



Darcy and the Blue Devils

(Happiness in Marriage #7)

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Category: Historical

Description: In Kent, Mr Darcy fights his attraction to Elizabeth Bennet and discovers the connexion between her and the blue devils that plague him.

Darcy and the Blue Devils is a short story variation of Jane Austens Pride and Prejudice. It is a second chance at love with a happily ever after for Darcy and Elizabeth.

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CHAPTER ONE

March 23, 1812

Darcy sensed Colonel Fitzwilliam's eyes on him from across the carriage and slid further into his seat, curling his shoulders as though that would hide him from his cousin's view.

"You should not look so glum," Fitzwilliam said. "A week or ten days is all we shall have to endure. Imagine how my father would reprimand us if he were here! He no more likes her than we do, yet we must never speak of it or show how we feel."

He laughed, evidently hoping Darcy would share in the joke. Instead, he briefly looked at his cousin and managed a small smile, then turned to watch the passing countryside. The two of them were presently travelling to Kent to visit their aunt and cousin for the Easter holiday. No one found Lady Catherine de Bourgh or her daughter easy company. Yet, if the Fitzwilliams and Darcys believed anything, it was the importance of maintaining strong family connexions.

After a brief pause, Fitzwilliam sighed heavily. "What is it? Your foul mood cannot entirely be due to the prospect of spending a few days at Rosings."

Darcy fixed the colonel with a hard look. "You are not the one she expects to marry her daughter."

"No, but your ill-temper has been apparent to me since I returned to town last month. Bramwell says you were the same at Christmas, and even my mother remarked on it.

Please reassure me it is not because of what happened in Ramsgate.”

“It is not.” Darcy wished his elder cousin and aunt had kept their observations to themselves.

“Then what is it?”

Once again, Darcy looked out of the window. The sky was blue, and there were a few signs of the new season. An image of Miss Elizabeth Bennet appeared in his mind; he expected she revelled in the spring and the increased opportunities to be in the open air.

When he had first arrived at Netherfield Park last autumn, it was already with the weight of the blue devils on him. It was as if there were little beings sitting on his shoulders, poking and laughing at him, throwing dust in his eyes and obscuring the brightness and joy he ought to feel.

He had long conceived of his dark moods in such a manner. His mother had once used the expression ‘blue devils’ when she was despondent. Then a child, he had envisioned tiny creatures pestering her, and he still imagined them haunting him during his thankfully rare periods of melancholia.

At present, he berated himself for feeling so. After all, what had he to be unhappy about? Last autumn, the situation was different; then he could name his sister’s near elopement and the fact that Wickham, once one of his dearest friends, had betrayed him yet again.

While in Hertfordshire, his mood had improved. He had told himself it was simply because more time was passing; he was recovering from the initial sting of what had happened. It had nothing to do with meeting Elizabeth Bennet, who was wholly unsuitable as an object of his romantic interest. By the end of November, she was

gone from his life, he was back amongst his family and friends in the ton... and the blue devils had returned to plague him.

“I fail to understand why you did not come at Christmas,” Lady Catherine said to Darcy at breakfast the next morning, as she had several times the previous day. “Anne and I expected to see you, and who has a greater demand on your time than we do?”

Sitting across from him, Fitzwilliam gave him a look that either indicated sympathy, humour, or indigestion. Given the conversation, all were equally possible.

“I was required at my estate,” Darcy said, not for the first time.

His aunt huffed. “If your steward is not capable of seeing to your affairs, you need a new one. You have responsibilities to my daughter, and since Rosings will be yours upon your marriage?—”

Darcy stood. “You must excuse me. I will not argue this point with you again.” His aunt’s expectations left him nauseous. He used to imagine the sensation was caused by blue devils jumping in his stomach, and headaches were them wielding hammers at his temples.

Against Lady Catherine’s protests, he left the room. About an hour later, Fitzwilliam found him in his chamber. “I reminded her that my father insists you decide for yourself whom you will marry, and she has vowed not to raise the matter again,” his cousin said.

Darcy scoffed. He was slowly walking about the room, and, glancing at Fitzwilliam, said, “Stop acting as though I am on the verge of...weeping or falling into a fit of some sort.”

“You are not well, Darcy. Will you not confide in me?”

Going to the window, his back to Fitzwilliam, Darcy said, “It is nothing that should concern you. One or two irritating business matters I shall not bore you with, a lack of sleep, and having to listen to Lady Catherine are enough of a reason, do you not think?”

Fitzwilliam sighed. “I shall not press you, but I am willing to listen—even if it is about contracts and legal disputes and what have you. Our aunt’s parson is expected shortly, and she wishes to introduce him to us. After that, what say we ride? The fresh air and exercise will do us both good.”

Darcy turned to face him. “It would. As for the parson, I regret that I have already had the pleasure.” He rolled his eyes, and, as they made their way to the drawing room, he explained about meeting Mr Collins the previous autumn.

When they joined the ladies, Lady Catherine regarded Fitzwilliam coldly and ordered him to sit in a particular armchair, but otherwise ignored him. Darcy did not fare as well. She had arranged the furniture—apparently having some of it removed and other pieces pushed to the sides of the room—leaving Darcy the choice of taking a place beside her or her daughter. Neither was an attractive option, and still feeling ill, he went to the settee and sat as far from Anne as possible. Little was said for the next few minutes, and Darcy kept his eyes lowered to avoid the expectant manner in which Anne was regarding him.

Lady Catherine has been filling her mind with nonsense about our ‘engagement’ since she was an infant. There were times Darcy wondered whether he would have the strength to resist his family’s pressure—subtle and not—for long enough to find a suitable lady he wished to marry.

Oddly, Elizabeth Bennet’s visage flashed through his thoughts. Since she was entirely

un suitable, he had never considered her a potential bride.

You lie, a harsh voice whispered to him. It seemed so real, he lifted his head enough to see if anyone else had heard it. But it was only one of the nasty devils.

Mr Collins's arrival alleviated some of the awkwardness of Darcy's situation, but soon he wished the man away. He had forgotten how obsequious and blathering he could be. After an overlong greeting of Lady Catherine, followed by a lengthy question that amounted to him hoping Anne was in good health that morning, Mr Collins turned his attention to Fitzwilliam.

"I am, naturally, very pleased to meet another of my patroness's nephews. I say another, you understand, as I have had the distinct honour to meet Mr Darcy before." He nodded solemnly at Darcy. "I did not need to call this morning to acquaint myself with your safe arrival, sirs. I spent yesterday in the lane, waiting for your carriage to pass. I feared that if the hour grew late and you had not yet arrived, Lady Catherine would begin to worry, and under such circumstances, I would want to offer whatever assistance I could."

"Did you indeed?" Fitzwilliam asked.

For a reason Darcy did not understand, Mr Collins stood from his seat by Lady Catherine and bowed to Fitzwilliam.

Lady Catherine kept a hard gaze on Darcy as she said, "He understood that Anne would be gravely disappointed if Darcy did not appear as expected, even if some amongst us do not wish to acknowledge how important his visits are to us."

"Just so, just so," Mr Collins said. "Knowing that Mr Darcy and Miss de Bourgh?—"

"How do you like living in Kent, Mr Collins?" Fitzwilliam interjected.

