



Ever After End

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Category: Historical

Description: In this delightful Pride and Prejudice Variation, fortune takes a surprising turn for the Bennet family when Elizabeth Bennet wins a lottery, securing her family's financial future, even as Elizabeth learns that every blessing comes with curses of its own. A decision of Mr Collins improves fortunes even more for Jane Bennet, who finally feels free to focus on her own happiness. However, fate shifts once more when the Bingley party never arrives at Netherfield. Instead, they settle at The Gables, an estate in the charming village of Highbury.

Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy cross paths with the ladies at Ever After End, a grand estate owned by the enigmatic and benevolent Theodosia Darlington, who throws matchmaking house parties for select marriage minded individuals each summer, and whom Darcy calls godmother. Despite their best intentions, to assist Mr Darlington with an estate matter, both gentlemen soon find themselves captivated by the spirited Elizabeth and the serene Jane. As other guests, eager for matches, weave webs of admiration and competition, the peaceful countryside of Somerset becomes a stage for surprises, misunderstandings, and unexpected unions.

Away from the familiar pressures and prying eyes of Meryton, Elizabeth and Darcys sparks ignite their interest in one another, while Jane and Bingley face their own journey to happiness. Amid the lively games, morning strolls, and lingering glances, true love emerges in a tale of wit, charm, and second chances, proving that the path to happiness is often unpredictable—and ever enchanting. Ever After End invites readers to a world where fortunes rise, hearts awaken, and love blossoms in the most unexpected of places.

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PROLOGUE

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Elizabeth Bennet stood on the pavement in London and read the sign on the brick wall behind the man selling tickets on the street in Cheapside. “The Third and Last Grand City Lottery of Freehold Houses . What is a lottery of freehold houses, Uncle?”

“It is a way for architects and home builders to make a great deal more profit than they would by selling a new house on the market,” Uncle Gardiner explained. “A freehold house means that you own not only the entire building, but also the land the building sits on. Ownership will never revert back to a landlord. Most freehold houses in London sell either at auction or by lottery. Think of it this way, Lizzy; you might never be able to buy a house, but perhaps you could afford to risk four pounds, yes? And even if you did not win the grand prize, which for this lottery is a brand new house and a sum of money, you might win something. There are many people willing to risk four pounds on such a chance. They will draw many prizes, because they will sell tens of thousands of tickets. Perhaps hundreds of thousands. If you won the smallest prize, it is still five hundred pounds. That is not a house, but it is still an incredible sum of money to many people. It does not say how much money comes with the house if you won the grand prize. What is the sum in question, sir?”

“‘Tis not fixed,” said the businessman behind the table. “‘Twill depend upon the number of tickets sold, a percentage of the profit. Not less than five thousand certainly. Perhaps as high as twenty or thirty, but there are no guarantees.”

“And is there a charitable endeavour attached?” asked Uncle Gardiner. Then he said to Elizabeth, “There is often a promise for a donation to a charity, to soothe the worries of those who feel that gambling is wicked.”

“Five percent of the profit will go to the parish schools in the east end, sir,” came the man’s reply.

“Do you think gambling is wrong, Uncle?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

“Well, Lizzy, there are different kinds of gambling, and in my opinion, they are each quite different in terms of good or wicked. Take the parish game night when you all purchase a game card and play housey-housey? 1 . You might win a prize, or you might not, but you had fun, and what was important was that funds were raised for the parish. That is not particularly wicked, in my opinion. Then there are my sister’s little card parties. People who are not poor or in need, betting a few pennies on a night of entertainment is also of little danger, though I do believe ladies should exert caution, particularly girls like Lydia and Kitty, who have limited pin money, and in my opinion, ought to be playing for buttons.”

Her uncle continued. “Then there are the rich or worse, not so rich men who go to gambling clubs or taverns, and wager large sums of money that they cannot afford to lose, some taking food from their childrens’ very mouths, others losing their daughters’ or wives’ dowries, some so bad they lose their estates, the very homes and lands their families have held for generations. That is certainly very wicked. This here is relatively innocuous in my opinion, as long as one is not spending funds they cannot afford to lose, or taking food from their children. When I sit down at a table to play cards with other men, I view it as an amusement rather than a way to win money. I decide before I begin how much I am willing to spend on that night’s entertainment, and when or if I lose that much, I stop. The key to everything is moderation, Lizzy. This is my opinion, though there are those who are very pious, who believe that all gambling is evil.”

“Well I certainly cannot afford to lose four pounds. Papa gave me funds to spend on clothes while I was here. He would not be pleased if I returned with a lottery ticket instead,” said Elizabeth.

“How much can you afford to spend?” her uncle asked curiously.

“Well...” Elizabeth said uncertainly. “Perhaps a pound? But that is not enough to buy a ticket.”

“You could buy a share of a ticket, and the prize would be split between you and another after you won, but instead, let us do this. If there was anyone who would benefit from owning a home and receiving a large cash prize, it would be you, Lizzy. You spend your pound, and I will pay for the rest of your ticket. It can be your birthday present.”

“Uncle, ‘tis too much!” Elizabeth objected as her uncle ignored her and purchased the ticket.

“Not at all, my dear. Now, here, keep this ticket safe in your reticule, and hide it when you get home. Then you may spend the next few weeks thinking about what you will do if you win. That is the best part of a lottery ticket.”

1 ? Housey-housey was the form of BINGO that was played in England as far back as 1700. It was invented in 16th century Italy.

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CHAPTER 1

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, sir,” Darcy’s butler Ferguson said as he announced Darcy’s cousin to the study in his London house.

“Richard!” Darcy exclaimed, getting to his feet, and clapping his cousin on the back. “You were not expected again for months!”

“There has been a delay with the departure of my regiment. The ship that we are to depart on needs significant repairs, and there is no other that can accommodate us at this time,” Fitzwilliam explained. “What have you been doing with yourself in Georgie’s absence?”

“It has been dismal in the extreme,” drawled Darcy. “I am to visit her monthly, and in this stinking unseasonably early heat, town is nearly unbearable. All of the nobility have abandoned London for their estates.”

“Well, let us make it bearable, shall we not? I rarely have leave that I am not expected to spend dancing attendance upon my mother, my aunt, or my cousin,” said Richard, slapping his knees. “No one knows I am at leisure besides you; my parents are at Matlock, and Aunt Catherine does not expect us until Easter, which is months and months away, if I am even on these shores come spring, which is doubtful. None but the unlanded and very debauched remain in the city in this heat. Let us take advantage of it, and enjoy what London has to offer a bachelor at leisure for a time. When does Georgiana expect you again?”

