, I doubt any will believe that.” Elizabeth sounded very bitter and Mr. Darcy wished to comfort her. Though she wore her mother’s face and he did not know Mrs. Bennet well, the anger and sadness were apparent. What had she endured whilst her father had no idea he insulted his daughter and not his wife? He recalled finding Mrs. Bennet weeping on Oakham Mount, suddenly realizing it had been Elizabeth. His heart ached for her and the pain she carried.

“We are meant to be repairing things, dearest.” Mrs. Bennet patted her daughter’s hand soothingly. “We shall depart first. Come along, Mr. Bennet.”

Darcy watched himself get up and follow his Elizabeth out. He shook his head. “This is very odd,” he said. “I almost do not know what to call anyone.”

“Best keep it simple. Mama calls my father Mr. Bennet or sir. He calls her Mrs. Bennet or ‘my dear’.”

“I should like to use such endearments,” he confessed, reaching out and taking her hand.

“Mama told me everything,” she said again, this time more earnestly. “We did not mean to deceive you. It was she who first noted your interest in me. Oh, how she worked to convince me! And when she did, I began to care for you. I have not allowed my heart to hope, though. My feelings have undergone a material change. Yet, I cannot see a way out of this predicament.”

“I must believe a future is possible,” he replied with the same fervor. “Come, let us go back to Longbourn.”

“Will it not be difficult for you to be so exposed to my family? The dynamic has changed, given Lydia’s banishment to the nursery and Kitty no longer being out. Perhaps it will not be such a trial.”

He chuckled. “I have spent many hours in just such an attitude. The idea of being so surrounded grows on me.”

She looked pleased and accepted his hand. They left the cottage, securing the door behind them.

“Why is this not in use?” he asked. “It is a shame that it sits empty as nature overtakes it.”

“The Smiths had it,” she replied. “They moved away, and their fields were taken over by the Wilsons, one of my father’s longtime tenants. I have tried to keep the worst of nature at bay, just in case it is needed again. And it will be, for the Wilson’s oldest son has lately proposed to the baker’s daughter. They will likely approach my father and ask for it.”

“It seems a shame for you to lose your sanctuary.”

She shrugged. “I shall find another,” she replied. “As I always have.”

They walked slowly, arm in arm, carefully picking their way along the path.

“I feel as though I can know you in truth, now,” she finally said after a long silence. “It has been very frustrating not to be able to speak whilst you talked with my mother.”

“She did an admirable job of being you,” he confessed. “I could not tell the difference.”

“You will learn quickly. Mama has a few mannerisms that I do not. I shall point them out.”

Longbourn came into view and they went inside. Both proclaimed their hunger as they handed their things to a bemused Mr. Hill. They ignored the stares as they walked arm in arm to the breakfast room. Mr. Darcy held her chair out as she took a seat before going to the head of the table.

They bid each of Elizabeth’s sisters a good morning as they walked in. Mr. Bennet’s usual paper went untouched, still folded by his plate. Instead of reading, Mr. Darcy engaged in conversation with Jane, asking after her plans for the day and wondering if her betrothed would call. Then he turned to Kitty, inquiring if she wished to choose a book from his library.

Kitty’s mouth dropped open in shock and she stuttered a reply in the affirmative. Later, as she browsed the shelves, Elizabeth told him that Mr. Bennet never let the other girls into his private room. “That was an honor given only to me,” she said sadly. “Now, I avoid this room as much as possible. It is a reminder that I saw and knew nothing.”

“We will work in here,” he said comfortingly. Darcy took her hand and kissed it. “If we are meant to heal what is broken, then we must fix this room for you. It will be a happy place again, my love.”

Did I say that? Well, he would not apologize. He loved Elizabeth in whatever form she had. “Now, where are the books?”

Elizabeth plopped a stack of ledgers down. “Here they are. I know the basics, but my

father handles most of it.” He noted how bitterly she mentioned her sire and wondered again how he had wounded her.

He opened the first, reading silently. “I can already see several places where we might employ easy improvements. I shall discuss it with...” he glanced up. Kitty was across the room, far enough that she had not overheard their conversation, but it would be prudent to be cautious. “Later,” he concluded. “We can speak on that later.”

Kitty bounded up, a novel in her hand. “I have never read Gulliver’s Travels !” she cried. “Thank you, Papa!” She kissed Darcy’s cheek, and he cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“You are welcome,” he replied. Kitty ran from the room, the book clutched tightly to her chest.

“Alone at last,” he muttered.

“Oh, sir? Do you intend to press your advantage?” She smirked and winked, pulling a chair close to his and sitting down.

Darcy laughed. It sounded unfamiliar to his ears. “I meant only that we could speak freely,” he said.

Elizabeth chuckled. “I know.” Pausing, she frowned. “I confess, though I know you are not my father, it is difficult to separate what my eyes see from what my mind and heart know. The whole situation feels entirely confusing, wrong... unnatural! I fear I have been losing myself. It has been difficult, facing the fact that my father is not all he ought to be. His words were directed at my mother, but I am my mother right now. Every insult, every bit of mocking stung. It became easier to pretend I was Mama, if only to distance myself from the pain. And it helped me to stand up to him when needed.”

His heart cried out for her, protesting the injustice she had faced. “We shall resolve it in time. I swear.” He took her hand again, caressing it and kissing the back.

She sighed heavily. “Unfortunately, sir, our success likely depends on all four parties learning whatever we are meant to learn. We are well on our way, but the other two... Oh, my mother and father have many years of grievances to air. We have only a few months.”

He wrinkled his brow in confusion. “What grievances?” he asked, genuinely perplexed.

She smirked again. “I suppose I ought to ask, sir, if you find me more than tolerable, now that I have blond locks and an extra six inches of height.” She batted her eyes playfully as she rested her chin on her palm.

“Tolerable? Oh dear.” She laughed as he closed his eyes in mortification. “You heard me! Allow me to apologize. I was a pig-headed, blind fool. You are a vast deal more than tolerable, my dear. You are, in fact, the handsomest woman of my acquaintance.”

“Even as a woman of nine-and-thirty years?”

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “Your beauty transcends outward appearance.” He touched her face, hoping she could see the truth in his eyes.

Sighing, she leaned into his palm. “Oh, that was nicely done, sir. Nicely done, indeed.”

### Chapter Sixteen

December 20, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

If forced to admit it, Elizabeth would say she looked forward to a more peaceful Longbourn in her father's absence. It proved exceedingly easy to separate Mr. Darcy from his outward appearance, for he and her father were nothing alike. Mr. Darcy behaved as a proper gentleman ought, showing consideration to the staff and kindness to his 'family.'

He reserved his best behavior for her. Their disguises meant he could forsake propriety and leave her in no doubt of his feelings. He kept to Mr. Bennet's rooms as was proper, since they were not married in truth. But he held her hand in front of their 'daughters,' walked out with her with no chaperone, paid her pretty compliments, and pecked her on the cheek or her hand.

Nor was he required to leave Longbourn after some arbitrary time specified by society. They would stay up late in his study, reading, speaking of estate matters, or asking each other questions. With every day that passed, she found more to love about Mr. Darcy. He was everything a gentleman ought to be, and she knew that if—when— they returned to their bodies, she would be pleased to accept his proposals.

Elizabeth did not forget about her mother and father. Papa called with Mr. Bingley, spending fifteen exceedingly uncomfortable minutes with his 'wife' before hastening off to the study to speak with Mr. Darcy. He resisted mending things with Mrs. Bennet and his odd behavior caused more than a few strange looks. From the outside, it appeared as if Mr. Darcy were fickle. He had paid Elizabeth much attention and

now ignored her whenever he could. Darcy called him to account for his behavior.

“You will do damage to my reputation!” he scolded. “I am an honorable gentleman, especially where women are concerned. Your actions not only speak poorly of me, but leave Elizabeth open to the derision of her neighbors!”

Mr. Bennet grumbled but agreed to behave more circumspectly. He made a genuine effort to speak to his wife. “I shall pretend I do not know a thing about her,” he told Darcy. “It will make it easier to bear.”

Elizabeth joined Mr. Darcy during his meetings with Mr. Bennet. “If you are to be mistress of Pemberley, then you ought to know my business,” he said, spreading the papers out across the desk. They sorted through correspondence, separating business letters from those of a personal nature. Darcy wished to read letters from his relations privately. “I shall dictate them to Mr. Bennet,” he said. “It will preserve my privacy.”

Darcy’s active presence in the household proved a boon when Lydia, after a month’s confinement to the nursery, finally escaped. The family was all sequestered in the drawing room that afternoon. Mr. Bingley had yet to call, which meant Mr. Bennet had not arrived yet. Lydia swanned in, her hair hanging down her back and dressed in shorter skirts, acting as if nothing were amiss.