Darcy could have kissed his cousin for preventing the man from completing the question. For a full five minutes—Darcy watched the passing time on the mantel clock—Mr Collins praised everything about the neighbourhood. Darcy only half-listened. Consequently, he was not sure if he had truly heard the name Bennet. He wanted to know what the foolish man had said, but how to ask without betraying his eagerness to hear news of Miss Elizabeth?

“May I enquire after your family in Meryton, Mr Collins?” Darcy said. His heart thudded against his ribs, but he was confident his outward demeanour did not show it.

Mr Collins assured him it was no imposition and thanked him for his concern before finally answering the question. “They are very well, from what I have lately heard. Even though my cousin Mr Bennet must be fifty or one-and-fifty, he maintains his health. I suppose a man in my position might wish it otherwise, but I never have. Longbourn is a fine estate. Colonel Fitzwilliam, perhaps you do not know why I have such an interest in it. You see?—”

“It is entailed on him,” Lady Catherine said. “Mr Bennet has five daughters, that he will never see married, given they have no dowries, and the estate will go to a distant cousin. My Anne is in an enviable position. What gentleman of sense would not want to possess Rosings?”

Darcy did not need to look at her to know she was glaring at him.

“Very true,” Mr Collins said. “Sir Lewis must have been a fine gentleman, and I shall regret with my dying breath that I did not have the pleasure of meeting him. He was correct to ensure his daughter was his heir. I cannot be entirely displeased with my cousin’s situation, given it benefits me, but I am sure no one could object to my feelings.”

Except perhaps the gentleman himself and his wife and daughters, Darcy thought.

“I would never say as much in my cousin Elizabeth’s hearing, naturally, but my dear wife agrees.” Mr Collins turned to Darcy. “You knew her as Miss Charlotte Lucas. Her younger sister is presently staying with us, as is my cousin Elizabeth. She is very taken with the neighbourhood. I believe she wishes?—”

Was the ridiculous man saying that Miss Elizabeth was presently in Kent, that she was just a short walk away at the parsonage? Darcy felt breathless and almost dizzy with anticipation. What excuse might he use to go there at once? He should not wish to, yet, knowing she was nearby, his mind would not be calm again until he saw her.

“You and Miss Lucas were married?” Darcy interjected. “My felicitations. Her friend and sister have come to visit? How...pleasant.” He stood slowly to avoid any appearance of haste and addressed Fitzwilliam, saying, “I ought to pay my respects. Do you wish to come with me?”

“You mean to go at once?” Lady Catherine demanded.

“I believe I should,” Darcy said as he began walking towards the door.

Fitzwilliam was by his side, saying, “I shall accompany you.”

Behind him, Darcy heard Mr Collins babbling about not wishing to leave but feeling he should be the one to introduce his wife to Colonel Fitzwilliam. Lady Catherine evidently gave her permission—Darcy did not believe the parson would depart without it—because the man hastened past him and Fitzwilliam as they stepped out of the house and proceeded along the path to his home.

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CHAPTER TWO

Darcy knew rushing to see Miss Elizabeth was a mistake. He hardly remembered who Mrs Collins was. To be sure, he recalled going to some party or other at Lucas Lodge—it had been the night he had first noticed Miss Elizabeth’s prettiness and fine eyes—but other than Sir William’s loquaciousness, the family was unremarkable. It was knowing she was there that drew Darcy towards the parsonage.

As soon as he saw her, a frisson passed through him. The air felt different suddenly—he felt different, somehow lighter and easier, and he quickly looked around him, relieved to discover that no one had seemed to notice. Mr Collins was introducing Fitzwilliam to the ladies, allowing Darcy a brief period for private reflections, and he attempted to puzzle out why he felt so strange.

“Mr Darcy, please do sit, sir.”

The sound of Mrs Collins’s voice recalled Darcy’s attention. He murmured his thanks and took the chair closest to him. He struggled not to stare at Miss Elizabeth, who wore a blue day gown that was simple but complemented her rich brown hair perfectly. Instead, he considered Mrs Collins and Miss Lucas. It took a moment, but he finally remembered meeting them in Meryton. He could not say that he had spoken to them beyond the usual commonplaces, but the two ladies looked familiar.

“It was very kind of you to call, especially so soon after your arrival,” Mrs Collins said. “Do you not agree, Eliza?”

Darcy felt there was some meaning behind the question that he did not understand,

and the slight blush on Miss Elizabeth's cheeks seemed to confirm it.

"Mr Darcy is all consideration," she said.

Mr Collins spoke over her. "Indeed, it is a great honour, and I thank you gentlemen very sincerely. To have you come to my humble?—"

"Would you like some tea, Mr Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam?" Mrs Collins gently interjected. She gave her husband a look that had his expression alter from disapproving to chagrined.

Miss Elizabeth appeared amused; her brow arched and lips twitched. He continued to observe her as Mrs Collins served refreshments.

"Miss Bennet, how long have you been in the neighbourhood?" Fitzwilliam asked. He was sitting in an enviable position, being beside her on an old-fashioned settee.

"About a fortnight."

Fitzwilliam offered Miss Lucas a polite smile. "Have you enjoyed your sojourn? How long do you expect to remain?"

The girl's eyes grew wide, and she gave Miss Elizabeth a pleading look. Mr Collins might have responded in her stead, but his wife subtly shook her head.

"The neighbourhood is very pleasant," Miss Elizabeth said. "What is most agreeable is seeing my friend so happy in her new home."

Darcy spoke before he realised he was going to; it had the effect of Miss Elizabeth directing her attention to him not Fitzwilliam, which was exactly what he wanted. After all, he had met her before, and his cousin had not. "The-the house is a

comfortable one, and the garden delightful.”

Faintly, Darcy heard Mr and Mrs Collins say something, but he paid them no mind. Miss Elizabeth made an indifferent noise, but did not speak, which was disappointing.

“May I enquire after your family? I hope they are well,” he asked her.

She eyed him speculatively. “They are well, thank you. My sister Jane has been in London since the end of December. Have you happened to see her?”

He just managed to stop himself from displaying his shock. Was she aware that Darcy knew of her sister’s presence in town and had concealed it from his friend?

“No, I-I have not been fortunate enough to encounter her,” he said and averted his gaze. In his head, a malicious voice remarked on his lying. It was ungentlemanly, and worse, he had lied to her.

He said nothing further, and after quickly finishing his tea, indicated to his cousin that they ought to depart.

Two days later, despite his inclination, Darcy returned to the parsonage—but only because keeping company at Rosings was even less agreeable than sitting in Mrs Collins’s parlour. Fitzwilliam was busy with he knew not what, which allowed him to slip out of the house unseen—not that there was any reason to keep his intentions to himself.

Mrs Collins welcomed him politely. After offering him refreshments, which he declined, she occupied her sister in a quiet conversation; she even sat in such a way that if he and Miss Elizabeth kept their voices low, the other ladies would not overhear. His heart beat rapidly, and he was vexed to realise he did not know what to

say. Thus, after an awkward reference to the weather, he picked up a newspaper he happened to notice on a nearby table. While pretending to read, he glanced at her repeatedly, the tight band about his chest slowly loosening.