“Not for three weeks,” said Darcy suspiciously. “Your idea of bearable sounds

distinctly unenjoyable, to my way of thinking. You will gamble far more than you ought.”

“But you will humour an old soldier, will you not?” Richard cajoled. “After all, who knows when I may have the opportunity again! I promise that if it even appears that I am beginning to lose, I will call it a night. I am not dependent upon the game, as so many men are. And if I have not been called to return to my unit by the time you leave for Ramsgate, I shall join you, and give my young cousin a surprise. What say you, Darcy?”

“I suppose I cannot deny you. As you say, you could be recalled any time, and your leave is rarely your own, with the demands of the ladies in our family.”

“Where’s that fellow you gad about with... Bingley? He’s an amenable fellow, probably first rate at kicking up a lark. Shall we invite him?”

“Very well, but we will go to the quality clubs, not the copper hells full of haymarket ware that you frequent on your own. I do not know why I keep my subscription to Sedgewick’s. I only go when you wish to, or occasionally with Bingley for billiards. I inherited it from my father, and who knows why he kept it, he probably inherited it from my grandfather. Lord knows, after the trouble my grandfather caused the family in that place, it ought to have been cancelled. Perhaps, after this outing, I will do it.”

“That would be a shame for me, though safer for your heirs perhaps,” said Richard. “You cannot hope that they will all have your moral compass.”

Two hours later, Bingley arrived for dinner, in answer to a note penned by Darcy’s valet. This was a system that the two men had worked out. When Darcy wished to send a message to Bingley it was penned by his valet, ensuring that Miss Bingley did not recognise the writing, resulting in Miss Bingley missing many opportunities to tag along on invitations not meant for her.

“Darcy!” Bingley exclaimed when he was shown into the drawing room. “I cannot say how pleased I was to have been invited out on the town with you and your cousin. The tales of your exploits are legend in the hells, Colonel, and your brother’s are worse. As you instructed Darcy, I brought my trunk, prepared to stay for some days.”

“Do not encourage him, Bingley,” Darcy warned. “We are to show him a good time before he returns to battle, but the last thing we need is to have him competing with his brother’s infamy.”

“The only thing preventing me from making Ashley appear as fast as a country miss not yet out of the school room, is the fact that most of my larks are enjoyed on the continent,” Fitzwilliam laughed, shaking Bingley’s hand. Ferguson appeared to announce dinner, and the men followed him to the small dining room the Darcys used when they were alone or only entertaining a few guests.

“So how long is this bout of debauchery to last?” Bingley asked easily as the men enjoyed the cook’s excellent fare.

“Until my cousin bores of it,” Darcy grinned. “He always claims to be so much worse than Ashley, but the truth of the matter is, Richard cannot abide such dissipation for long without productive employment to balance it. He is too used to real work on the front. Ashley, however, can carry on for months without ever having a single sensible or practical thought enter his mind. I give him a week, but our limit is three weeks, when I travel to Ramsgate to visit my sister.”

“Have you noticed anything about Georgie’s letters?” asked Fitzwilliam. “She seems oddly distant of late.”

“I have, but her companion says that it is not uncommon for girls her age to feel a sudden necessity to display exaggerated maturity, and that often displays itself as a disinclination to communicate with one’s parents, or in Georgie’s case, guardians.”

“That is certainly the truth,” Bingley said, applying himself to his roast beef. “When Caroline was Miss Darcy’s age, she went an entire quarter treating our father as if he were the stupidest person in the world, and even refusing to speak to him. He was just entering his illness, and when I visited from school, I gave her a piece of my mind like you cannot imagine. Then I wrote to Louisa, and invited her and Hurst to come to Scarborough and stay with father and Caroline to ensure her compliance.”

“That does not sound very much like you, if you do not mind my saying so, Bingley,” Fitzwilliam said pointedly. Bingley was notorious for his lack of control over his sister.

“The key to Caroline is choosing one’s battles,” Bingley said amiably. “One cannot fight over everything or one would be an angry person all the time. When I truly put my foot down, my sister knows it is pointless to attempt to change my mind. But enough of Caroline. I meant to ask you, Darcy. I am leasing an estate, like we talked about, and I took that fellow you recommended, Mr Lambert, with me to look it over, and he said it is sound. How long will you be in Ramsgate? Might I convince you to come for a month or two this summer, to teach me some of what I must know? I leave in a week, myself. Miss Darcy is welcome to accompany you.”

“Congratulations, Bingley!” said Darcy enthusiastically. “I am glad you sought out Lambert’s assistance. Of course I will come. I am only meant to visit Georgie for a week; she means to stay where she is for two more months. Where is the place?”

“It is an estate called The Gables, and it is near a small village called Highbury, in Surrey,” answered Bingley. “It currently earns close to four thousand a year, and the manor is in good repair. The tenant houses and farms need some work, and that is why I took it. I have no objections to paying to fix another person’s problems, if it assists me in learning what I must know. It will be good for me to learn to solve these issues. The owner fears the steward is crooked since the place ought to earn closer to five or six thousand. However, she is an old woman and would rather not deal with

the matter herself. I have been given the authority to investigate and replace him if necessary.”

“In that case, yes, I agree I ought to join you,” agreed Darcy. “I assure you Bingley, I shall teach you the methods of determining whether a servant is cheating you and will advise you upon the best course of action if it turns out to be true.”

After they dined they enjoyed a few glasses of brandy in Darcy’s study, they made for Sedgewick’s in Darcy’s carriage with a pair of armed grooms riding on the back. London could be a dangerous place at night, particularly if one was visiting the hells.

Sedgewick’s was what was known as a golden hell. Patronised by the wealthiest of London, and only by subscription, the gambling den was luxurious and decadent. It had been opened in the very early eighteenth century by the second and third sons of a man from Cornwall who owned mines. The man gave all three of his sons five thousand pounds, and bade them go out and seek their fortunes, warning them that the family estate and mines would be run dry and bankrupt before they could provide for the eldest. The eldest, who had the greatest sense of family loyalty and responsibility, used his funds to buy more mines, hoping to use the funds from them to shore up the family and poor labourers dependent on the local industry. Sadly, the endeavour was an utter failure, just as his father warned him that it would be.

The other two sons went into business together, and opened a gambling den in the city. It began as a copper hell, mostly for working men and the lower middle class. Boxing matches and cockfights were favoured, as well as card games. Over the decades, they suffered two fires, though the properties were insured far beyond their value. Many years ago, the Sedgewick in charge purchased half a city block of buildings in a fashionable part of St James, demolished them, and had an enormous new establishment built. The gaming house now owned its own bank, and was lauded as the most lavish golden hell in London for the last sixty years. Patronage was limited to subscription, and only offered to the nobility and to wealthy gentlemen of

great worth and connection .