“Lydia,” Elizabeth said, standing up and preparing to act the part of her mother, “does Miss Holt know you are here?” The youngest Bennet was required to have her governess with her at all times. Since she had not left the nursery until this moment, that had never been an issue.

“La,” Lydia replied, “Mama, you are so silly! Miss Holt needed a rest and so she let me out. Goodness! Should she not have done so? You will have to let her go without reference, I suppose.”



“Your ploys will not work.” Elizabeth stepped forward and took Lydia’s arm. “Let us go back upstairs.”

Lydia protested, yanking her arm away. “You cannot make me!” she shouted. “It is nearly Christmas and I am missing all the entertainments! It is not fair! Why is Kitty allowed out?”

“Kitty is behaving.” Mr. Darcy came to Elizabeth’s side and put his hand on Lydia’s shoulder. “Come, child, back upstairs.”

Lydia gaped. “What is the matter with all of you?” she shouted. “Papa is acting strangely, as is Mama! And you all sit there as if nothing is amiss!”

“Nothing is amiss,” Mary said softly. “For the first time in what seems like forever.”

“Nobody asked you, Mary!” Lydia’s voice rose until she was shouting.

Kitty piped up. “I like how things are,” she said happily. “Papa lets me read books from his study and Mama lets me keep my own things.”

Lydia gaped at her favorite sister. Kitty had always followed her lead, and this was the ultimate betrayal. “You all hate me!” she screamed. “And I hate all of you!”

Miss Holt appeared at the door, a look of apology on her face. “She slipped out whilst I attended to my needs,” she said contritely.

“Take her upstairs,” Mr. Darcy said wearily. Miss Holt led the sobbing child away. Lydia did not struggle and her shoulders drooped dejectedly.

“Perhaps she will now make a greater effort,” Elizabeth reflected.

“We can only hope,” he replied.

The party from Netherfield arrived shortly thereafter. Mrs. Bingley quickly took a seat next to Elizabeth, rattling away about a large crate her brother-in-law had sent. “There is some lovely fabric,” she said. “Straight from his mills. It will be perfect for Jane’s wedding clothes. I thought about bringing it, but decided we ought not to risk having anything happen to it. Will you come to Netherfield Park and have a look?”

Elizabeth agreed, mentioning that they ought to have Jane approve of it before deciding. “It is her wedding, and though I would prefer a lavish affair, she likes a more subdued gathering.” Voicing Mama’s preferences came easily now, flowing from her lips as smoothly as water from a pitcher.

“I believe a walk is in order!” Mr. Bingley called. “Jane? Who shall we convince to chaperone today?”

Kitty volunteered, as did Mama. Papa demurred. “I have something to discuss with Mr. Bennet,” he said smoothly.

Elizabeth frowned, irritated that her father once again maneuvered things so that he did not need to spend time with his wife.

“Goodness, sir!” Mrs. Bingley giggled. “I cannot fathom how you can be parted from Miss Elizabeth for long. She is such a lovely girl. Why do you not come to the point already? Or perhaps that is why you wish to speak to her father?” She waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“My business with Mr. D—Bennet is my own, madam,” he replied stiffly. “And it has nothing to do with Miss Elizabeth.”

“Do not be such a cold fish, Darcy.” Mr. Bingley clapped a hand on his back. “You

have made your interest clear. Seize your happiness!”

“Thank you, Bingley.” Papa grimaced. “If you do not mind, I shall go about my business. Enjoy your stroll.” Papa rose and went to the door, waiting for Mr. Darcy to join him. When Elizabeth made to follow, her papa glared and shook his head. It would seem that I am not welcome today, she thought. I wonder what they wish to discuss.

Content to remain in the warm parlor, she spoke at length with Mrs. Bingley. A question here or there kept the conversation going until the gentlemen returned.

Darcy

He would never get used to seeing himself from this perspective. Mr. Bennet stood before the desk, shifting nervously. They had discussed Darcy’s estate business and penned correspondence, but now the gentleman looked as though he had something to say.

“Sir?” Darcy asked. “Will you not return to your seat? I sense there is something more that you wish to discuss.”

Mr. Bennet sat, rubbing his hands on his legs nervously. “I find myself in a peculiar situation, sir,” he said. “I have been master of my estate for more than twenty years and never have I shown such dedication as you display. Estate matters take up how much of your day?”

Darcy considered the question. He leaned back in his chair. “It is less during the winter,” he said finally. “Maybe two or three hours. If there is some disaster, then much more. The warmer months take more of my attention. There are repairs, the crops, my other interests... The list is long. I have a capable steward, which helps, but it is easy to take advantage of a neglectful landlord, so I try to know precisely

what goes on in my holdings.”

Mr. Bennet looked thoughtful. “I know you and Lizzy have looked over my books,” he said. “Am I being taken advantage of?”

Darcy nodded. “You have several shopkeepers charging Longbourn more than Netherfield Park for certain goods and services. It is likely because you have never bothered to renegotiate costs. I helped Bingley in this way. And your crops would yield more if you rotated them differently. Have you considered planting winter wheat?”

They spent some time deep in discussion. Darcy made a list of tasks as they went, making a note to apply the changes Mr. Bennet approved. When they were done, he put down the pen and turned to the man in front of him.

“I must ask, sir, why you persist in avoiding Mrs. Bennet.” He frowned. “I do not wish to remain in your body forever.”

Mr. Bennet sighed. “It is because I do not know how to break away from my habits,” he admitted. “I have tried what we spoke of—pretending as if we are courting. But conversation is stilted, and I cannot tell if my efforts are yielding any results.”

“If I may, sir, I would say that you are not making any effort.” Darcy grinned at the shocked look on ‘his’ face.

“How can you say that? I spend time with her daily. We engage in social niceties. I compliment her gown, her hair, her accomplishments. It has proven far easier than I imagined to see Fanny as herself, even though she looks like our daughter, but that has likely complicated things.”

Shaking his head, Darcy chuckled. “Mr. Bennet, you have been married for nearly a

quarter of a century. You are well beyond the social niceties. Even when I was still myself, I spoke of deeper things with...Elizabeth.” It had not been Elizabeth, of course, but they both knew that.

“What should I do?” Mr. Bennet looked desperate. It made Darcy hopeful that he meant to really try now.

“It is time for you to take advantage of being Mr. Darcy,” he said, sitting forward. “You have not needed my funds as of yet, but it is time. I have enough money at Netherfield for you to spoil your wife thoroughly. I want you to spend to her likes, not Elizabeth’s. Everything you do is for Mrs. Fanny Bennet, not for your daughter. Now, let us make a list of your wife’s preferences.”

Mr. Bennet’s shoulders dropped. “I hardly know them anymore,” he confessed. “She has been a stranger to me for so long.”

“Surely, there are some things that have not changed.”

He nodded. “Some things never do. That is true. Fanny loves sweets—the expensive ones from town. I do not purchase them often. And I admit that when I have in the past, I have hidden them and not shared.” He cleared his throat. “I may have even deliberately left a wrapper here and there for her to find.”

“Badly done!” Darcy frowned again, this time with more disapproval. “Why would you mock and torment her? Did it make anything better?”

“I know! I am well aware of my sins. No, it made everything worse. But in time, it became easier to tease and be cruel. It masked my hurt and confusion.” Mr. Bennet sighed heavily. “I have much to atone for. She may never forgive me. And I fear my actions have poisoned Elizabeth against me as well.”

Darcy nodded gravely. "Your behavior has deeply wounded both," he said. "I am attempting to build a relationship with your other girls as well. Kitty has been reading your books. Mary, too, though more recently. You had best remember that when you return to yourself."

Mr. Bennet nodded. They added a few more things to the list. As they finished, the gentleman perked up. "I just recalled," he said, standing, "that I have a little something in my safe." He went to a far wall and moved a picture, quickly opening the safe behind it. "I purchased it, oh, ten years ago in London." He brought out a jewelry case covered in blue velvet and opened it.

Nestled inside was a brooch that looked as though someone had made lace out of gold filigree. "It is very much to Mrs. Bennet's tastes," Darcy said approvingly.

"She loves lace. I remember thinking that it was a way for her to have the decoration without drowning herself in it."

"Why did you never give it to her?" Darcy asked.

Bennet wilted. His shoulders sagged, and he sank slowly into a chair. "I came home after being gone for a week. Mrs. Bennet had torn the sitting room to pieces, and she was in the midst of redecorating. The harvest that year had not been abundant, and I had already economized to buy her that brooch. I was furious. The argument that day was beyond anything we had yet engaged in. The brooch went into the safe, and I withdrew into myself."