It was very good to see her again! He was loath to admit it even to himself, but he had thought of her often in the months since they had last seen each other. Usually, a little thing brought on a memory of her—hearing a lady laugh and knowing Miss Elizabeth's was more musical, sitting next to a young woman at dinner and seeing that her eyes were not as fine, her conversation not as witty, her attempts to tease not as charming. There was no denying that the pull he felt to her had not diminished since the autumn.

But it is impossible. She is entirely unsuitable. This... feeling I have means nothing. In Hertfordshire, it was because I was miserable after what happened with Georgiana and Wickham, and now it is because of how uncomfortable my aunt makes me. She proposes Anne as my bride, when all I have to do is traverse the short distance to the parsonage to see a lady I know would make me infinitely happier.

Tossing the newspaper onto the table, he stood. "I have taken up enough of your time. Good day, ladies." He bowed and was gone before Mrs Collins—or Miss Elizabeth—had an opportunity to speak.

Mr Collins' sermon that Sunday was as dismal as Darcy had expected it would be. He sat as still as possible, his spine rigid, willing himself not to—yet again—look across the aisle to where a certain lovely young lady sat. Her bonnet and pelisse were a deep, rich blue that reminded him of the summer sky. He wondered if she had spent much time walking since arriving in Kent, concluding that she must have. She would take pleasure in exploring a new region, as well as escaping the confines of the parsonage. She would adore Pemberley.

He was imagining what sort of wife she would be to him, when Fitzwilliam jabbed an

elbow into his side. “He must be almost finished, do you not think? I would swear we have been here half the day already.”

At Darcy’s other side, Anne sniffed loudly. Although he believed it was because she had heard Fitzwilliam’s remark rather than a sign of illness, Mrs Jenkinson began to quietly fuss. Fortunately, Lady Catherine’s increasing deafness combined with her close, scowling study of the parson meant she had not noticed what her relations were doing.

A moment later, Fitzwilliam whispered, “Shall we convince our aunt to invite them to dinner? I would not object to more of Miss Bennet’s company.” He tilted his head towards where Miss Elizabeth sat with her friends.

Darcy’s eyes lingered on her. It would be better for my peace of mind if I avoid her. Nevertheless, he gave a single, curt nod.

CHAPTER THREE

Lady Catherine did not invite the Collinses and their guests to dinner, but she did ask them to spend the evening. Between dinner and their entrance, Darcy kept his eyes on the mantel clock, anxious for Miss Elizabeth's arrival. As soon as he saw her, he felt lighter—he could breathe easier, stand taller without a weight on his shoulders pressing him down, and his mind was stiller.

“Miss Elizabeth, you are looking well this evening. I-I mean, I hope you are well.” He had not meant to compliment her and blushed. He never complimented a lady unless she was a relation. No doubt, Miss Elizabeth already recognised his interest in her, and he would not give her reason to believe his attraction would end with an offer of marriage.

Her eyes sparkled in humour, and she smiled. “Thank you, sir, I am quite well, and I believe this gown suits me admirably. Young ladies must consider these things.”

She and Fitzwilliam began to chat, and Darcy would have joined them but for Lady Catherine.

“Nephew, come explain that nonsense Parliament is planning to Mr Collins. He ought to know about it, and although I have an excellent understanding, it would be better coming from another man.”

Darcy knew well that his aunt had no head for financial matters, but refused to admit it. Duty made him nod and take a chair near them. For the next interval, he half-listened to her, adding the occasional comment as required, and tried not to see how

Mr Collins nodded stupidly as though Lady Catherine was the wisest person in the world. Mrs Collins, Anne, and Miss Lucas were close enough to also participate in the conversation, though they said nothing.

The remainder of Darcy's attention was on Miss Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam. Despite straining his ears, he heard little of what they said to each other. From the snippets he could make out, they mostly spoke of travelling, books, and music, subjects he would be happy to survey with her.

There is much I could tell her about them or anything else she cared to discuss. In other circumstances, he might caress the smooth skin of her face, tuck a curl into position—casual touches that would feel so right .

Darcy almost cried out in joy when coffee was served. It brought about a change, chiefly that he was freed of Lady Catherine and Mr Collins. Once Miss Elizabeth had finished her beverage, Fitzwilliam reminded her that she had promised to play for him. Thus, they went to the pianoforte, and a moment later, Darcy followed them.

Before Miss Elizabeth had been playing two minutes, Lady Catherine was commenting on her lack of skill—which she attributed to not practising enough—and invited her to play the pianoforte in Mrs Jenkinson's room. Darcy met Fitzwilliam's gaze and saw in his eyes the same frustration he felt for the woman's rudeness. Miss Elizabeth, on the other hand, seemed to find it amusing.

Which is just like her. I wonder if she might teach me the habit. There is much that vexes me, and if I could learn to overlook it instead, I might be a happier man.

Elizabeth glanced at him and said, "Have you come to criticise my performance, Mr Darcy? We have heard Lady Catherine's opinion, and perhaps you seek to confirm that I am not worth listening to?"

He smiled, and Fitzwilliam laughed, then said, “He does look severe, does he not? But, truly, no one could find your playing anything other than delightful.”

Again, Miss Elizabeth’s eyes flicked to him. “I believe your cousin might feel otherwise, Colonel. Do not be concerned that I might be insulted. Mr Darcy and I are too familiar with each other for him to take my remarks seriously, and I know better than to seek to earn his approbation.”

Good Lord, how he had missed her teasing! He had no chance to speak before his cousin did, and never had Darcy hated—or envied—him more for his easy manner.

“You are severe upon him. Was he so terrible when you met last autumn?” Fitzwilliam asked.

Her fingers flew across the keys during a particularly quick and difficult part of the Bach concerto, delaying her response. Darcy might have spoken then, but he was too caught up examining her features; he had not been this close to her since he had come to Kent, and there was so much to take in—the soft fullness of her cheeks and lips, the gentle slope of her nose, the fineness of her lashes.

“Mr Darcy and I first met at an assembly. He did not dance, other than with Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley, even though many young ladies were without partners for a good part of the evening. While there are certainly greater crimes, you will agree it was shocking behaviour,” she said, her tone light.

Recalling the night in question—and a certain rude remark he had made about the lady who had soon captured far too much of his notice—Darcy’s insides heated, and he hoped his face would not turn red. “I-I am not fond of the activity, and?—”

Fitzwilliam interjected, “And you cannot truly find a good excuse, other than you were thinking of your own pleasure and not that of the ladies without partners.” He

shook at finger in Darcy's direction. "Admit it."

Miss Elizabeth met Darcy's eyes. He saw humour in hers, and it made him bolder than he might otherwise have been. He found himself saying, "I ought to have extended myself, forgot my own discomfort in favour of alleviating that of others."

Slowly, the corners of her lips turned up. "What an excellent response, sir. You leave me no choice but to forget the entire affair."

Although she turned to the sheets of music again, Darcy had seen enough. She was flirting with him, and his heart swelled with pleasure.

Later that night, Darcy was sitting by the fire in his apartment, comfortably reclined in an armchair, wearing a banyan, and sipping a glass of wine, when Fitzwilliam knocked at the door. Soon, his cousin had poured himself a drink and was sitting in the matching chair. Nothing was said for a long moment. The two men often met in one of their chambers. They were the only places at Rosings where they might reliably find privacy. Anywhere else, their aunt might intrude on their conversation, or one of her servants might see them. Lady Catherine had bullied them into believing they must report everything they witnessed or risk losing their positions. Even if Darcy was fond enough of Anne to consider marrying her, he would not, simply to avoid having Lady Catherine for a mother-in-law.