Darcy rarely attended, but when he and Bingley did, they kept to the low stakes tables or the billiard rooms. The boxing matches and cockfights were long gone, though Darcy was certain his cousin would drag him out in search of them long before the week was out. Darcy knew Fitzwilliam would outstrip Bingley in consumption of spirits and all other methods of debauchery in no time at all. Darcy and Fitzwilliam were both in possession of the ability to drink astonishing quantities of spirits without getting unbecomingly foxed. Other men had limits, whereas Darcy, Richard, and Richard's brother Ashley, could drink for days, and though they would be mildly drunk, they never lost their faculties. It also took them all an incredible amount of brandy to reach such a state of mild inebriation, and so Darcy and Fitzwilliam rarely considered the effort worthwhile, though Ashley never seemed to tire of it. It was said amongst their family that their maternal grandfather, and his father before him, had been such drunkards that their progeny were nearly immune to drink.

A year after Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam left to fight on the continent, he returned on leave with skills at the card table that were entirely unmatched. He had been training in intelligence, and therefore saw and understood every blink, twitch, side eye, or hesitation displayed by the other players. As a result, he won so often that though many thought he was poor, he had a five-figure sum in the bank which would start him with a handsome nest egg when he retired from military service. The majordomo of the club and even its owner watched all of Richard's plays as closely as was possible, and they swore no cheating was involved, nor did they believe the man had the demeanour of one who had the skill of counting cards. Only the very brave, or the very drunk and stupid, sat down to play cards with Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.

Darcy and his guests were welcomed by the club manager with all of the pleasure one might expect for the appearance of one such as Fitzwilliam, who would create excitement and the impulse to spend among the other guests. For a while, the men parted – Darcy and Bingley to the low stakes tables, and Richard to the high stakes

games. Darcy shook his head and hoped that Richard did not cause too much of a stir, as he sometimes did when putting his hand to the cards. He did not approve of such high stakes wagers, thinking it entirely irresponsible, but Fitzwilliam explained from whence his ability came, and since he rarely lost, and he never tricked anyone into thinking that he was unskilled or an easy target, Darcy said nothing about it.

His uncle had the ability to provide for Fitzwilliam even more handsomely than the generous situations Darcy's father had set by for his subsequent sons who had never appeared, but Lord Matlock chose, as so many other men like him did, to provide his second son nothing more than an education, a commission, and a small allowance during his father's lifetime. His brother might give him a pension when he inherits, but he was under no obligation to do so. At least Richard was given a gentlemen's education and had learned about estate matters with his brother. Some second sons were given hardly any such consideration, but at least Lord Matlock saw the wisdom that if a spare was required, one ought to give him the education to manage the task before him in case he inherited. There was also the fact that Fitzwilliam might marry a lady with an estate, or an heiress to one.

Considering how little his cousin had otherwise been provided for, Darcy could hardly blame him for acquiring funds however he could, as long as it was not criminal behaviour. There was always an idiot who insisted, no matter how he was persuaded to rethink his wager, on losing everything at least once per month at Sedgewick's. If the men must waste their resources, at least they could be won by a man who would treat them responsibly rather than one who would only wager and lose them again the following week.

Darcy and Bingley played at the tables for two hours, Bingley up perhaps twenty pounds, Darcy only up perhaps ten, for he truly did not care if he won money, so he never suggested large wagers. They excused themselves from the tables, and made their way to the billiards room, drinking and laughing with the others of their set. Darcy made an effort to be pleasant, since there were no women about, and as long as

no one approached him to ask him for loans or to enter their business ventures. The men played billiards for perhaps another two hours, Darcy consuming an enormous quantity of spirits, which put the other gentlemen, who typically viewed him as staid and boring, in a more than usually friendly mood with him. So many men held grudges against him because he refused their requests for investments, and their daughters or sisters were not good enough for him. Darcy had never said they were not, but he had been the master of his own estate for years, and society had expected him to settle down long ago.

They later made their way to the high stakes tables, where, as usual, there was a large crowd around the table where Richard and one other player remained, the other players having left the game without their dignities, but at least with most of their fortunes intact. One of the owners of the club, Lewis Sedgewick, stood near Richard, watching the play carefully. Near the dealer stood the majordomo, doing the same.

Darcy and Bingley took seats at a small table nearby, ordering drinks and some food from the servants. It was nearly three in the morning when they sat, and they watched Richard and the other man, Viscount Lymington, the heir of the Earldom of Rutledge, as the stakes grew higher and higher. Richard was at the high stakes table, but one of the things that worked in his favour was that he hardly ever made incredibly high wagers, so when he lost, he of course lost a great sum, but not everything . This maddened his competitors, who lost mediocre sums to him over and over, until it began to add up to life changing amounts of money.

Viscount Lymington had reached that point. Over the course of more than six hours, Lymington had lost over twelve thousand pounds. Finally, at the end of the night, when the sun was rising outside, the Viscount demanded that Fitzwilliam play one more hand for incredibly high stakes to allow Lymington to win the sum back. Fitzwilliam declined, saying that Lymington had played for over six hours, and if he were going to win, he would have done so by now. Lymington threw down the deed to his estate, recently deeded to him by his father, in the hopes of teaching him

something and making the young man more responsible. The name of the estate was called Green Hollow Hall near Birmingham, and it earned more than six thousand a year.

The hall immediately erupted into shouts and objections, some, the Viscount's friends, others, the friends of his father. Even Darcy and Bingley protested the irresponsible action on the part of the young nobleman. At Sedgewick's it was customary for the majordomo, the dealer, and the owner to discourage a player from ruining himself. Yes, life altering sums were won and lost in a single hand every single night, but none could claim that they lost everything they owned without being strongly discouraged from doing so by the owners of the club themselves. The Sedgewicks did not want a poor reputation amongst a resentful population of noblemen, they instead, had a reputation for entertaining the elite of London with the highest integrity.

Fitzwilliam agreed with them all. "I do not want your estate, Lymington, though you deserve to lose it, considering this display of stupidity. Your entire estate is not worth losing to save twelve thousand."