Darcy nodded in understanding. "It is a good beginning," he said. "Netherfield has a hothouse. Start with flowers. And for heaven's sake, please begin speaking of consequential things!"

Mr. Bennet agreed, and he tucked the jewelry case into his pocket. It was past time to

rejoin the ladies, and they left the study together after gathering all their papers.

Elizabeth greeted him with a beaming smile. It warmed Darcy's heart. He realized for the first time that his beloved had her mother's eyes. When he looked in them, he saw past Mrs. Bennet's outward appearance to his Elizabeth within.

"Are the lovebirds still out?" he teased.

"They should be back any moment," she replied. "The tea is ready, and they will be frozen solid!"

"I am glad they are out there and not me," Darcy agreed. Mr. Bennet's body did not like the cold. Elizabeth, he knew, complained of the same thing. Both wondered if they, too, would suffer thus in twenty years.

The walkers returned a few moments later. Mr. Bennet went to his wife's side as soon as she seated herself, angling his body toward her as he had not done before. They were too far away to hear the conversation, but it looked promising.

"She looks a little surprised," Elizabeth murmured to him.

"He confided in me," he replied. "I shall have to tell you about it later."

"Hopefully, this means things will begin to progress." She patted his hand.

"Well, they ought to come to the point," Mrs. Bingley cut in. "He moons over her enough! Goodness, is he afraid she will reject him?"

Darcy and Elizabeth exchanged a look. Mr. Bennet was likely afraid of just that, and he had every reason to be. His wife had no inducement to like him at all.

### Chapter Seventeen

December 24, 1811 Longbourn Fanny

The snow crunched under her boots as she walked through the trees. It was Christmas Eve and time to decorate Longbourn for the festive season. Fanny could not remember the last time she had partaken in the activity. Her old bones protested traipsing through the trees in the midst of winter.

Her husband walked beside her, holding a basket for holly, ivy, and mistletoe. He had said little since they set out and she thought he seemed rather nervous. “There! I see some!” she cried, pointing to mistletoe hanging from a tree. She immediately began to climb on a lower branch. It was just out of reach and the obliging limb put the plant in her grasp.

“Have a care, Fanny!” Thomas’s hand came to her back, steadying her as she climbed down. “You will break your neck!”

“You mean I will break Elizabeth’s neck?” She chuckled nervously. How often she had fallen to humor to ease tension or disguise her unease! It was very like Elizabeth, and a habit she meant to keep when she became Mrs. Bennet again.

“As you like it,” he grunted. “Look, here is some holly.” They gathered silently for a time. She wondered what he was thinking. The hostility that had existed between them seemed to have gone. In the first days after Mr. Bennet and Mr. Darcy swapped bodies, he had avoided her. Then he had made a paltry effort. It was only in the last few days that her husband seemed genuinely interested in mending their broken



marriage.

He handed her a knife, which she used to cut a few pine boughs. Arms full of them, she turned and placed them on a little sledge they had found in Longbourn's stable.

"What happened to us?" he suddenly blurted. "You were so vivacious, so calm and so happy. And then with each year that passed, you grew more erratic, irritable, and...different."

Fanny paused. "I hardly know where it began," she admitted. "After Mary, I was so lost. Everything took on shades of gray and black. I could not find happiness. And then you started mocking me. I may not be intelligent enough to understand all your jokes, but I know when I am being insulted. I no longer felt your love. Instead, I received only derision, disdain, and disregard. You wish to know what changed? I felt like I had become a disappointment in your eyes, for I could not give you a son to ensure your legacy, and so I became less than nothing to you. And then I felt like little more than a vessel for begetting heirs..." she shook her head. "I turned to material things, hoping that I could attract you once again."

Thomas huffed. "If you are so concerned with the future, why do you spend as though we had the funds? You serve lavish dinners and entertain regularly. The girls do not wear second-hand gowns. You protested whenever I tried to correct behavior, claiming you knew more about raising a girl than I. I felt as though you had only married me for my estate. It was the worst sort of deception, and I resented you for it. After a time, it was easier to not try."

Whirling to face him, Fanny hit his chest with her fists. He stumbled back, the contents of his basket tumbling into the snow. "I married you because I loved you!" she cried. "I loved your quiet nature that so perfectly balanced my own more vibrant manner. And I loved listening to you talk about books even when I did not understand. I loved when you tried to teach me new things, even though I am a slow

learner. And you loved me exactly how I was, imperfect looks and all. No other man ever treated me the same way. My father thought my only use was to keep house. And as for the spending... it made me feel alive. As I said, at first, I bought new things hoping to attract your attention. I tossed aside the consequences just to feel pretty. And then the girls... well, by then there was no hope of dowries or a son. I dressed them as finely as I could to attract a man. Yet Jane, our prettiest daughter, reached two-and-twenty with no husband.”

Thomas spluttered. “Jane will marry Mr. Bingley!” he cried.

Sighing sadly, Fanny bent to pick up the scattered greenery. Her husband crouched down to help her. “It almost did not happen,” she said dismally. In quiet words, she explained everything from Miss Bingley’s letter to her own revelations. “So, you see, I was almost the cause of destroying the happiness of a most beloved daughter. Elizabeth and I have worked very hard to improve ourselves.”

“I see more of the Fanny I married now than I have in years,” he admitted. “I have hardly known where to begin—I have missed you.”

“Have you? I never would have guessed.” She sounded bitter, but she did not care. There were years of hurt pressing down upon her.

“I have much to atone for,” he said humbly. “All I ask is that you let me try. We, both of us, have made mistakes, and I admit, my sins are far greater than yours. I have until recently been determined to think I did nothing wrong, that my actions were not what damaged our relationship. But I have lately come to realize that I hold the lion’s share of the blame. I did wrong by you in so many ways, and you have every right not to forgive me. I promise you I shall go to my grave earning your forgiveness.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she turned to look at him. “How can I trust you?” she whispered. If I let myself hope—if I let down the walls I have erected around my

heart, I risk being shattered once more by your disrespect and indifference. I cannot bear it any longer, Thomas.” Fanny wiped her eyes and reached into her pocket for a handkerchief.

Thomas knelt at her feet, setting the basket aside. He took her hand and kissed it. “I solemnly promise, my dear Fanny, that I shall do everything in my power to become the husband you deserve. I shall treat you as a queen, showering you with gold and diamonds, if that is your desire.”

“I do not want gold and diamonds,” she said shyly. “I have only ever wanted you.”

“And you will have me.” Standing, he kissed her cheek.

And so, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’s second courtship began in earnest. Thanks to the Darcy fortune, Mr. Bennet was able to spoil his wife as he never had. Sweets came from London and they enjoyed them together in front of Longbourn’s fire. And though she appreciated the delectable morsels, it was the gift of his time that Fanny truly adored. He followed her around the house with an armful of greenery, handing her bits and pieces as she arranged them on the mantle, the banister, and the middle of the table.

It was with a heavy heart and more than a few regrets that her dear Thomas departed that evening. He and Mr. Bingley promised the family they would return for breakfast. Mrs. Bingley bemoaned waking early, but agreed to attend as well. Fanny stood at Longbourn’s door, watching until the Bingley carriage rounded the bend and moved out of sight.

“It is hard seeing him go,” she said to Jane.

“I understand completely,” her eldest daughter said. “Lizzy, if he proposes, we must have a double wedding as we have always planned!” Jane took her hand, excitement

spreading across her face.

Fanny had never known about that, but she liked the idea very well. Such a grand affair it would be, planning two weddings. “Yes, that sounds lovely!” she agreed. “Shall we tell Mama?” They giggled and hugged. “I am very happy for you, dear Jane!” she said fervently.

“And I feel the same for you. Who would have thought that Mr. Darcy could be an amiable and attentive man?”

“Who would have thought, indeed?” Fanny smiled. She already missed Thomas. It seemed a little foolhardy to open her heart so readily, but she could not resist. Never had she stopped loving him, and she was more than ready to return to the happiness she thought was long lost.

Yet another trait I share with Lizzy, she mused. I wish to think on the past only as its remembrance brings pleasure. I do so hate dwelling on unfortunate or depressing things.

Her late night discussions with Elizabeth had not ceased. Fanny continued them, if only to ensure her daughter and Mr. Darcy behaved themselves. She ought not to have worried—she knew him to be an honorable man. Yet, they were both human and prone to mistakes, and she did not wish to take any chances.

Tapping lightly on the door before entering, she pushed it open and entered her chambers. Once more, she glanced longingly at the bed before making her way to Elizabeth’s side.