It was a strange world in which the thought of having Mrs Bennet for a mother-in-law was the more appealing option. The difference is that I would not have to see her. Miss Elizabeth might choose to visit her relations if she liked, but I would not have to go with her, he told himself. Not that I intend to marry her. It is unthinkable.

"I am glad there is decent company to be had at the parsonage," Fitzwilliam said. "Mrs Collins is a pleasant, sensible woman, and her friend is very..."

“Very?” Darcy prompted.

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “Amusing, I suppose, and she is certainly pretty. If she boasted a large dowry, I might give her my heart.”

The mere suggestion of his cousin developing a tendre for Elizabeth Bennet made Darcy’s muscles clench. No doubt, he was also scowling but Fitzwilliam was occupied watching the fire and did not notice, which was just as well; he would want to know why.

“Since you insisted we call on the ladies the morning after our arrival, you must agree,” the colonel said.

“I was being polite.” Darcy took a drink of his wine.

Fitzwilliam chuckled. “I would have said eager.”

“I have no idea what you mean to imply, neither do I care.”

“Must I be suggesting anything other than you leaping at the opportunity to get away from our aunt and cousin? If you meant to be polite, you would have spoken more. By the way, where did you go Thursday? I have been meaning to ask. I looked for you, but no one knew where you were. Have you found a new hiding place, and why have you not shared it with me?”

“You do realise you are not amusing?”

“I have made Miss Bennet laugh often enough. I would ask if you were at the parsonage, but I do not need another of your famous scowls aimed in my direction!”

There was a brief lull in the conversation, which Fitzwilliam broke. “You seem to be

in better spirits. Compared to during our journey here, that is. I had expected your mood to improve only once we are in the carriage bound for London again?—”

“We should stay longer.” Darcy was as surprised by the words as Fitzwilliam appeared to be; his cousin positively gaped at him. “I...I have been helping the steward, and we require more time.” While he did customarily review whatever matters Lady Catherine or the steward wanted his opinion on, there was nothing extraordinary to tend to. He hated the lie, but he just did not want to leave yet. He did feel better than he had lately in town, likely because he was away from the gossips and people speculating on when he would finally get married—as though he was seven-and-thirty not seven-and-twenty.

Soon to be eight-and-twenty, a very good age to be married. If only you could find the right lady, one of the devils in his head said.

He experienced a momentary day-dream of Elizabeth Bennet being his wife, his closest friend, always nearby to brighten his life, but shook it away. It was caused by the obnoxious little creature who seemed determined to make his life a misery.

“You want to stay at Rosings longer?” Fitzwilliam exclaimed. “Are you mad? You know Lady Catherine will see it as evidence that you are growing attached to Anne, as will she!”

Darcy went to the window, roughly pushing aside the heavy curtain to stare into the darkness. He thought he could just make out a light in one of the windows at the parsonage. Was it Miss Elizabeth? She might be awake still, reading. Or thinking of me. She knows how...bewitching I find her, and she must wonder if I shall forget my own self-interest and propose. “I have little desire for their company, yet I have a duty to our aunt. I need a few additional days. That is all. We shall depart as soon as possible.” As soon as I can tear myself away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Attempting to prove to himself that Miss Elizabeth had no hold on him, Darcy had called at the parsonage the next day. He had found her alone, Mrs Collins and Miss Lucas having gone into the village. The visit had almost been a disaster. They had spoken of the roads and how easy a distance fifty miles was, and he had almost proposed! The words were on the tip of his tongue. He blamed the thought of her always remaining at Longbourn, withering to nothingness, her wit and the joy she radiated as the sun did light, fading away. He could rescue her from such a fate.

Fortunately, Mrs Collins had returned before he completely lost himself, and he had fled the house.

The following morning, he and Fitzwilliam were riding when they encountered her taking a walk. After exchanging a few pleasantries, they continued their separate excursions. Surreptitiously watching her go, the gentle swaying of her skirt and curls, Darcy experienced a sense of longing so strong he could not breathe for a moment. It was almost as if she took a part of him with her.

“She is an agreeable young woman,” Fitzwilliam said warmly, forcing Darcy’s attention back to him.

“As I believe you have said many times this past week. Since I have not disagreed, I do not understand the need to repeat yourself.” He tapped his horse’s side and began to trot, his cousin keeping pace.

“I suppose it is because I had no notion we would have such good company during

our stay, or any, really.” Fitzwilliam sighed. “If only I could meet a lady like her but... better. You know what I mean. More suited to my needs.”

Darcy tightened his grip on the reins.

“Not that I have even the inkling of those sorts of feelings for her,” Fitzwilliam continued. “If I was worried about my heart, I would have left you here rather than risk injuring either her or myself. For her sake, I hope she meets a decent man who can give her a good life. It will be difficult, given her lack of dowry. What is her family like?”

There was a slight pause before he answered. He could give her the life she deserved, one far beyond any she likely had ever expected. He was rich enough that it would not matter all that much that she brought nothing to their marriage. But then there was her family. “I can say nothing good about the mother and younger sisters, though the older sister knows how to comport herself properly. Mr Bennet is negligent, despite his intelligence.” A wave of hopelessness almost brought tears to his eyes. How could he ever entertain the thought of marrying a lady with such relations? “Let us speak of something else. Anything other than people so wholly unconnected to us.”

“Mr Darcy,” Miss Elizabeth said, dropping into a curtsy.

He did not return the greeting, lost in the sight of her lean figure framed by the brilliant blue sky. He had hoped to meet her that morning and had quietly left Rosings early to avoid his family, especially Fitzwilliam, who would have joined him without questioning whether he was intruding.

But I need to be with her alone! The reason I remained beyond my original intention was to exorcise her from my mind, and I can hardly do that if we are always in company with others.

If he had other motives for staying in the neighbourhood, he chose not to recall them—especially at present. She was such a tempting vision. If he did not keep tight control of his actions, he would gather her into his arms and promise her whatever she desired.

“I shall leave you to—” she said, half-turned to the path she had just taken.

“No!” Darcy gave a small cough in an attempt to moderate the urgency in his voice. “Th-that is, good morning, Miss Elizabeth. I trust you are well. You were headed towards the stream? That is a fine idea. Shall we?” He extended a hand, indicating the direction they must go.

She regarded him for a moment before giving him a brief smile and beginning to walk. The lane was wide enough to allow them to remain beside each other.

“Are you enjoying your visit with Mrs Collins?” he asked.

“I am. She is satisfied with her new life, and I am pleased for her.”

Miss Elizabeth’s voice was tight, and he wondered if she entirely meant it. She could not rejoice to know her friend was married to a fool.

“What think you of the neighbourhood? Do you find it very different from that about Longbourn?”

Her brow furrowed, and she glanced at him. “Not particularly. As you noted the other day, the two are only fifty miles of good road apart. Nevertheless, the environs are pretty and make a pleasant setting for my exercise.”

“From early in our acquaintance, I had the impression that you liked to be out of doors as often as possible.”