"I do not give a damn, I never wanted the bloody estate!" Lymington exclaimed. "My father gave it to me earlier this year in an effort to remove me from town, but I have no wish to live like him, cooped up in the country, trapped by the rain, entertaining the local spinsters and the vicar. I do not need the damned place; it is a millstone about my neck. In the absence of a younger brother, I inherited a comfortable fortune and a small townhouse from my mother's brother. I can live the life I enjoy without difficulty here in town. The only purpose that deed serves is to return to me the funds I lost tonight, and if I lose the deed as well, then at least my father will learn to leave me the hell alone."

When Fitzwilliam continued to demur, Lymington stood and threw his glove on the table. "By God, Fitzwilliam, I demand that you concede, or I shall call you out onto

the field!” Again, the hall was thrown into disorder.

Fitzwilliam only raised a brow and said, “Why would you do that? You must know that the only thing that I am better at than cards when not on a battlefield is besting men at swords and shooting. Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Lymington continued to declare that either Fitzwilliam would comply or Lymington would have satisfaction. Disputes like this broke out between gentlemen in London often, and even amongst the recruits in the regiments, such conflicts were common. There was no doubt that this one would be discussed by the gossips and in scandal sheets all over town tomorrow.

“I want it on record for his father that he gave me no other alternative than either to destroy him at the tables, or kill him,” Fitzwilliam announced. The men in the room all grumbled their agreement, displeased with the reckless libertine. It was all too obvious he would make no better an earl than a viscount.

The game began, and it truly seemed to Darcy that his cousin’s heart was not in it. Darcy wondered if Richard would lose on purpose. Twelve thousand plus whatever he had won from the other men before they left the game, half in investments and the other half in the percents, would greatly improve his retirement, when he finally decided to retire his commission. And though an estate of six thousand a year would serve him even better, Darcy knew his cousin would not wish to take one like this.

It did not seem to be in the cards for Richard to lose, for fortune had been extremely unkind to Viscount Lymington. There was absolutely nothing useful in his hand, even a pair of threes would have beat him. The men close enough to see his cards cried out in frustration, and when Fitzwilliam laid down his own, there was a collective sigh of acceptance. Fitzwilliam began to receive claps on the shoulder from the other men about them, as they all agreed that he had done all that one could expect of him to encourage the young nobleman to consider another path. It was agreed by all that the

earl was to be pitied for his unfortunate heir, and that the earldom and its coffers would one day be doomed.

Lymington stood and said flippantly, "As I said, perhaps now my father will cease his attempts to improve me." He left the table with the majordomo, who had been a solicitor before his employment at Sedgewick's. It was his responsibility to watch the play, to make judgements when plays were questioned, to ensure that debts were properly recorded, and payments were legally transferred.

Most of the patrons had gone home or to a nearby brothel that had a business agreement with the gaming club. When Fitzwilliam emerged from the majordomo's office, he and the other gentlemen departed. By the time they arrived at Darcy House, it was nearly eight in the morning. Thankfully, the cook had breakfast ready early, expecting Darcy and his guests home any time. The men joined one another in the breakfast room, and enjoyed a hearty meal before going upstairs to wash and sleep.

"I cannot believe the idiocy of that damned fool," grumbled Fitzwilliam to the others as he ate. "I attempted to get him to stop somewhere around seven thousand, long before you two joined the others. Each time I attempted to get him to call it a night, he would become belligerent, and demand that I allow him to win the funds back. At first I agreed to a few more hands, but then it quickly became obvious that such an outcome was completely impossible. I began in earnest to convince him, but that only seemed to make him worse."

"Everyone present could see that," assured Darcy. "His father will hear of it. The man was excessively aggressive; what were you expected to do, shoot him? I doubt his father would prefer it."

"You never know about that. I have heard that his father is widowed, and looking for a young bride in the hopes of providing another heir, considering that Lymington may not even survive to inherit," said Bingley. "Hardly surprising given the man's habits."

Someone will shoot him one day.”

“What will you do with the estate? Will you finally resign your commission?” Darcy asked.

“Not yet. Six thousand a year will suit me admirably when the time comes. But as a younger son, it is my place to contribute to the glory of the Fitzwilliams’ duty to the crown through my service in the army. When the war is over, and I have won the requisite medals to further distinguish the Fitzwilliam name, then I shall resign my post, and take a wife. In the meantime, I shall hire a steward, and Darcy might hopefully be willing to have his man keep a weather eye on things until I am ready to take over management.”

Over the next week, the men engaged in an endless round of manly activities. They fenced and engaged in pugilism at Gentleman Jack’s by day, and made a round of the boxing matches, cockfights, gaming hells, and even a brothel by night. Darcy detested such places, and he touched no one and allowed no one to touch him, but he reminded himself that every day his cousin was away, he might die. It was such a little thing to ask that Darcy show him a good time before he returned to his regiment. His cousin found so little of such entertainments otherwise.

It ended up being true that the scandal of the card game reached society and the gossip columns. Fitzwilliam received a scathing letter from his mother, as well as a congratulatory one from his father. The latter was filled with satisfaction for his younger son’s good fortune, as well as a warning about becoming too fond of the tables. By the end of the week, Richard had won eighteen thousand pounds, the estate near Birmingham, an expensive set of duelling pistols, a gold watch, as well as an amethyst parure, and a valuable silver tea service that would make his future wife very happy one day. Added to the funds he had in the bank and investments already from previous gaming adventures, he felt very comfortable announcing that he was retiring from high stakes gambling forever.

“A gentleman must quit while he is ahead,” he insisted firmly.

At the end of the week, Bingley, rather worse for wear from attempting to keep up with the other men, and bearing Darcy’s promise to join him later, left them and returned to his house to collect his sisters and head for his new country seat. As Darcy expected, when Bingley had gone, Richard looked at him and said, “Darce, the city is deathly dull. What do you say we go to Georgiana straight off tomorrow morning?”

CHAPTER 2

Elizabeth Bennet was returning to her home at Longbourn in Hertfordshire after her morning walk to Oakham Mount. Her family was likely awakening and going about their morning now. They had all slept a bit late after having dined at Netherfield the night before.

The new young couple at Netherfield, Mr and Mrs Lockhart, were charming people, and Elizabeth looked forward to having them for neighbours. Mrs Bennet was still smarting from the blow that Netherfield was not to be taken by a single gentleman of large fortune. Fanny Bennet had, at least, refrained from being embarrassing about it in their company, and had been gracious with Mrs Lockhart.

As Elizabeth came down the hillside, she noted a carriage approaching Longbourn. It looked like her Uncle Gardiner's carriage. Elizabeth wondered what could possibly be wrong to bring her uncle so far unannounced at such an early time of day. He must have left London before dawn. Could her aunt or the children be ill, perhaps? She hurried as quickly as she could to the house.