“The house looks very festive,” she remarked, sitting next to her daughter.

“It does. You all did very well. And Darcy and I found a yule log.” Elizabeth grinned,

setting aside the book she had been reading. “You seem much happier. Tell me, is Papa making an effort at last?”

Fanny’s cheeks went pink. “Yes, I think so. Am I a fool for forgiving him so readily?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “You have had a long time to mull over your feelings and come to terms with them. Perhaps you did not need any longer.”

She nodded. “I confess that being you helped. I could distance myself from your father and process things better. It made me ready to move on, I think. What about you?”

“Do you mean to ask if I have forgiven him? I know not. He hurt you—and me by extension. The father I imagined I had existed only in my mind.”

“He will be better than ever now,” Fanny said happily. “You wait and see.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I am not so quick to forgive—I worry the relationship I had with my father is forever altered. I must reconcile the man he now is with the man he was and the man I thought him to be. It feels like an impossible task.”

“Why not create something new with him?” Fanny asked insightfully. “You do not need to have precisely what you did. I do not believe my marriage will resemble anything like what it was when we first married, for we are not the same as we were then. Trials and tribulations have shaped us both. I think what we make of our life now will reflect that and be better than either of us could have envisioned.”

Elizabeth grinned. “When did you become so wise?” she asked.

Fanny laughed. “Perhaps you are rubbing off on me,” she teased. “That is not a bad

thing. There are many characteristics that are wholly Elizabeth that I wish to adopt when we change back.”

“You mean if, do you not?” Elizabeth sighed and shook her head. “It has almost been a month.”

“The longest month of our lives, if we are being honest.” Fanny patted her hand sympathetically.

Suddenly, Elizabeth grew agitated. “How am I to live?” she blustered. “I wish to marry and have children of my own. Forgive me, Mama, but your daughters belong to you. They are not mine! Every night, I pray I will wake in my own bed and every morning I am still here. Is it strange that I feel jealous of you? You and Papa are getting a second chance at love. Your courtship should be mine.” Tears trickled down her cheeks.

Fanny reached out and hugged her daughter. “And so it will be,” she promised. “Your father has begun to see. It will not be long now.”

“What if the changes do not last?” Elizabeth sniffed, burying her face in her mother’s shoulder.

“I have considered that. I do not think we will change back until our reforms are a sure thing. Otherwise, you and I would be normal by now.”

Elizabeth nodded and pulled away. “We have repaired what was broken, have we not?”

“Yes, and now we must help your father finish the process.”

Elizabeth

Elizabeth bid her mother goodnight. She stayed by the fire for many hours after, staring into the flames and watching the wood burn to coals. Never one to give in to melancholy, she found it very difficult to cast away the gloom that hung around her. She felt stagnant.

Mr. Darcy was everything she wished for and more, yet they could not progress or move on to their future as they were. Part of her resented her father for resisting change, and part of her rejoiced that he finally seemed to be working toward improvement. Mama seemed to believe him to be genuine. Elizabeth felt less certain.

Whatever the case, she hoped that the changes her father worked toward would become permanent soon. She wished to stand up with Jane at her wedding. Perhaps they would even have the double wedding they imagined as children. She had overheard Jane telling Mama about it earlier.

Jane's hopes of a proposal for Elizabeth would go unfulfilled as long as she remained trapped in Mrs. Bennet's body. She had no doubt Darcy would offer his hand regardless, but she selfishly wished to see him on one knee before her, not her father offering his hand to the woman he had been married to for almost five-and-twenty years.

Perhaps I ought to accept my fate, she thought dismally. Mayhap I shall be Mrs. Bennet for the rest of my days.

Another voice inside her scolded her for being morose. "I shall be well," she said aloud. "It cannot be much longer." Tomorrow was Christmas, the season of hope. If a miracle were to happen, the festive season was the best time for it to occur.

She had acquired a present for Mr. Darcy and hoped to give it to him on the morrow. She did not know if his family practiced the tradition of gift giving, but she intended to take full advantage of the season so she might present him with a token of her

affection. It was not much. She had cut a lock of her hair—her mother knew, of course—and had it fashioned into a watch fob. Whether he would appreciate it, she could not say, but she wished him to have some sign of her love that he could carry with him always.

In the early hours of the morning, she finally went to bed. She felt exhausted, but more settled. She knew the morning light would come too soon and force her from her bed.

At least the Gardiners are not here! she thought as she drifted off to sleep. They had remained in London due to family illness. Elizabeth was glad, for she did not feel equal to prevaricating when they inevitably began to ask questions.



### Chapter Eighteen

December 25, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Christmas morning dawned. A blanket of brilliant snow had fallen while they slept, covering everything in glistening white. Elizabeth loved the snow. It was magical somehow. Ice crystals made the pristine landscape glisten, draping everything in what seemed like precious gems. The view from her window showed it had yet to be marred with footprints or marks from carriage wheels.

Elizabeth always looked forward to Christmas. Everyone was at their very best and abounding with good cheer. Even Lydia seemed less petulant during the season, and she hoped her younger sister would be able to join them for the festivities. She had spent her time well in the nursery the last few days, and she seemed to have grudgingly accepted that things would not revert to their state before the Netherfield Ball.

Miss Holt taught both Kitty and Lydia deportment every day. Kitty took to the lessons with ease, but Lydia questioned everything. Her protestations and inquiries would have tried the patience of a saint, yet the governess handled it all with nary a cross look. Her skills handling wild young ladies had not been exaggerated. Elizabeth liked her very much and hoped they could employ her for many years, perhaps until Lydia was married.

Breakfast was a simple fare that day. Mr. Bingley planned to join them with his aunt. He wished to spend the entire day with his betrothed, or so he said, and since he did not have his sisters there to disapprove, he declared to one and all that he could do as

he pleased. He arrived with his aunt and Mr. Bennet in tow, around nine o'clock in the morning.

The atmosphere around the table was merry and bright. Elizabeth wished she could sit next to Mr. Darcy, who sat at the head of the table in her father's place. Instead, she sat in the mistress's spot, facing him. They exchanged long looks filled with emotion across the table. Strangely, she did not see her father when she looked at him anymore. She saw the man she loved, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, in Derbyshire. It was as though he could not help carrying himself with more purpose and authority, despite the much older body he now possessed.

Elizabeth hoped they would be returned to themselves soon. Given the progress exhibited by her parents, she had faith that it could not be much longer. But what if I am mistaken? she often thought to herself. What if we have misjudged the situation entirely? She could not dwell on that, though, or she would go mad.

Her confidence that Mama and Papa would keep the changes they had implemented grew with each passing hour. That pair seemed pleased to have the responsibilities around Longbourn handled on their behalf. Mr. Bennet assisted Darcy with his business, but his duties were much less now than they had been for many years. He and Mrs. Bennet seemed pleased to spend all their time in each other's company.

Elizabeth and Darcy amusedly watched their courtship. Mama blushed often, and Papa continued to try his best to win her regard. "I wonder if what we are witnessing is very like when they first courted," Elizabeth said to Darcy that afternoon. They stood in the parlor doorway, observing the occupants of the room. Jane and Mr. Bingley, sequestered in a corner, spoke only to each other. Mrs. Bingley had formed a strange bond with Mary, and the pair of them discussed everything from books and music to carriages and carts. Kitty joined them. She still hovered around, uncertain where she belonged now that Lydia spent her time in the nursery.

Mr. and Mrs. Bennet looked very much like young lovers. As Elizabeth and Darcy, they were required to behave as though they were not married, yet they had shared greater intimacies than most unmarried couples could boast. Mr. Bennet often took his wife's hand, caressing it gently. There was still a little tension, but whatever strides they had made the day before seemed promising.

Their Christmas activities included going to church and then to Haye Park for dinner. Elizabeth would have much rather spent the day at Longbourn, but her mother urged her to accept the invitation.

"It will make things easier for you," she said wisely. "And it will give our servants a chance to rest for the day." And so, she would have to dress and endure a chilly carriage ride...and possibly more of Mrs. Goulding's acidic tongue.

Hence, that afternoon, she searched through her mama's closet, looking for a suitable holiday gown. She found one Sally had lately dismantled. It was an overdress made of red satin with long sleeves. It fastened in the front with a gold clasp engraved with flowers. The under gown was cream wool with delicate gold embroidery on the skirt. Before refashioning, lace had adorned the neck and sleeves of the undergown, and yards of lace had covered half the satin of the overdress. Elizabeth felt very glad Sally had removed it. The gown looked much better now.

She donned the ensemble and added a simple pearl necklace and earrings. Her maid finished styling her hair and then handed her a reticule and a wrap. "Thank you," she said kindly. "I do hope you will spend some time doing something enjoyable tonight."