She gave a short laugh. “Ah, yes. Miss Bingley remarked several times that I am a great walker. Have you seen much of her in London?”

Hearing what he thought was sharpness in her tone, he looked at her, but then decided it was nothing. “Not frequently, no. You would enjoy exploring new places, ones with greater variety. The north—such as near my estate in Derbyshire—would interest you. I suppose you have read about the Lakes and Scotland and more. Would you like to see them yourself?”

Her response was slow in coming. “I have, yes, and I would. Whether I ever shall have that privilege, who is to say?”

I am. He was glad she appreciated the difficulty of his position, because of course what she was truly asking was whether he would ever be able to propose and take her, his beloved wife, on trips to such regions.

“I do customarily walk every morning at about this hour,” she continued. “This path, and the one through the copse, are particular favourites.” She pointed to the left, which Darcy took as her showing him which nearby woods she had been referring to. He knew the one as surely as he knew her true purpose in supplying the information. She was telling him when and where he might find her; she was inviting him to join her! His heart sang, and he felt like he was floating several inches above the ground.

They spoke about travel books for a short while, which brought them back to her stay in the neighbourhood.

“As I said earlier, if I could go to more of the places I have read about, I would be well pleased,” Miss Elizabeth said. “For now, I content myself with being here, just as I am happy when I am in London with my uncle and aunt and little cousins. Sometimes a change is good for one, even if the change is not...spectacular. You might not appreciate it as much as I do, since I imagine you travel frequently, to stay

with friends and family, if nothing else.”

“That is true, though I much prefer being at Pemberley or my town house. Yet, I have obligations, such as coming here.” Briefly, Darcy considered that, if she was his wife, she would stay at the manor, which would make the prospect of such sojourns far less daunting. “You would find it agreeable to stay near the parsonage. You might spend time with Mrs Collins.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I was thinking of Rosings,” he said, still half lost in his day-dream and what the future might bring. “My aunt should not have suggested you go to Mrs Jenkinson’s chamber to practise the pianoforte. If you wish more time at the instrument, I would ensure it was in a more comfortable room. But I suppose you will depart soon enough, and it will not matter this year. Beside the instrument in the drawing room, there should still be one in the old music room.”

He paused. “I am certain there was yet another. Whenever she could, my mother played the pianoforte for hours every day, and I know she passed a great deal of our time here in that pursuit. She liked little better than music, and as a boy, I would sit with her. It was near the guest chambers, I believe. We shall need to search for it, perhaps make it a room for your use alone.”

Miss Elizabeth stumbled over her words, which was unlike her. It drew his attention, allowing him to shake off his reflective mood. He realised he was not entirely sure what he had said, and sought clues in her speech.

“I assure you, sir, I took no affront to Lady Catherine’s offer. I am aware that I do not practise the pianoforte as much as I should, but I am content to occupy my time while in the neighbourhood on other activities, especially being with Charlotte. She is why I am here, after all.”

“Naturally.” That afternoon, he would seek out the other instruments—just out of curiosity. With the question in his mind, he was interested to see where they were placed, and if those rooms needed refreshing in anticipation of someone wishing to use them. Georgiana might, and there was always the possibility that Miss Elizabeth...

As they continued to walk in silence for a while, Darcy observed her, relishing the peace that came with being near her. They had long since reached the stream and presently were on another path that would soon see them go in opposite directions, him to Rosings manor and her the parsonage. Another day, he might go with her to call on the Collinses, but as much as he wanted the additional time with Miss Elizabeth, he required a period alone to review the many thoughts racing through his mind.

Yet, since they still had several minutes together, he should not waste the opportunity to understand her better, to determine how well she might fit into his life. “Have you attended many concerts or the theatre? I am aware there are occasionally performances in Meryton, but they cannot compare to those in London or a more significant town.”

“That might be true, but I have greatly enjoyed those I have seen, and I am grateful for the effort expended to make them diverting. Why do you not tell me about your favourite performances, sir?”

Darcy was a little surprised by her question, but supposed she might like to know more about him. After all, she was hoping, perhaps increasingly expecting, him to make her an offer of marriage, especially after this morning. He took a moment to consider what would be most instructive before answering.

CHAPTER FIVE

Darcy took a slow tour of the drawing room. He was with his relations, awaiting the party from the parsonage, who were coming to dinner. Earlier, Fitzwilliam had remarked how pleased it made him.

“The hours seem much shorter when they are here, do they not?” his cousin had asked him. “Please, I implore you, tell me we are leaving Kent soon! I have had about as much of being here as I can bear.”

Darcy knew he could not delay their departure much longer, but he did not want to go while Elizabeth remained in the neighbourhood. He mumbled a response, and reflected that, as much as his family often vexed him, he loved and respected them, and trusted they felt the same for him. It made him especially glad, because he had decided to marry Elizabeth Bennet. Fitzwilliam would welcome her as a new cousin, and even Lady Catherine would accept their marriage, once she overcame her disappointment that he had not chosen Anne.

Darcy had encountered Elizabeth—he could no longer think of her as Miss Elizabeth—every morning for the past week, apart from the day rain kept everyone at home. Twice she had not been on either of the paths she had mentioned during their initial walk together, but he thought nothing of it. She understood that he was struggling to decide whether to propose or not, and she sought to distance herself, to give him time for reflection. He preferred this explanation to the other one that had come to mind—that his presence injured her knowing that it was unlikely he would make her an offer.

Soon all doubt will be at an end! He would leap at the first opportunity to propose. How happy they would be!

At last, the Collinses and Miss Lucas arrived, but Elizabeth was not with them.

“I am afraid she is not feeling well this afternoon,” Mrs Collins said.

“Which she bitterly regrets,” Mr Collins said, bowing to Lady Catherine for the second time. “I assure you, she did her utmost to be strong enough, such was her hatred of disappointing you and missing the treat of your kindness.”

His aunt huffed. “I do not hold with young ladies always fancying themselves to be unwell. I had not thought she was such a silly girl, but...”

Darcy heard no more. Was Elizabeth genuinely ill? Momentarily, he felt weak, as if someone or something was trying to keep them apart. He would not permit it, he could not?—

“I say, Darcy, are you well?”

“I am. Just...hungry,” Darcy said, although he had no appetite. The only thing he wanted was to see Elizabeth, and he was determined to do so, if only to assure himself of her well-being.

And then it struck him. Elizabeth was not unwell; she had remained at the parsonage to give him an opportunity to propose! She knew that he would find a way to go to her. If he did not, she would take it as a sign that he had decided against her.

But I have not, and I shall be with you as soon as possible!

It was thus that, after eating his dinner, he left the house, telling the butler to inform

Lady Catherine that he had gone for a walk, should she happen to notice he was missing.

Less than ninety minutes later, he was quickly stamping back to Rosings. How could he have so misjudged Elizabeth Bennet? What had ever possessed him to like her, to think that she might be the lady who would comfort and love him through the long years of their lives, that she might be the perfect wife for him?

He could still hear her saying, “I have never desired your good opinion.” There was an extra element to it, as if the mocking tone of self-doubt he carried with him had been combined with hers.

She had said that she was indifferent to him, that her feelings had always been against him. “Despite every interaction telling me otherwise, despite the indications of her regard I saw, I was mistaken. No, I should not doubt myself. It is her I should doubt. She knew what she was doing. She decided from the moment we met that she hated me, knew that I liked her, and sought to make me miserable!”