"Uncle!" she cried as she entered the hall from the back of the house. "Is everything all right? Are my aunt and the children well? "

"Everyone is fine! Everyone is just fine," Edward Gardiner smiled at all of his other relatives who had joined them in the hall with the same concern as Elizabeth. "I have some business with Thomas in his study, but first, I will join you all for breakfast if I may, and hear your news."

“Of course, of course!” his sister crowed, allowing him to kiss her cheek. “Into the breakfast room, all of you! You may sit by me, Brother, and tell me what my sister-in-law has been up to in London. I am vastly excited about what Madeleine told me in her last letter about the new fashion for long sleeves!”

The family were all their usual selves as they spoke to and over one another at the breakfast table. No one questioned Mr Gardiner again about the reason for his visit, because when gentlemen had business together, it was none of the women’s concern. Elizabeth could not, however, help wondering what was happening, particularly because her uncle kept looking at her and smiling.

It was evident that Thomas Bennet was similarly curious, for the moment his brother-in-law laid down his fork, Bennet was hurrying everyone from the table, and encouraging them to go about their mornings. Jane had work to do in the still room. Mrs Bennet was to be at home to callers in the drawing room. Mary went to practise her instrument, and the younger ladies went upstairs to change the trim on one of Lydia’s gowns.

“Well, Edward, what is it?” demanded Bennet as they rose from their chairs.

“In your study, please, Thomas,” Gardiner insisted, and followed his host into the hall. He caught Elizabeth there, and hissed, “Do you still have it? The lottery ticket.” When Elizabeth opened the book she was carrying, and showed him the ticket she was using for a bookmark, he said, “You will want to frame it after today. Go to your father’s study.” He then went to the front door, whistled for his manservant, and bid him to wait outside the door of his brother’s bookroom, ensuring their privacy.

“Elizabeth, what are you doing here?” her father asked as she entered the room behind him .

“Uncle instructed me to come in, Papa,” Elizabeth said meekly. She had no idea how

she could be concerned with the men's business. Could it be possible that she had won the smallest prize of the lottery, just as her uncle had told her she might? What would she do with five hundred pounds?

Uncle Gardiner finally entered behind them, carefully closed the door, and embraced Elizabeth, spinning her about. "Lizzy! You won! You won the lottery!"

"Whatever can you mean, Edward?" said Bennet, rising to his feet.

"When Lizzy visited us for her birthday, I helped her pay for a lottery ticket as her present. I told her to have fun daydreaming about what she might do if she won. Lizzy, you won! You won the grand prize!"

"The grand prize!" Elizabeth cried. "Not the last one, Uncle? Surely you jest! Certainly it must be the last prize."

"I cannot take it in, I must sit," said Mr Bennet, shaking his head and falling back into his chair. "What lottery are you speaking of, and how much did Lizzy win?"

"It is the Grand City Lottery, Brother. Lizzy has won a brand new house, a freehold in London, and fifteen thousand, seven hundred pounds," answered Gardiner.

"Fifteen thousand and a house?" said Bennet in surprise. "What sort of a house?"

"A four storey modern brick home, with six bedrooms, and a goodly number of public rooms. It is in a neighbourhood slightly more fashionable than Cheapside, a very genteel location. The drawing was yesterday, and when I filled out the ticket with your name on it, Lizzy, I listed myself as your guardian, because I thought it would be most convenient. I had a feeling that you would win something, so I went to the guildhall yesterday when they drew the winners, and you won, Lizzy! You won the house and the money!"

“What must I do?” asked Elizabeth uncertainly.

“You do not need to do anything. Your funds are now in a trust in a bank in London, with myself as the trustee. The house is deeded similarly. ”

“That was slick, Edward,” said Thomas with an edge to his voice. It had been presumptuous of Gardiner to set himself up as Elizabeth’s trustee before anyone knew of the matter, and rather disrespectful to her father.

“With all due respect, Thomas, I will not be burdening you with the task of protecting Elizabeth’s good fortune from my sister. Now, there will be no way for Fanny to take the money, and no way for her to badger you into doing so,” said Gardiner firmly.

“Uncle Gardiner paid for most of the ticket anyway. Uncle you really ought to keep the money for my cousins. Would not that be fair? I could keep the house, and we will not be thrown to the hedgerows when Papa dies. Perhaps we could let the place, and put the funds towards something cheaper and easier to manage here in Meryton. A charming little cottage, with a little extra from the rent of the new house?”

“Lizzy, I meant it when I said that I could think of no one who would benefit from a freehold home and a sum in the bank more than you. I thank God that I was inspired to help you buy that ticket. You will be safe for all your days now. Even after marriage. No man will take all you own, for he must go through me, as your trustee, and I will see to your marriage articles, ensuring it. Do not get married without a proper marriage settlement approved by me. Promise me, Lizzy.”

“I promise, of course, but is it not unfair for me to keep the house and all of the money? If it is my money, I would be happier if we shared it between me and my sisters. Three thousand each. And later Mama’s portion will make it four. Is that not better?” Elizabeth protested.

“No, Lizzy, it is not better, and I will explain why. The interest on three thousand pounds will not be enough to keep you, not in that house, and barely at a respectable level even outside of the house if you rented it out and lived meagerly in the country. With the interest from your winnings, you can live in the house, though rather frugally if you have your mother and sisters with you, for all of your days, whether you are married or not. If you do this, you can help your mother and sisters, but if you split the money for your sister’s dowries, you will not have the necessary income to live in the house,” Uncle Gardiner explained. “It might seem unfair that such a good thing has happened to you and not your sisters, but that is the way of life. Life is about changing, Lizzy; nothing shall ever stay the same. None of you will have the same things as the others as you grow up. Some of you may marry rich men, others poor men, perhaps one or two may not marry at all. Some of you may die in childbirth as young women. The others might live until their ninetieth year. Nothing is ever fair or equal, my dear.”

“He is right, Lizzy,” her father said. When she turned to him, he said, “When Lydia won ten pounds at housey-housey last year, did she share it with all of you?” Elizabeth shook her head. “Did she even buy you so much as a ribbon?” Elizabeth shook her head again miserably. “Then you have your answer, my dear. I am certain that you will be much more generous with all of them than any of them would be with you, perhaps save Jane or Mary. You cannot beggar yourself to provide for them. Providing for them was my job, and the fact that I failed at it does not mean that you ought to suffer for it.”