"Very good, madam," Sally replied, curtsying.

There was a tap at the door between the rooms, and Elizabeth called for whomever knocked to enter. Darcy stepped in, dressed in one of her father's red waistcoats, his

coat draped over his arm. “You look ravishing,” he said, coming to her and kissing her cheek. Sally giggled from by the closet where she hung up the gown Elizabeth had worn that day. They ignored her, and she kissed him as well.

“I wish we could spend the evening here,” she moaned again. “I would much rather curl up in front of the fire with a book!”

“I understand, my dear, but we have accepted the invitation and therefore must go forth.” He grimaced, not looking any more excited about the prospect of being in company that evening than did Elizabeth.

She clutched at his arm dramatically. “But what if the carriage slips on ice and crashes, Mr. Bennet?” she cried. “What will become of us, then? You will die, and we shall starve in the hedgerows!”

They both chuckled. A few weeks ago, it would not have been nearly as funny, but now Charlotte was engaged to Mr. Collins and Jane to Mr. Bingley. And, of course, Darcy would marry Elizabeth someday. Yes, Mrs. Bennet’s future would be secure, even if, heaven forbid, Mr. Bennet died tomorrow.

Drawing a fortifying breath, she said, “Shall we?” Mr. Darcy offered her his arm, and she took it, squeezing it lightly. “Miss Bingley would be terribly jealous of me right now,” she whispered as they left the room.

“I hardly think she would turn green at the sight of Mr. Bennet escorting his wife to an evening’s entertainment,” he replied lightly.

“Oh? And what if she saw Mr. Darcy speaking sweet nothings into Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s ear?” She smirked. “I assure you that my father has been doing just that. Mama’s blushes and coy looks are enough to tell me that!”

Mr. Darcy chuckled. “Yes, I imagine she would do everything in her power to divert my—that is, Mr. Darcy’s—attention away from that ‘ill-mannered country hoyden.’”

“Did she really call me that?” Elizabeth asked in surprise.

“She said many things. I can hardly recall all of them. She believed by pointing out all your supposed flaws and the negative aspects of forming an alliance with your family that I would be more inclined to abandon you. She was both right and wrong. Every mention of you drew my attention in that direction further. Yet, I could not forget that which I objected to so strenuously. But it was far too late by the time I left Hertfordshire. I already loved you. Indeed, I was in the middle before I knew I had begun.” He affectionately patted the hand looped through his arm.

Elizabeth’s heart leapt with pleasure. “That was a very pretty speech, sir. I pray you do not run out of lovely things to say before it grows time for you to make me an offer of marriage.”

“I promise you, Elizabeth, I shall save the words of my heart for when I offer it to you fully.”

He had hardly used her name since the switch, for it made it very hard to remember what he should call her in company, or so he said. But it pleased her he did so now, and she grinned.

The carriage waited when they came downstairs. They would exchange gifts after returning from Haye Park. The Netherfield party would join them. Jane, Mary, and Kitty waited, already dressed in their cloaks, bonnets, and fur muffs. Mama came last, wearing one of Elizabeth’s favorite gowns. It was a very dark green—not the usual color for young ladies, but it suited her dark hair and fair complexion admirably. Someone recently trimmed the neckline with a little white lace, and Elizabeth admitted it improved the gown’s allure rather than making it seem too ornate.

“You look very nice, Lizzy,” she told Mama as she approached, her winter cloak draped over her arm.

“I am sorry I am tardy,” Mama said. “I had to finish adding the lace. Do you approve?”

Jane cast a strange look at her ‘sister,’ but said nothing.

“Yes, well,” Elizabeth cleared her throat, searching for something to do or say that would cover Mama’s slip. “It certainly makes that gown look more festive. I like it very well.”

Mama beamed and said nothing more, instead readying to brave the cold for the time it would take to reach Haye Park.

“Is Lydia to remain?” she asked Elizabeth softly as the others filed out of the house.

“Yes. I have promised her she can join us downstairs after we return if she behaves. Miss Holt has reported that she thinks Lydia can manage it.”

Mama sighed. “I should have hired a governess long ago.”

“No point quibbling now,” Elizabeth said crisply. “Shall we?”

Mr. Darcy waited to hand them in, first helping Elizabeth and cheekily saying, ‘Daughter,’ to her as she climbed in. Then he took Elizabeth’s hand, turning to assist her. “Wife,” he said huskily, staring deeply into her eyes. She licked her lips, her throat suddenly dry.

“Husband,” she replied. Ducking into the carriage, she settled into her seat. Jane and Mama joined her there. Mary, Mr. Darcy, and Kitty sat on the opposite bench.

The girls chattered away as the carriage drove off. Mama spoke with Jane about the wedding. Elizabeth felt grateful they could still speak so comfortably. Mama did a wonderful job impersonating Elizabeth while still being very much herself. Who could have imagined it? she wondered. I certainly could not!

Light poured from Haye Park's windows, casting a glow on the snow. Carriage wheels had left many ruts in the white blanket, and it was thankfully not too icy to traverse without taking a tumble. Mr. Darcy helped each of the ladies out before escorting Elizabeth inside. Mr. and Mrs. Long promptly greeted them, welcoming them warmly to their home.

"Happy Christmas, Mr. Bennet! Mrs. Bennet!" Mr. Long was a gregarious man and as lively as Sir William Lucas. His wife was much quieter but greeted her guests with no less enthusiasm.

"I do hope you will enjoy our festivities," she said warmly. "We have lovely parlor games, including bullet pudding! All the young people like that activity. Cards are in the parlor for those less inclined to messy diversions."

Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth thanked their host and hostess and, arm in arm, went to the drawing room. They had set out a table of refreshments and punch, and guests mingled about the room. There were officers around, and she glanced around nervously for Mr. Wickham.

It seemed a miracle he and Mr. Darcy had not encountered each other since their meeting in Meryton before the ball. Elizabeth could not repine the loss. She did not like that she had been so easily taken in by that reprobate.

"I have not seen a certain red coated individual lately," she muttered whilst they filled their plates with biscuits and puddings.

Mr. Darcy suddenly looked very nervous.

“Sir?” she asked. “Is there something you wish to tell me?”

He cleared his throat. “I may have asked your father to help me... We had him transferred to a unit in the regulars and shipped off to the Canadas.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “And when did you do this? We have scarcely been apart in days!”

“I convinced him to help me a few days ago. It was before he became so anxiously engaged in our cause.” Darcy nodded to Elizabeth’s parents. They stood with Jane and Bingley, speaking animatedly.

“Well, I cannot be cross at you for acting thus,” she said with mock irritation. “I only wish you would have confided in me. I have watched for him and have feared for my sisters’ safety whilst he roamed about.”

“It is for them we acted. Your father and I could not bear if Mr. Wickham had the slightest chance to harm those who we love. And we also had concerns for the neighbors, of course.”

Elizabeth frowned. “But what of Miss Mary King? He courted her!”

Darcy cleared his throat. “I may have written her uncle—as Mr. Bennet, of course—in Liverpool an informative letter,” he said carefully. “He was most obliged, especially when I said that I would never wish for such a future for my own daughters or nieces. Life under Wickham’s control would have been a life of misery.”

She reached out and touched his cheek. “You are a very honorable man,” she murmured. “How did I become so fortunate as to have won your regard? I did not try



to, I assure you.”

“You needed to do nothing more than be yourself, my dear.” He looked at her tenderly, his gaze drifting to her lips before clearing his throat. “Now, what say you to cards? I do not imagine you would wish to play bullet pudding, especially not when attired so becomingly.”

She laughed merrily. “You are a flatterer! I do not know why I ever thought you taciturn and serious.”

“You bring out this lighter side of me, my dear. My life was full dark before you brightened it.” He took her hand and looped her arm through his. “Shall we?”

### Chapter Nineteen

December 25, 1811 Haye Park Fanny

Since he had not played bullet pudding in years! Fanny laughed as Mr. Bingley caused the bullet to drop into the heap of flour. The group gathered around the little table cheered as he put his face into the flour and rooted around for the bullet. He emerged victorious, but white powder clung to his face, eyebrows, and eyelashes.

“Again!” Gertrude Long cried, clapping her hands. “Who will be brave enough to take a large slice?”

Gertrude scooped the flour back into the bowl and then overturned it once more. Carefully, she placed the bullet in the center and picked up the knife. “Who will go first?” she asked.