Again, the memory of her words struck him. “I have every reason in the world to think ill of you.” She, the woman he adored, had called him ungentlemanly.

Darcy shook his head, batting at whatever had landed on his cheek—likely a piece of leaf or dirt. Vaguely, he recognised that his hand was wet. Whatever it was had got in his eyes, which stung. His steps slowed, almost as though a strong wind was blowing him backwards, grabbing at his limbs to keep him from reaching the house. He wanted to sink to the ground, sob, and hide from the world, just as he did the day his mother died and then, years later, when his father had. Both times, the blue devils had overtaken him. He felt them all around him currently, which was hardly to be wondered at. He had given his heart to a woman who did not want it.

Although his pace was no faster than that of a snail, he stumbled and nearly fell to his

knees. It was as if a thunder clap had exploded in his head. The blue devils. He had not noticed them pestering him in days—had only occasionally experienced that oppressiveness of spirit since arriving in Kent. That was wrong; he had not felt it at all since learning Elizabeth was in the neighbourhood. He had been miserable enough in the carriage with Fitzwilliam, as his cousin had remarked. But then, as soon as Darcy had seen her...

His head whipped around, and he looked in the direction of the parsonage. His mouth hung open, and his breath became laboured. Could it be? Was she his shield against the darkness, the one who, by her mere presence, would remind him of all that was good in the world, all the reasons to be glad for each new day? Of course she was. He had already known that, but had he fully understood how vital she was to his well-being?

Other aspects of their recent interview flashed through his mind like a rapid succession of images. She had been angry that his actions had caused her sister to experience disappointment and misery. He did not question how she knew he had interfered in Bingley's affairs and kept the couple apart; what mattered was that Elizabeth had been fierce in her defence of Miss Bennet, which served to remind him why he loved her.

Beyond that, her chief charge against him was Wickham. Darcy had known his erstwhile friend was likely to spread his usual lies, but he had not cared. "Because I did not care what anyone in Meryton thought of me. Their opinion was irrelevant, because to me, they did not matter."

Then he recalled what he had said to her—how he had insulted her family, whom she surely loved as much as he did his own—and that he had struggled with his feelings for her, that he had never wanted to admire her.

"Dear Lord, what have I done?" he cried. He covered his face with his hands and

shook his head, whispering ‘No’ over and over again. Letting his hands drop to his sides, he said, “This cannot be the end. I refuse to accept it.”

How could he, when he was certain they belonged together? Elizabeth was the only person who could keep him from a life of unhappiness and loneliness. In return, he would dedicate his life to protecting and loving her, to ensuring she experienced joy every day and had cause to laugh and smile, to always making sure her eyes sparkled with delight.

With long strides, he began to walk back to her, back to the only woman in the world he could ever marry.

As he approached the parsonage, Darcy was relieved to see a light in the window of the parlour. He said a silent prayer that it meant Elizabeth was in the room. Knocking at the door for admittance was impossible; it was enough that he had called on her once. That he could say was nothing other than a moment of politeness, a desire to ensure she was well. Thus, he trampled through the garden Mr Collins was so proud of, hoping he was not doing too much damage, and tapped at the window. He had to repeat the action twice more before he saw Elizabeth’s startled face peering around the edge of the curtain. He motioned that she should join him outside, she vigorously shook her head, and it was only after he clasped his hands together in a pleading gesture and mouthed the word ‘please’ that, with evident reluctance, she nodded.

“I shall return in a moment,” he heard Elizabeth call to the servant. “I do not need anyone to accompany me.”

When she appeared in front of him, he immediately felt easier—despite her raised eyebrows.

He spoke softly to avoid being overheard. “I am very, very sorry for what happened earlier this evening. I cannot apologise enough.”

“Mr Darcy, I do not see any purpose?—”

He touched her arm lightly, instantly withdrawing his hand. “Please, let me speak. I believe there has been a gross misunderstanding between us. I am entirely at fault, yet I beg you to give me an opportunity to explain. Indeed, even if you hate me for the rest of your life, there are several matters we must discuss—for your own well-being and that of your sisters. Will you please meet me tomorrow morning where we can talk freely?”

She opened her mouth as though to speak, but the only sound she made was one of indecision; he could read the same emotion in her eyes. After he repeated his request, and after she examined him for a long moment, she nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “In the grove where you left your horse yesterday morning. I shall be there by eight o’clock or thereabouts.”

“Thank you.” He added as much sincerity to his voice as he could muster despite the way his legs shook and head swam.

Elizabeth gave him a long look, which held no little suspicion, gave a single nod, and walked away.

CHAPTER SIX

Before he completed his greeting the next morning, Elizabeth interjected, “Please say what you will. I do not believe there is anything left for us to speak of, and I would prefer to have this over as quickly as possible.”

It was not an auspicious beginning, and Darcy wished he had not burnt the notes he had written throughout the night. He had been unable to sleep, and knowing how important this conversation was to their future, he had scribbled his thoughts again and again, thinking of everything it was essential he impart to her.

“Very well. Of course. Yes. First, thank you for coming. I have no wish to cause you discomfort or—” He sighed and pulled his hat from his head for no reason other than to occupy his hands; if he did not, he might be tempted to reach for her. “May we walk? What I have to tell you is not easy, and it might make it slightly less difficult to say and hear.”

She nodded and led the way, choosing the widest lane, whether consciously or unconsciously he did not know. The morning was overcast, and the air felt heavy with moisture; he expected it would rain, but with luck, not until later in the day.

“I cannot recall how I spoke to you last night without shame,” he began. “From the first words I said until the last before I fled Mrs Collins’s parlour, I could not have chosen to approach you in a worse way if I had actively set out to make you despise me. Which, as it transpires, you already did.”

“Mr Darcy.”

Before she could continue, he shook his head. “I apologise. It sounded like I was indulging in self-pity, and truly I was not. You have ample reason to think poorly of me, and yesterday only added to it. I am ashamed, but not only for...recent events. I was halfway to Rosings after leaving you the first time when I recalled what either of us had said, and I soon realised that you were—understandably—mistaken about two important matters. Regardless of whether your opinion of me ever changes, I must ask that you let me explain them from my perspective.”

“If you like, though please allow me to say that I, too, have reflected, and as much as I do not regret the essentials of what I said, I was too strident in how I expressed myself, and I am sorry for it.”

Darcy stopped and stared at her. She also stood still. “You have nothing to apologise for!” Her features were largely hidden by the wide brim of her bonnet, but he saw the curved edge of her jaw, which appeared to be clenched. He wished he had the right to cup it with his hand, to coax her to smile and forget everything that made her unhappy.

She shrugged and resumed her slow steps; he kept to her side.

“You charged me with separating Miss Bennet and Bingley.” At once, he felt her stiffen beside him, but he persisted, explaining how he had seen no symptom of admiration in her sister, how he had worried that his friend would end up in a marriage based on unequal affection. “I did not wish to see him unhappy, to regret the choice he had made. While I gave him my honest opinion of your sister’s sentiments, I also participated in a lie. I knew Miss Bennet had called on his sister, but agreed that Bingley might behave thoughtlessly—not in his best interests—if he knew. It was wrong of me, and I anticipate he will be very angry when I inform him.”