“Thomas, I will not hear you sounding self pitying over a situation that you ought to have prevented,” said Gardiner sharply. “Perhaps we should go and tell the others, but first, Lizzy, do you want me to have the house let straight away? And I took the liberty of separating the seven hundred from the rest, in case you wanted to do something with a portion of the money now. I will hold onto it until you need it.”

“I am not Lydia, and nor am I mean or cruel, so I would like to do something nice for

my mother and sisters,” said Elizabeth. “Might I have some funds now so I might treat them each to a new gown, a bonnet, and some slippers? And yes, if you think it is a good idea, please let the house. It is smart to let it earn something while it can, there is no reason for it to sit empty.”

“It will be harder to lease, considering it has no furniture or housewares of any kind, but I suggest that you rent it out anyway, and then set those funds aside to buy some furnishings,” said Uncle Gardiner sensibly. “You see things for sale in London by desperate people all the time; I shall keep an eye out for bargains that cannot be passed by, and I can store it all for you in my warehouses until you need it.”

To say that Fanny Bennet found the situation unfair was an understatement. First she exclaimed, then she shrieked, then she was bewildered, then she raged like a banshee over the injustice that Elizabeth was to have fifteen thousand and a house in town, and Jane was not.

“With such a fortune, Jane would be married to a wealthy man, perhaps even a peer, in less than three months, Brother! Then she would have no need of the house, and we could all live there when Thomas dies. It is shameful to waste such gifts upon Lizzy, when they will do her no good!” Fanny ranted.

When her brother would not budge, she tried to negotiate. “Let Lizzy have five thousand then, if she absolutely must be so mean with her sisters. Then bestow seven thousand on Jane who will surely find a husband quickly with a proper dowry of any kind, and let the rest be shared between the other girls!” Fanny was adamant that Jane ought to receive the largest portion of the funds, being the eldest, the most beautiful, and, in Fanny’s opinion, the most likely to snare a wealthy husband.

Gardiner explained patiently to his sister that this was actually a blessing for the women of the family, and the solution to her fears, if she allowed herself to see reason. “You say that Jane is the most likely to wed, and perhaps that is so, I really

could not say, Fanny. But you must allow that Lizzy is your cleverest daughter, and consider that perhaps she is not so clever for nothing. Elizabeth has the acumen to manage such a fortune and support you and the girls in London when Thomas dies, but we must be careful with the funds. Even with such a sum, you will need to live carefully in such a neighbourhood in London on the income in question with so many women. If the funds remain intact, then you and the girls are saved, and will live in comfort and gentility. If the funds are split between the girls, or spent, then you will not have enough to live on.”

Fanny Bennet was silent, considering the matter, as her brother continued. “I do not want to hear, after I am gone, Fanny, that you have been scolding or badgering Lizzy. She is not in charge of the money. Neither is Thomas; I would never have allowed either of you to take it from her. I am the trustee of Lizzy’s fortune, she could not give it to you or Jane even if she wanted to. And I assure you, as mean as you paint her, she wanted to. She tried to insist that it be shared equally amongst all of your girls, but that is not the way to save you all. Do not punish her for what has been my decision.”

“And I do not have to take my share of Mama’s dowry, do I?” asked Elizabeth brightly, hopeful that perhaps her mother might somehow be reasoned out of being furious with her. “Can that be done, Papa? Should we ask Uncle Phillips? That would give my sisters a little more for their portions. And I wish to tell you all that Uncle has given me a very small portion of my funds, and though it will not stretch to anything significant, there is enough for me to treat all of you, Mama, and all of my sisters, to an outing in Meryton or perhaps even St Albans. I think we might all manage a new gown and a bonnet. Will that not be nice?”

“Nice! Oh, it sounds like a lovely day; how kind of you, Lizzy,” said Jane, catching onto Elizabeth’s plaintive attempts to appease her mother. Jane eyed Mary and her sisters.

“Though I am not one for vanity, I look forward to an outing with Lizzy, and I am grateful that she so far seems to be amenable to taking us all in if something happens to Papa, and we are not married. We all know she does not have to. To be homeless is a fear we have all shared for years, save Papa, who is fortunate enough to be secure just by being alive, and I for one am thoroughly beholden to Lizzy for being a means to its end. Thank you, Sister. You are too good to us. I promise that I shall endeavour not to be a burden.”

“Not at all, Mary,” said Elizabeth in bewilderment of everything that happened that morning.

“It is not fair, Uncle, that you gave Lizzy a house and a fortune,” said Lydia. “I am sure that if any of us younger sisters were ever invited to visit you, that we should like to become as dear to you as Lizzy has.”

“Lydia Bennet!” her father chastised her.

Her uncle smiled. “I wish I could give each of you a house, and a fortune as well, Lydia. But I did not give them to your sister. I bought her a lottery ticket as a birthday present, and she won it by chance. But I should hate to be accused of having favourites, so I promise you this. From now until you are married, whether you are visiting us in London or not, I shall buy each of you a lottery ticket for your birthday, so that each of you has a chance. Will that suit you?”

Lydia and Kitty both jumped up and hugged their uncle and thanked him, Lydia crowing about the house in London that she would win, and Kitty insisting that hers would be every bit as grand.

CHAPTER 3

Darcy and Richard departed from the inn at dawn to complete their journey, and planned to surprise Georgie for breakfast. They arrived slightly later than they anticipated, but Darcy descended from the carriage and bounded up the steps of the house he had engaged for his sister, followed by his cousin. His knock went unanswered. Perturbed, he exchanged a glance with Richard, before he tried the knob, and they let themselves inside.

The house was quiet, and they encountered no one and nothing but trunks stacked in the hall as if a journey was being prepared. They made their way to the drawing room, where they found Georgiana alone, pacing and anxiously twisting a handkerchief. She started as they entered, and then her eyes flew wide, and Darcy could see relief upon her features.

"Brother! I cannot express how relieved I am to see you! You have saved me!" Darcy's sister burst into tears as she threw herself into his arms.

"Georgiana! What is the matter! Where are Mrs Younge and the servants? Has illness fallen upon the house?" Richard asked in alarm as Georgiana attempted to compose herself .

"Mrs Younge dismissed the servants for the day. I believe she is upstairs resting before the journey she planned. Brother, Richard, I have something quite distressing that I must confess to you. I am afraid that I find myself in a most improper situation, and I need your help desperately. But I must speak to you in absolute privacy without interruptions, and I believe you will wish to speak with Mrs Younge when our

conversation is finished," began Georgiana.

Richard was leaving the room to summon a footman from Darcy's carriage, when Mrs Younge entered the drawing room, her shock at seeing the two gentlemen evident.