“I will.” Mr. Bennet stepped forward amidst faces gaping in shock. No one could imagine the proud Mr. Darcy partaking in such a game, but Mr. Thomas Bennet had no qualms. Fanny remembered playing it with him when they were courting and whilst their children were young. He picked up the knife and bravely cut a large slice out of the mound of flour. Everyone gasped at how close the knife came to the bullet, yet it remained.

“Oh, how wonderful!” Gertrude cheered. “Mr. Darcy, I did not know you were so capable.” She batted her eyelashes, and Fanny bristled. How dare she flirt with another woman’s husband! Oh yes, she reminded herself. Mr. Darcy is unmarried. Still, it rankled. Mr. Darcy favored Elizabeth with his attentions, anyway, so it might

have been that he was married.

“F-Miss Elizabeth, would you care to go next?” Thomas offered her the knife, and she took it, relishing the little thrill she felt touching his fingers. “I shall get it closer,” she announced, winking saucily at him. “Wait and see, Mr. Darcy.” She brandished the knife and made a great show of cutting the flour. Everyone held their breath.

The bullet hovered half on and half off the pile of flour. After thirty seconds, it had not fallen, and everyone cheered. Fanny relished the attention and held the knife up. “Who wishes to be next?” she asked. “Is there a brave soul who will make the attempt? You will likely end covered in flour!” People laughed and nudged each other, but no one stepped forward.

“I believe you and I ought to have a friendly competition, Miss Elizabeth.” Thomas smirked. “Let us see which of us will make the bullet fall.” He took the proffered knife, and this time sliced a much smaller section off the flour. “To make it more interesting,” he said at her inquiring glance.

“Very well, sir, you have a bargain.” Cheers went up again, and Fanny took the knife. The chunk of flour she cut away was larger than his, but did nothing to disturb the bullet, which was already balanced precariously half on and half off the flour. “If it falls, whomever is holding the knife is the loser,” she said, handing it back to him.

Nodding, Thomas cut another bit of flour. By now, the bullet stood on a column of the white powder. Nervously licking her lips, she moved to where the bullet teetered unsteadily. With precision, she sliced down the side of the column. Flour dropped to the bottom of the pan, but the bullet stayed balanced.

Triumphantly, she handed him the knife. He looks a little nervous, she realized. It endeared him to her further, and she watched as he, too, removed more flour, leaving the bullet in place.

“You two are the best players I have ever seen!” Mr. Bingley cried. “Surely, the next slice will send the bullet tumbling.”

Not if I can help it, sir. Fanny examined the pillar of flour. There was a spot where she thought she could make another slice without upsetting the bullet, and she lifted the knife. Hand shaking, she cut. The flour tumbled to the tray and at first the bullet did not move. Everyone watched with bated breath as it trembled.

Fanny tried to hand Thomas the knife, knowing it would fall, but before he could accept it, the bullet tumbled into the pile of flour. Their onlookers cheered loudly, yelling at her to fetch it out of the mess.

“I shall do the honors,” Thomas said boldly. “We cannot have Miss Elizabeth spoiling her lovely gown.” Winking, he put his hands behind his back and buried his face in the white desert of flour. He emerged with the bullet between his teeth, eliciting more cheers from those gathered around.

She clapped along with the others, secretly flattered her husband was willing to drench himself in flour for her sake. As the others arranged the game again, he led her away. Having wiped much of the white powder from his face, there was a dusting in his hair and on his eyebrows. She reached up and brushed it away, her hand lingering in his hair before dropping to her side.

“My gallant hero,” she murmured. Fanny did not see Mr. Darcy when she looked. No, she saw the Thomas Bennet she remembered, the man from years ago who had wooed her and won her heart. Her love for him, long dormant, had exploded, flowering into something more beautiful than she could ever have imagined.

“I hope you know, dearest, that I do not intend to be anything else ever again.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I have been the villain in your story for too long.”

“What sort of book is it where the hero becomes the villain and then the hero again?” she quipped. “And is ours a gothic novel?”

He shook his head. “No, ours is a great epic, equal to that of King Arthur. And the conclusion has yet to be written.” Kissing her hand again, he asked, “Will you write it with me?”

“Oh, Thomas,” she sighed happily. “Of course.”

Elizabeth

“It seems you have been keeping secrets, Mrs. Bennet.” Mrs. Goulding sidled up to Elizabeth, her face puckered in what she assumed was supposed to be a smile. “How long has Mr. Darcy been calling on your Elizabeth?”

“Hmm?” she said distractedly. “What was that you said?” She had watched the bullet pudding game with great interest after Sir William drew away her husband—Mr. Darcy, that is.

“Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy! Why, I have never been more shocked in my life. All of us thought he quite disliked her. What was that he had said about her at the assembly—tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt him, or something of the sort? Now, I must have your secrets. How could you have induced the man to give two straws about a woman he so disparaged?” Mrs. Goulding folded her arms and waited expectantly.

“Whatever makes you think I had anything to do with their courtship?” she asked, genuinely bemused.

“You always have something to do with courtships.” Mrs. Goulding tapped her foot impatiently. “We all thought he had gone away and then suddenly he and Mr. Bingley

were back again! I suppose you will say he could not help himself, thrown into the path of your daughter as Mr. Darcy surely has been. He has accompanied his friend to Longbourn, I assume.”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy has been a frequent visitor to my home.” She sipped her punch, smirking as she thought about just how much time the man had spent at Longbourn lately. “He and Lizzy are well-matched.”

“You said that about Mr. Bingley and your Jane, too. What is it about Bennet women that so enthralls men? Why can you not leave any for the rest of the young ladies?” Mrs. Goulding’s laugh was brittle and a little hysterical.

Elizabeth turned to the lady and raised an eyebrow. “If you imply that my daughters have employed underhanded means to gain the affection of worthy gentlemen, then you would be mistaken. They have done nothing but behave like themselves. I could hardly force Mr. Darcy or Mr. Bingley to pay court to my girls. Heaven knows, many a matchmaking mama has tried! Now, if you will excuse me, I believe I have need of more punch.” She walked away, well aware that her glass was still half full.

Lady Lucas found her next. “Is there an understanding between Eliza and Mr. Darcy?” she asked in an excited whisper. “I saw him kiss her hand just now, and she blushed from her ears to her toes!”

Very good, Papa, Elizabeth thought, proud that her father made such successful overtures with her mother. “There is an understanding of sorts,” she hedged. “It is not official yet, but we have every hope that Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy will soon reach an agreement.” Her mother and father had better, for Elizabeth longed to make things official with Mr. Darcy.

“How lovely for your family! Oh, how blessed we are, Mrs. Bennet! Charlotte will be married in January and I believe I heard Jane mention March for her nuptials. What

about Mr. Darcy and your second daughter? Will they marry soon afterwards?" Lady Lucas fairly bounced with excitement.

Chuckling, Elizabeth patted her arm. "Jane and Lizzy have always wished for a double wedding. We shall see if such a thing takes place. Mr. Darcy's family is very highly placed in society and they may wish for a grand affair." Seeking to act more like her mother, she leaned in closely. "He is the nephew of an earl, did you know? His uncle is the Earl of Matlock!"

Lady Lucas gasped. "No! I had no idea. Oh, what a blessing for your girls! I am certain he will be instrumental in throwing them in the path of other rich men."

Hearing her mother's words made her wince internally. "I will be pleased as long as they are all happy and well-settled." Hopefully, that was enough to satisfy Lady Lucas's exuberance.

Mrs. Long spoke to her next, quietly commenting on what a charming couple Darcy and Lizzy made. Elizabeth nodded gratefully and then departed in search of Darcy or a quiet space to think...or both. After a few moments of searching, she did not find him and so made her way to a quiet alcove just off the drawing room. Elizabeth leaned against a wall and sighed, wondering if things would ever be normal again. She meant only being back in her body, for she quite liked the positive changes happening at Longbourn and in her life. Her parents seemed happier, and she felt as though they would soon reach an understanding.

More than anything, she longed to tell Mr. Darcy that she loved him. He would have to speak first and though she had thought he would speak more than once, something always held him back. There was nothing for it now, anyway. Even if he did not love her, when they returned to their respective bodies, they would marry. After so many marked comments about their 'courtship,' how could they do anything less?

“There you are!” He came to her as if summoned by her thoughts. “I wondered where you had gone.” He took her hand and kissed it. “Why are you hiding? It seems more like something that I would engage in—hiding from the company, that is.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I needed a moment to myself,” she confessed. “There has been much talk tonight about you and me—or rather, my mother and father posing as you and me. If we ever wished to part ways when this entire debacle concludes, I believe we have missed our chance.”

“Do you wish to walk away?” he asked quietly, stroking her hand with his thumb.