“You intend to tell him what I told you?” She sounded astonished, and again, she ceased walking for a moment.

He nodded, but moved on, not certain how long he had before she decided she had no more interest in listening to him. “The matter of Mr Wickham is much more difficult for me to discuss. I do not know exactly what he told you of our connexion, but I ask that you permit me to tell you of it myself. Colonel Fitzwilliam can confirm everything I say.”

With that, he began a lengthy recitation of their childhood together, how his boyhood friend had changed as they became young men, what had happened after his father’s death, and lastly, how he had deceived Georgiana in Ramsgate. Elizabeth listened attentively, occasionally exclaiming in shock or explaining the contrasting information Wickham had given her. By the time he was speaking of Georgiana, she had sat down on a fallen log, saying she did not care if it was damp and begging him to continue his story when he expressed alarm.

“Oh, how terrible!” she cried once he was finished. “Your poor sister. Mr Wickham has such an appearance of goodness?—”

“Whereas I have forgotten how to comport myself as a gentleman. I am aware how easily he makes friends.”

He stood across from her, leaning against a tree, and the look she gave him was almost admonishing.

“Appearances are all well and good, but what is inside of us is far more important,” she said.

He wanted to ask her what she thought of him at present, but was afraid of her response. It was too soon to expect her opinion to have changed greatly enough to satisfy him.

They were silent for a while, until she said, “May I enquire how your sister is now? Is

she still much affected by what happened?”

He gazed at her, and by the way she blushed, the depths of his adoration must have shown, despite him not intending that it would. She was kind and good and compassionate and, to all the reasons he wanted to marry her, knowing she would be the most excellent sister to Georgiana was added. “She is well, thank you. She has always been shy, and I am afraid the events of last summer will make it more difficult for her to overcome it, but Fitzwilliam and my aunt assure me she will naturally become less awkward in society once she is a little older. I refer to his mother, not Lady Catherine, who does not know of Ramsgate.”

She smiled softly. “I am glad. I have seen that you and the colonel are close, and now you have mentioned his mother. Do you spend much time with that part of your family?”

“Georgiana and I would both say that our dearest relations are the colonel, his brother, and their parents, along with my father’s brother and his family. We have other relations—such as Lady Catherine and her daughter—but we are not as close to any of them.”

He asked if she had family beyond those he already knew of, and they spent a minute or two on the subject. She then stood and brushed off her skirt.

“You have given me a great deal to think over, sir. I believe I should return to the house before anyone questions why I have been absent so long. Thank you for confiding all of this to me. I...” He encouraged her to continue and watched as she took a deep breath. “I am heartily ashamed of myself.”

“What? Why?” he exclaimed, taking a step towards her, his hand outstretched.

She laughed, although it was short and feeble. “I was a fool. Could I have misjudged

you more if I had deliberately set out to be completely wrong in my estimation of your character? I do not say you are not partly to blame, but I believed Mr Wickham, despite the fact that he was a stranger and shared his lies about you when we hardly knew each other. Lying convincingly might be his true talent. I abused you dreadfully last night?—”

“You said nothing of me I did not deserve.”

Her smile was a touch more genuine this time. “I do not agree, but let us save debating that point for another time.”

He felt an overwhelming urge to touch her to prove he was not dreaming, and his mouth was almost too dry to permit speech. “Will there be another time?”

She observed him for what felt like half an hour before nodding. “I think there will be. I think that, upon reflection, we shall realise we have more to say to each other. If you agree, we might meet again tomorrow morning.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

They had remained together above an hour the next day. Their conversation had traversed some of the same subjects, but to Darcy's delight, they also spoke of more general matters, such as the volume of poetry Elizabeth was presently reading and his affinity for historical works. When it was time to separate, it was with the understanding that they would see each other the following day, which was Sunday, but might not be able to speak privately. It made him anxious. His time in Kent was quickly coming to an end, and he longed for some certainty regarding when they would be together again.

"I do not know if my aunt will invite you to spend the evening at Rosings, as she did last week," he had said. "Even if she does, you have seen enough of her behaviour to know it would be impossible for us to exchange more than commonplaces."

She had laughed. "Will you think poorly of me if I say I am not certain I wish her to issue an invitation?"

"Nothing you say could make me think poorly of you."

His comment had made her blush. It thrilled him to know he could affect her in such a way, and he cautiously believed her view of him had materially improved.

He had added, "Although I love and respect my aunt, she is not the easiest company, and some of her behaviour towards you has been abominable." After criticising her family as severely as he had, Darcy wanted to show that he was not blind to the faults of his own relations.

“I cannot like how she orders Charlotte about, but it is not my business, and, in some ways, Lady Catherine has been very generous to her and Mr Collins,” Elizabeth had said. “Unless the weather is poor, I see no reason why I shall not continue my custom of walking each morning on Monday.”

She had not looked at him as she spoke, and there was the slightest edge of uncertainty in her tone. He took it to mean she was uncomfortable with their changing connexion. He had not responded beyond nodding and smiling—but not too broadly, which might frighten her—when she glimpsed in his direction.

As predicted, no invitation was extended. Darcy suspected it was because he had informed Lady Catherine—yet again—that he would never marry Anne, for the first time also hinting that his interest lay elsewhere, and that he and Fitzwilliam would depart in a couple of days.

Early Monday, Darcy encountered Elizabeth along the path that led to the stream. They bowed and curtsied as usual, but then strolled in silence for a time.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said, “I hope you understand that I deeply regret my past behaviour. To know how you and others perceived me has been...edifying. I do not blame you for what you thought of me. Do not mistake my meaning. I accept the justice of your words the other night.”

“And I hope you understand that I recognise my errors of judgment, as well. You have been reluctant to do so, which is very gallant of you, but I shall continue to insist on it until I succeed in making you agree.”

He would never view her errors as comparable to his own, neither did he imagine anyone else familiar with the situation would. “I cannot remain much longer. I have already extended my stay, and Fitzwilliam is anxious to return to town. My sister is there and longs to see us.”

“That is understandable. When do you leave? I ought to say I am not surprised and had rather expected this news.” She laughed, then added. “Have you told Lady Catherine? I am afraid she will not be pleased.”

“I did, and she was not.” He wished Elizabeth felt the same. “Unless I tell Fitzwilliam why I am reluctant to go, we ought to depart tomorrow.”

She nodded and stopped to examine a tiny white bloom. Sighing, she said, “I do love the spring, especially once the flowers emerge to colour the world.” She met his gaze. “You must return to your family. Remaining here so that we might stroll the countryside and chat for an hour a day is not a good reason to ignore your sister and your responsibilities.”

It felt as though she had stabbed him through the heart, and he looked away to hide his pain. But then he felt her hand on his arm, and she continued. “I appreciate that you have stayed so that we might address our misunderstandings. I am very glad we have done so, both because I know I have learnt more about myself and how I might improve as a person, and because...because I am glad we have become friends.”

His eyes swung back to hers. Was there reason to hope that she might like him enough to accept a second proposal—not today, but soon? “I could not go knowing we...” Words failed him. How could he express what he felt without saying too much, and possibly frightening her away?

“Were not friends.” She offered him a gentle smile.