"Georgiana! You did not tell me your guardians were expected! I thought we were going to stroll to the beach to finish your drawing. Remember your promises, dear."

Darcy thought that was a strange remark to have made about a walk and a drawing. Particularly from a servant who was there for Georgiana's convenience, not the other way round. A moment later, Richard returned to the room followed by a footman.

"Thompson, please see Mrs Younge to her room, and ensure she remains there until we send for her," he ordered darkly. Something sinister was afoot here; he could sense from Georgiana's demeanour that something was terribly wrong. Whatever it is, this woman is going to answer for it, Richard thought.

When the woman began to object, Richard silenced her. "Go with the footman."

After Thompson escorted the companion from the room, Darcy poured Georgiana a glass of wine and persuaded her to sit and compose herself. Composure was clearly beyond the girl's capabilities, and her hands shook as she attempted to drink the refreshment.

"Be not afraid, Georgie; tell us what has happened," encouraged Darcy.

"I am not afraid. I know I can trust you both completely with any confession, little though I deserve it. I just grieve because I know you will both be disappointed in me, and I cannot bear it. I have been taken in. I did not know he was a rogue, but I certainly know it now," said Georgiana, eyes downcast .

"Who, Georgie, who is a rogue?" demanded Richard urgently, exchanging alarmed glances with Darcy.

"George. George Wickham," Darcy's sister whispered miserably.

Fear struck Darcy's heart as he laid a hand on Richard's shoulder, hoping to calm the rage he could sense already vibrating inside his cousin. "What has happened, Sister? Tell us everything. Leave nothing out."

Georgiana attempted to speak coherently as she forced the words out. "I will leave nothing out, not even the bits that I'm sure you would both rather die than hear, and I would rather die than tell you. A few days after we arrived, we met Mr Wickham on the promenade. He flattered me, told me how grown up I had become, how I resemble my mother, reminding me how he had devoted hours to my entertainment when I was a child. Truly, my memories of him are dim. It has been some years since he has spent much time at Pemberley, although I do remember him playing some games with me when I was very small. Mrs Younge said that it was very appropriate for me to entertain a family friend, the godson of my father, and encouraged the gentleman to call on us here."

Darcy could see a vein pulsing at Richard's temple.

"I did not see how very convenient it all was at the time, but suddenly he was bumping into us everywhere. Mrs Younge encouraged me to invite him for dinner on a number of occasions, and then would find excuses to leave us alone together. A week ago he declared a passionate love for me, and asked me to marry him, and I accepted. He persuaded me that if we asked you for permission, you would receive pressure from our uncle and aunts and society to say no, due to his status as our steward's son. Then, he claimed if we eloped then it would be a *fait accompli*, and you would be grateful to us because then you could call George your brother without having to endure lectures from our family.

"Even though I had no true friends there, I have been very lonely since leaving school. I feel so isolated, and though you have been the best of brothers, Fitz, I allowed myself to be carried away by the attention and the idea of having such a devoted companion. I thought I should never be lonely again, and convinced myself that you would be happy for me. I consented to the elopement, and we made our plans. We planned to leave today after luncheon, but I noticed that once I had agreed, and we had set a day for our journey, that George began to change just a bit. I could not put my finger on it, but suddenly he was not always so nice. I did not see it for what it was until last night. It was his mask slipping, showing me bits of his true nature here and there."

She took in a deep breath and squeezed her eyes shut, "I allowed him liberties."

"What liberties, precisely?" Richard growled. When Georgiana hesitated, he pressed her "Georgie, we have no wish to hear any more than you wish to tell us, but you must be entirely truthful or we cannot help you."

Georgiana's voice shook again as she continued, "At first it was nothing terribly bad, I allowed him to hold my hand, and another time he stroked my leg with his hand under the table. But a few days ago, I allowed him to kiss me several times. He did something rather shocking with his tongue." Darcy closed his eyes as if in pain. "And... I allowed him to place his hands on my bosom... Later that evening after I had reflected on my behaviour I determined not to allow anything more. I did not wish to be a wanton or to dishonour my family... Last night, Mrs Younge left us quite alone, and he attempted to put his hand up my skirts!" Georgiana covered her face and burst into tears.

"Attempted?" ground out Richard through his teeth.

Georgiana sobbed, "I would not allow him to do so, and he was quite angry! I never expected such disapproval from him! He called me a tease, and told me that if he did

not return for me today, that it would be quite my own fault! He left the house outraged, and Mrs Younge chastised me severely, saying that gentlemen have needs, and that it is wrong for a lady to stir them and then leave him unfulfilled, and that it was an unkind thing to do to the man I claimed to love so dearly. That is when the shades finally dropped from my eyes. What sort of companion encourages her charge to anticipate her wedding vows? Suddenly I could see all the times she directed me to be flattered by George, encouraged me to invite his advances, and I realised that we had been deceived by her, Brother. Even if you might be relieved by not having to bless my marriage to our late father's godson, you would never wish the woman you trusted with my safety to encourage me to do something so terribly wrong.

"Mrs Younge told me she would go and speak to George for me and try to persuade him to return for me today, as we planned. She said she did not wish to cause rumours with the servants so for me to stay at home and she would go out late at night and attempt to reason with him. I followed her. She took the path behind the house to our private cove, and he was waiting for her there on the beach. They laughed at me, at what an innocent idiot I am. How they would abandon me or sell me to a brothel as soon as they had my dowry, and how they would escape to America to start a new life together. Honestly, I heard the same falseness in George's voice when he flattered her that I recall now when I think back on all of his compliments to myself. I doubt he is any more sincere to her as he was to me and am sure he plans to abandon her as well.

"I did not stay for the end of their conversation. It was very amorous and loud, and I had no wish to expose myself to any further inappropriate knowledge than I had already obtained." She bowed her head and a sob caught in her throat. "I was frantically trying to think of a way to escape without damaging my reputation when you arrived. I thought perhaps I might throw myself upon the local magistrate, who is a baronet, and his wife. They have four daughters, and I was working up courage to leave the house alone to make my way there. I was going to tell them that my companion had conspired against me, and that I feared I might be the target of heiress

snatching. I had heard the magistrate complaining last week about men who do that, and how he feared for his daughters among fortune hunters, and I thought I might trust him. I thank you for coming, and I can only offer my apologies, Brother, for failing you so terribly. "

Darcy caught her up in his arms in a fierce embrace. "Never, Georgiana! Never say that you failed us! Yes, you were foolish, but you realised your mistake, and confessed to us bravely, and asked for our help. How could we ask more of you? You are braver than I ever gave you credit for, darling girl. Yes, you have behaved wrongly, but you are young and were led astray! We will discuss that later, for we both are at fault, you and I. We will talk about it together, and make sure we understand our lessons completely!"