“No! No, I do not wish it,” she said earnestly. “Indeed, I can no longer imagine my life without you in it. You are the first person I think about when I wake up, and the last thought in my mind before I fall asleep at night. I am more than ready to start our future, yet we are stuck in this precarious position, trapped somewhere between a lawful marriage and a life of sin.”

“That is an interesting way of putting it,” he said. “I must say, I feel the same way about you. I have patiently awaited the day when things are set to right. It will not be long now, but every morning that I wake up and nothing has changed, my heart falls. I cannot repine spending my days in your company, however, and so I try to be grateful to have that.”

“I agree completely.” She smiled and squeezed his hand gently. “I suppose I ought to be better at looking for the positives in our strange situation.”

“It has been very strange indeed. Shall we return to our friends?” He held out his arm, and she released his hand, taking it and allowing him to lead her back to the party.

When they returned to Longbourn, the Netherfield party accompanied them. Papa discreetly handed Mr. Darcy some parcels, whispering that they had arrived from the



north the day before.

“I did not know if you wanted them now or wished to wait until...” Mr. Bennet trailed off, shrugging. Mr. Darcy thanked him and tucked them away to be opened in privacy. It would not do for others to see ‘Mr. Bennet’ opening strange parcels.

Mr. Bingley presented Jane with an elaborate set of matching jewelry. There was a bracelet, necklace, earrings, and a box of hairpins, all made of sapphires and pearls. Jane, in turn, gifted Mr. Bingley a new blue waistcoat and a watch fob.

Mama and Papa secreted themselves in a corner of the room, exchanging gifts where none could watch. Darcy, too, took Elizabeth aside and gave her a lovely novel that she had never before read, written by A Lady. She nervously gave him the watch fob that contained a lock of her hair. The maker had fashioned the lock into delicate scrolls, arranging it on a gold background. The effect was excellent, and Darcy thanked her fervently.

When the hour grew late, the Netherfield party made ready to depart. As they enjoyed each other’s company, snow had fallen and now there was so much that the carriages could not possibly make it back to Netherfield Park that night. Offers of lodgings were readily forthcoming, and no one complained about the arrangement. Jane could not be more pleased, and Mama looked as though the cat had got the cream. She leaned close and whispered something to Mr. Bennet. He grinned and winked at her, making Elizabeth wonder what sort of secret they exchanged.

Lydia had joined them for the evening and eventually she, Kitty and Mary went to bed, followed by Mrs. Bingley. They had given Mrs. Bingley one of the guest rooms, and she retired for the night after being assured that ‘Mr. and Mrs. Bennet’ would chaperone the other couples. The irony did not escape Elizabeth’s notice.

Jane and Mr. Bingley spoke until the early hours of the morning before finally going

to bed. Mama and Papa had fallen asleep on the settee, holding hands. Mama's head leaned against his shoulder and she looked very content.

That left Darcy and Elizabeth, the chaperones. They, too, talked until the fire died down before going to bed. Their age, unlike the other couples, prevented them from sleeping outside their comfortable beds.

He bid her goodnight at her door, gently kissing her hand. "Goodnight, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth."

As she drifted off to sleep, the storm raged outside, and Elizabeth thought she heard a rumble of thunder.

### Chapter Twenty

December 26, 1811 Longbourn Elizabeth

Elizabeth blinked. Light poured in through a window, blinding her as she attempted to open her eyes. I could have sworn I pulled the drapes shut around the bed last night, she thought. Groaning, she sat up, only to realize something felt markedly different. Immediately, the cobwebs from her mind fled, and she opened her eyes the rest of the way.

The drawing room ? Had she slept-walked? Never having had the propensity to do so, she immediately dismissed it. She noticed her gown and realized she still wore the green gown her mother had worn the previous night. Gasping, she stood abruptly, turning to the settee where Mr. Darcy still dozed. His feet were on a footstool, and he had discarded his coat over the back of a chair. But was it Mr. Darcy or her father?

For a moment she stood there, frozen. Elizabeth flexed her fingers, marveling at how they did not ache. Her neck was sore, but that was likely because of sleeping on the settee all night instead of in her comfortable bed. Oh, how wonderful it felt to be back in her own body.

Creeping closer to the settee, she sat next to Mr. Darcy—or her father—she knew not, and lightly shook him. “Sir,” she said quietly. “Wake up.” She longed to know if the man was her beloved Fitzwilliam. She dearly hoped it was so.

The gentleman—whoever he was—did not stir immediately. Elizabeth sat back and admired him. He looked absolutely adorable in sleep. His dark curls were mussed and

his face, usually stern, was completely relaxed. Reaching out, she touched a lock that fell over his forehead, brushing it aside.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured.

She knew in an instant that the sleeping man was Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth eagerly shook him, anxious to share their good fortune. “Fitzwilliam, wake up!” she cried, this time in a louder voice. “Wake up, my darling!”

He opened his eyes and looked around in confusion. “Mrs. Bennet?” he said.

“No, it is I! Elizabeth! Look at us, we have changed back!” She bounced excitedly, taking his hand.

Abruptly, he sat up and examined himself. “So, we have!” He drew her into his arms, laughing as he held her to his chest. “Oh, my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! It is a miracle!” He released her, holding her back to look at her face. “You are here. We are here and ourselves. I could not have asked for anything more.”

“Shall we tell my mama and papa?” she asked.

“I think not. Let them discover it on their own.” He settled back into the settee, pulling her close. “We can enjoy the freedom of being able to have private discourse a little longer before they come down.”

Yes, at least until their marriage, their private interludes would be cut short. Elizabeth frowned in disappointment. “That is definitely a drawback to returning to ourselves,” she moaned. “We had best enjoy these moments whilst we can.”

He turned and kissed her head. “Before another moment passes,” he said, breaking away again and standing. He pulled her with him and then got down on one knee.

“Dear Elizabeth, I love you—most ardently. Your vivacity, your wit, your compassion, and your kindness are all unparalleled. I wish to never be parted from you from this moment on. Will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

Sighing happily, she nodded. Tears filled her eyes, and she tugged him to his feet. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she buried her face in his chest. “I love you very much,” she said, her words muffled against the fabric of his shirt.

“I am afraid I did not hear you, dearest,” he said teasingly.

She pulled away and looked up, smiling broadly. “I love you, dearest Fitzwilliam,” she said. “I cannot picture a life without you in it. You are an honorable, kind, affectionate, caring man. Once I thought you proud and haughty, but now I can see that you have no improper pride. I have much to look forward to as your wife, and I can hardly wait.”

Bending down, he captured her mouth with his own, tenderly caressing her lips until she went weak at the knees. “I like that very much,” she murmured as he pulled away. Reaching up, she cupped his cheek in her hand. “I think you must try that again so I can become used to the sensation.”

Happily, he complied, and they then returned to the settee, content to stay wrapped in each other’s arms until the rest of the household awoke.

As Darcy absently stroked her hair, a blue velvet jewelry box caught her eye. It was partially under the footstool, and she broke away to pick it up.

“That was your father’s gift to your mother,” Darcy said immediately. “He showed it to me.”

Curious, Elizabeth cracked open the box. Nestled inside was a delicate gold brooch. It

looked as though someone had used gold to tat lace. “It is perfect for Mama,” she said approvingly. “Shall I sneak it into her chambers?”

“Certainly. If you wake her, it will only hasten her surprise.”

Elizabeth bade him to wait and crept from the room. Up the stairs she went and stealthily she crept into her mother’s bedchamber. She found the curtains drawn around the bed—just as she had left them the night before. Opening the box, she put it on the table beside the bed, knowing her mother would see it the moment she pushed aside the curtains. Satisfied with the arrangement, she left the room, closing the door carefully behind her.

Darcy awaited her in the hall. “We had best refresh ourselves,” he said. “No offense meant, my dear, but your gown is in a terrible state.”

Elizabeth looked down, grimacing at the wrinkled gown. “You remember where you were meant to sleep?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Nodding, he bowed his head and turned to depart. “I expect to see you in the drawing room, my love,” he said as he went. “I do not believe I am entirely ready to share you with others.”

“Then I shall hasten to change as quickly as I can manage,” she whispered back. She hurried to her chambers—her chambers—and worked to unbutton her green gown. It was difficult without help, but she managed. She draped the gown over the back of a chair. It would need to be pressed and cleaned for certain. Then she found a lovely rose gown with gold trim and donned it. Impressed that she had managed to do so without aid, she went to the mirror.

It was a strange feeling, seeing her own face in the glass after having seen another’s for a month. She touched her cheek, marveling at the smoothness. There were no

lines around her eyes or mouth, and her dark hair glistened in the morning light. Giddy, she spun in a circle. "All is as it should be," she said aloud to the empty room. Slipping her feet into slippers, she rushed out of the room, eager to be back in Fitzwilliam's company.