He nodded and resisted the urge to tug at his neckcloth, which suddenly seemed to be strangling him. “Do you think that if we continued to meet, we might become even better friends?”

There was a pause before she said, “I believe that is entirely possible.”

Her hand was still on his arm, and he covered it with one of his own.

“Maria and I shall not be here much longer either. Our departure is fixed for Saturday. We go to my aunt and uncle in London, where I anticipate staying for about a fortnight before Jane, Maria, and I return to Meryton.”

At this news, Darcy immediately began to make plans. “Miss Bennet remains in town?”

She nodded. “Did you not realise?”

“No. That might work out very well. I believe Bingley is there at the moment. I had already decided to speak to him of your sister as soon as possible. I do not know what his present feelings are, but I will ensure he knows where he can call on her.”

Her smile was brilliant, and Darcy felt like he had won the second best prize any mortal man could, the first being her agreeing to be his wife. “I can ask nothing more of you. I accept that you were doing what you thought was in your friend’s best interests. Charlotte once told me she felt that few beyond those who know Jane intimately would understand what was in her heart. I am not surprised you could not see how much she liked him.”

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze; she had yet to remove it from his arm which left him quietly rejoicing. “What about Wickham? I have not been able to determine the correct way to ensure his true character is understood. I could write to your father.”

A crease appeared between her brows, and she regarded him for a brief moment. “I think the news would be better coming from me.” Darcy took that to mean it would be more believable if she told him. “I would not tell him everything you confided to me, but I could say truthfully that I met both you and Colonel Fitzwilliam here, and it came to light that our understanding of Mr Wickham was faulty, that he is not

honourable and poses a danger to respectable young ladies.”

“That is an excellent suggestion. I shall have my solicitor prepare some proof to send to Mr Bennet to confirm my claims.” When she protested that it was not necessary, he added, “I insist.”

They stood, doing nothing more than looking at each other, for a short while until Elizabeth averted her eyes, her cheeks charmingly pink. Her hand slipped from his arm, but once they continued their walk, she wrapped it around his elbow.

“When we met like this the morning after...that day, I was not sure what to expect except perhaps to feel vexed,” she said. “I left with so many thoughts and emotions coursing through me that it is a wonder I could remain upright. But I have come to enjoy these occasions.”

“May I call on you while you are in town? Unless you tell me otherwise, I shall do everything in my power to ensure we have time together so that you can know me better.”

She chuckled and in a teasing voice said, “I rather thought the answer to your question was obvious, sir. I have been attempting to hint that I would not object to seeing you, so that we can both know and understand each other better. Perhaps now that I am no longer always thinking meanly of you, you will find I am not quite so interesting a person.”

He shook his head. “I assure you, that is not?—”

She began to laugh, and he stopped speaking in favour of rolling his eyes and also laughing. In that moment, he fell even more in love with her. She was bold—but not in an unappealing manner—good humoured, beautiful, and being with her made him happy. Knowing her had already made him a better man, and she would continue to

do so for the rest of their lives, because he was confident they would marry.

Darcy inhaled deeply. There was nothing weighing him down, no mocking voices in his head, only Elizabeth Bennet by his side and every promise of a bright future. Out of the corner of his eye, he seemed to catch a glimpse of a little blue devil sitting in a tree. This time, the creature was smiling approvingly rather than waiting to pester him into the doldrums. Its message was clear: as long as Darcy was not stupid enough to destroy his growing connexion to Elizabeth, it and its comrades would never have as much power over him again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

July 9, 1812

Three months had passed since his and Elizabeth's parting in Kent, and tomorrow, they would be married, as would Bingley and Miss Jane Bennet. Currently, Darcy and his very-soon-to-be-wife were walking in the gardens at Netherfield Park. Miss Bingley had arranged a celebratory dinner to honour the two couples. In addition to the Bennets, Hursts, and Bingleys, the guests included about ten of Darcy's relations. Lady Catherine had been invited but she had declined. Darcy had been correct that his aunt would accept his marriage to someone other than Anne, but it had been far more difficult than he had supposed. She had attempted to argue him out of his choice until Darcy had informed her that he was prepared to sever their connexion if she did not embrace Elizabeth as her niece-in-law. That and a few words from his uncle, the earl, had done the trick.

"How many walks of this nature do you suppose we have shared?" Elizabeth asked.

He chuckled. "I could not begin to guess. I suppose if I had a sharp pen, several sheets of paper, and a calendar, I might calculate it."

During her sojourn in London that spring, they had often visited one park or another, wandering aimlessly and talking. He valued each such excursion, as he did the occasions he called at the Gardiners' home or Elizabeth had come to his house to see Georgiana, the entertainments they had gone to—truly every moment he was able to spend with her. He had already loved her, but during that period, she had learnt to love him; at present, he knew their affection for each other was deep and enduring.

“I can hardly wait to see Pemberley and explore it with you as my guide. Everyone has described the estate in such glowing terms that my anticipation to be there is almost as great as is my anticipation to be Mrs Darcy.”

He stood still and stared into her upturned face. “You know the penalty for such a ridiculous speech, Miss Bennet,” he said.

Her eyes danced in merriment. “Why do you think I said it, Mr Darcy?”

Both of them were smiling as their lips met. They resumed their stroll several minutes later.

“I have often wondered why you agreed to meet me the morning after my disastrous proposal. I shall be forever grateful that you gave me the opportunity to apologise, but why did you?” he asked.

Her arm was around his, and she tightened her hold. “It is very simple. You came back and immediately sought to apologise and explain your actions and the truth about Mr Wickham. I could see as soon as we began to talk that you were willing to recognise the mistakes you made and accept my regrets for misjudging you.”

It had taken some convincing for him to agree that she had anything to regret, but when he understood that it was important to her that he admit she could make mistakes—and that she had as much right as he to wish to correct them—he had relented. Neither of them were perfect, but no one was. It was even possible that they would inadvertently injure each other in the future, but they would soon be husband and wife, and with the love and respect they shared, he knew they would always seek to earn and grant forgiveness when necessary. It might not be part of the marriage vows they would exchange the next morning, but it was nevertheless one they had made.

“I love you, Elizabeth. I intend to remind you of that, in words and deeds, every day.”

“And I love you, Darcy. I am not so naïve to believe we shall avoid occasions of sorrow, but I pray they will be rare, and I promise to always be by your side to lessen your burdens.”

Once again, they kissed, then they stood, arms wrapped around each other and foreheads pressed together, until it was time to return indoors.

When Elizabeth entered the church the next morning, the first thing that struck Darcy was her beauty and the extent of his good fortune to have won her heart. The second was the blue ribbons with which she had adorned her hair and gown. He had asked her to include the colour in her wedding outfit, if possible. Whereas once he had only associated it with melancholia, currently, it was a colour of hope and possibility and brightness.

He smiled broadly as he watched her approach, and did not cease doing so all day, despite how his cheeks ached. From saying their vows in front of their families and friends, to the festive breakfast at Longbourn, to being alone with her—his wife!—in the carriage as they travelled to London, to whispering words of love as they drifted off to sleep in each other’s arms that night, he smiled and felt more happiness than he had believed it possible for any man to experience or expect. And it was all thanks to the blue devils that had guided him to his Elizabeth.