He waited for her in the drawing room, having straightened his appearance and donned his coat. "You look fetching," he said, smiling happily.

"Thank you, good sir," she replied, dipping a curtsy. "I dressed with you in mind, I assure you."

"I should hope that you picked your attire based on your preferences," he replied seriously. "I find you lovely in whatever you wear."

She laughed and took his hand, leading him back to the settee. "And if I wore a sack?" she asked.

He grinned. "I should still find you ravishing." He touched her cheek and then quickly pecked her lips again.

"You are very good at compliments, sir." She nestled into his arms. As she sighed deeply, someone upstairs shrieked loudly.

Fanny

Fanny knew something had changed the moment she entered consciousness. Her eyes were still closed, and the air felt heavy. Slowly, she opened her eyes. Everything around her was still black, and she reached out, groping around her. Touching the fabric, she tugged. Curtains slid aside and light poured into the bed where she sat.

Bed? I fell asleep in the drawing room. Did Thomas carry me to bed? She looked

around, her eyes falling to the open jewelry case sitting on the bedside table. The wrong bedside table. She gasped and looked at her hands. Shrieking, she threw off the bedclothes and tumbled out of bed. Fanny went directly to the door connecting her room to her husband's and paused. What if Thomas had not changed back? Hand hovering over the doorknob, she did not move.

The door opened. Thomas—or was it Mr. Darcy—stood there in his nightshirt. “Fanny?” he asked in a low voice.

“Thomas?” she replied hopefully.

He gave a cry of delight and took her in his arms, kissing her fervently. “Oh, my darling wife. It is you! And I am me!”

She choked out a little sob, clinging to him as if her life depended on it. “I never thought I would be so grateful for pain upon waking!” Indeed, she could feel her back and hips aching. Her hands, too, were sore as they often were.

“I completely agree. And I have not been another person for nearly as long as you.” He kissed her again. “Come, let us sit.” He led her to her settee. She sat, and he poked at the fire, encouraging the coals to glow hot and then ignite the wood he added. When he had a cheery blaze, he came and sat beside her, drawing her into his arms.

“Do you think Lizzy and Darcy know yet?” he murmured into her hair.

“I found the brooch here. I am certain they know.” She snuggled deeper into his embrace. “Should we interrupt them?”

Shaking his head, he said, “I think not. Let them have a few minutes alone. They will not have it again for some time. Besides, I wish to stay here with you for now.”



They fell silent, simply enjoying each other's company. After a few minutes, she pulled away and turned to look at him. "This is real, is it not?"

"It is," he vowed, kissing her nose. His expression turned serious, and he pulled away a little more. "Fanny," he began uncertainly, "I wish to do something. I fear my knees will not allow me to kneel, but at this moment of renewal, of second chances, I wish to give you a proposal of sorts. Or maybe a vow would be a better word for it."

"Go on," she breathed, all anticipation.

"Dearest Frances, when we married so many years ago, I vowed to love you and care for you, and I fear I have not done either as I ought. I come to you now, a man thoroughly humbled and very much in love with you, asking for another chance. I vow to love and honor you, to be your companion, your beloved, and the husband you deserve. Most faithfully, I promise to hold your hand and be whatever you wish me to be." He cleared his throat, his eyes looking suspiciously moist. "I do not deserve your forgiveness. Indeed, these last days of happiness are more than I ever hoped for. I will treasure the memory of them always, for it allowed me time to court you again. Please, allow me to carry on as we did when we were not ourselves. Give me the chance to prove my love and dedication to you. I will not disappoint you again."

Fanny felt tears in her eyes. Overwhelmed with emotion, she nodded, her chin wobbling, unable to speak. "I love you very much, Thomas. I never stopped. Now, everything is new again, and I accept your offer with a full heart and hope for the future." She touched his cheek gently, hoping he could see the adoration in her gaze.

He embraced her, cradling her in his arms and pressing her head against his chest. "Thank you for this chance, my love," he said. They remained in that attitude for some time before he sighed heavily.

Confused, she broke away and looked at him expectantly.

“I need to apologize to Lizzy,” he murmured. “She has avoided me assiduously the last month, even once I became Mr. Darcy. I hurt her dreadfully.”

“She has a forgiving nature,” Fanny assured him. “It may take time, but she will grant you the same forgiveness I have.”

“How can you be certain?”

“Because she forgave Mr. Darcy,” Fanny said simply. “He insulted her most grievously.”

“But I am her father! Surely, my words have wounded her more than he ever did.” He looked genuinely distraught, and her heart ached for him.

“That may be so. But I have faith our daughter has been raised better than to hold on to a grudge. She will be worried that the changes we have experienced will not be permanent. We must strive to show her they are.” Fanny sighed. “I do wonder if I shall have the fortitude that Elizabeth had as me. What if I become lax with our daughters—Lydia, especially? What if she turns into a hoyden and ruins us all?”

“I shall be with you every step of the way,” he promised her. “United, we can withstand all her antics. And I think Miss Holt has done an admirable job of managing her so far.”

“I do like the lady. Her reputation was not misstated in the least.”

A clock chimed somewhere, and Fanny sighed. “We had best change and go downstairs.”

“Yes, I suppose we ought to.” He released her after kissing her once more. “I believe I shall be required to have an interview with Darcy today.”

She grinned. “Oh Thomas, do you really think so?”

“Of course, I do! He will not delay now that all is well.” Standing, he went to his chamber. “Shall I call for you in thirty minutes?” he asked.

She blushed and nodded. It was the beginning of a new life for both of them. Their future looked brighter than she ever thought possible, and she could not wait to begin. No matter what happened, Fanny had another chance at love. She would do nothing to risk losing it again. And with Thomas by her side, they could handle anything that life gave them.

Fanny dressed in a simple gown that did not require aid and then fastened her golden locks into a chignon. Grabbing her favorite shawl, she drew the delicate gold brooch out of the case and used it to fasten the shawl in place. She stroked the trinket lovingly, marveling at how her husband knew her so well.

“It has been a very happy Christmas,” she said aloud.

“A very happy Christmas, indeed.” Thomas came up behind her, wrapping her in an embrace.

## Page 21

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Mr. and Mrs. Bennet joined Elizabeth and Darcy before the rest of the household awoke.

They spoke to each other as themselves, clearing any other misconceptions and the hurt that lingered.

Mr. Bennet apologized to his favorite daughter, begging her to forgive him. Elizabeth granted her forgiveness, though she admitted that she still hurt from his behavior.

Mr. Darcy made quick work of asking for Elizabeth's hand in marriage.

Mr. Bennet gave his consent, and they told the news to Jane and Bingley upon their arrival in the drawing room.

The double wedding they had always dreamed of now seemed a reality.

Mr. Bennet kept his vow to his wife.

Their marriage became harmonious, and the door between their chambers remained unlocked and open.

In consequence of their newfound love, they welcomed a son and heir, Thomas Edward Bennet, ten months later.

It was certainly a surprise to all their families.

Mr. Collins and Charlotte sent them their heartfelt congratulations. No one resented

the passing over of the former as heir.

Lydia continued to improve.

When allowed back in company, she behaved decorously.

She and Kitty were still inseparable, but now better respected because of their changed manners.

Mary and Mrs. Bingley remained friends.

They wrote frequently when the latter returned to her home in the north.

Eventually, Mrs. Bingley brought her sister's son with her to visit her nephew and Jane.

He and Mary fell in love and married. Mr. Arthur Norton was a wealthy tradesman from Yorkshire, and Mary lived a life of contentment at his side.

Jane and Bingley left Netherfield behind after their first two years of marriage.

The owner wished to occupy it again, forcing their removal.

Mrs. Bennet, who had not visited them more than once a week, bemoaned the loss, but understood.

She vowed to visit them in Derbyshire, where they purchased an estate not twenty miles from Pemberley.

Darcy invited his sister to Hertfordshire as soon as it was safe for her to travel.

She came with Colonel Fitzwilliam and stayed until the wedding.

Georgiana and Elizabeth quickly became friends quickly, and Elizabeth felt pleased to have gained such a lovely sister.

Whether it was fate, folly, or something greater that caused the thunder to change their places, none could say, nor had any of them found a way to explain it.

But what began in confusion ended in clarity.

The experience left behind no physical trace—only the quiet knowledge that true understanding requires more than words.

It requires stepping, however briefly, into another's life.

The compassion and understanding gained aided them for the rest of their days.

And when they declared their love to their respective partners, they could say they truly loved them—body and soul.

I hope you enjoyed Body and Soul.