"Your brother is right, Georgie," added Richard grimly. "You made a mistake, but you came to us and confessed, and we can ask no more from you than that. And you even thought of a reasonably intelligent solution. I am prouder of your courage than I can say. But for now, what are we to do about Mrs Younge and Wickham?"

As it turned out, there was nothing to do about Mr Wickham. Fitzwilliam interrogated Mrs Younge, who told them where the man was lodging. When Fitzwilliam visited the place, the landlady informed him that Mr Wickham had left some time ago, and had not been gone long before he returned in a terrible hurry, stowing his few belongings in a sack, paying her because he could not avoid it, and then left in great haste, claiming to have been notified of a family emergency. All Fitzwilliam could think was that Wickham had come to the house, found Darcy's carriage in the crescent, and fled.

They did not feel that they could prosecute Mrs Younge without harming Georgiana's reputation, and some instinct whispered to Darcy that he may need Mrs Younge someday to locate Wickham, and so his bloodthirsty cousin was persuaded to let the woman go without a reference.

They remained in Ramsgate for one week, to avoid the impression that anyone had run off or left in haste. Word was spread amongst their few acquaintances in Ramsgate that Georgiana's guardians were present because her companion's mother had taken ill. They dined at the house of the magistrate, Darcy and Richard taking note that Georgiana had chosen well those she would have trusted, and left Ramsgate without any of the residents having noticed that anything might have been amiss. Richard finally heard from his general and left them for Portsmouth, while Darcy and Georgiana made their way to London for a fortnight, then to The Gables, Bingley's rented estate in Surrey.

CHAPTER 4

Highbury - June 1811

Darcy stood in the study of Bingley's newly leased house, The Gables. It was an attractive manor, well furnished and tastefully decorated. Miss Bingley had made it plain that she did not approve of the decor and was wild to change it, but Bingley had put his foot down. Money was to be spent on the tenant cottages and the improvement of the estate. He had come to learn how to manage an estate, and that was all he was willing to spend on the venture. Miss Bingley had complained bitterly about the place since the Darcys arrived.

The Darcys had been in residence for all of an hour and a half. They had taken tea in the drawing room with their hosts, before being shown to their rooms to wash and change. Georgiana was often overwhelmed by Miss Bingley's cloying attentions, so she remained upstairs to rest after the journey.

Now, Darcy stood in front of Bingley's desk and listened as Bingley pointed out cottages and farms on a map, listing all the issues he had identified as needing attention. This information had been compiled by Bingley himself. His steward was so far unhelpful and sullen. Additionally, Bingley had a list from the owner of the estate of work she had been billed for in the last three years. Bingley investigated the matter and could find no evidence that such repairs had ever been carried out.

"The ledgers are nearly incomprehensible, Darcy," said Bingley. "I cannot make heads nor tails of them."

“That is often the case when a steward is attempting to create confusion,” said Darcy. “I assure you, I will be able to make heads or tails of them.” There was a tremendous amount of work to be undertaken, but with that in consideration, the rent on the estate was less than half of what the place was worth. “If you had bought this place for yourself, Bingley, I would say that you had been terribly used. But considering what you paid for the rent, and the fact that you actually want to undertake all of this work as a learning experience, perhaps it is the perfect place for you right now. How is the neighbourhood?”

“Ghastly,” answered Bingley. When Darcy raised an eyebrow, he laughed. “I know, I know! If I am complaining about the neighbourhood, it must be bad. To tell you the truth, I never even asked the solicitor about the neighbours. I find country manners charming, and assumed that I would find a delightful village, but there are hardly any neighbours to speak of. There are only two great houses nearby. One is a widower with a daughter who is at her majority, and another is a bachelor who does no entertaining. There is a newly married couple with a small estate nearby, but they are middle aged with no children at home. The vicar is a mindless fop, his brand new wife makes Caroline appear demure, and the only other neighbours to note are spinsters and a few genteel families from the village.

“I do not think we will dine with even twelve families. Caroline is furious that I dragged her to this backwater. The widower and his daughter have not even called upon us. The bachelor, a Mr Knightley of Donwell Abbey, says that his neighbour, Mr Woodhouse, imagines himself sickly, and rarely leaves his estate, but neither has his daughter called upon Caroline. I fear they mean to snub us, which will frustrate Caroline even further. I apologise in advance if her temperament is unpleasant as a result.”

“Well at least Georgiana will be here to provide your sisters with some company, and I suppose they can console themselves that it is what they consider to be superior society. Perhaps Miss Bingley will humour her by practising a duet with her. I know

that would please Georgie above anything,” said Darcy. “I believe I know Knightley and his brother from town. They can be curmudgeonly sorts, but then I suppose I am no one to talk. They are both older than I.”

After a fortnight, it was absolutely clear that Miss Woodhouse, at least, intended to snub Darcy’s hosts. Darcy and Bingley had accompanied Mr Knightley to Hartfield, the home of the Woodhouses, to meet Mr Woodhouse. It was pertinent for the men to meet, for Hartfield shared a border with The Gables, and Bingley wished to discuss the mending of a number of fences that were neglected.

Mr Woodhouse apparently had no objection to spending whatever was required to make the repairs, but it was clear he had little interest in planning the endeavour. The man looked well enough, but was particularly preoccupied with drafts, and their conversation was interrupted thrice by the gentleman shouting in anxiety about ‘fatal chills,’ and had footmen scurrying all about to move screens in order to preserve the heat in the already sweltering room. They mostly planned out the new boundaries with Hartfield’s steward and Mr Knightley, who seemed to take great concern for his neighbour.

Their party had been invited to several small entertainments amongst the lower gentry of the village, and they accepted them all for lack of anything else to do. Darcy, Bingley, and Hurst were at least very much occupied with the work of the estate, and Darcy’s host found it very satisfying to roll up his sleeves and assist the men, at Darcy’s encouragement. By such methods, Bingley learned to cultivate the trust and respect of his tenants, and to gain an understanding of what it was like for the men who undertook the work .

Their party had received an invitation to Randalls, to dine with their neighbours the Westons and the rest of the neighbourhood. It was made obvious again that Miss Woodhouse intended to snub them. They still had not met her, for the Woodhouses accepted no invitations where their party was expected, nor had she called upon the

ladies of the house. She was never at home to visitors when the men called upon her father with Mr Knightley.

Today, they called without Mr Knightley, but it turned out that the man was present in the house anyway. When they left Mr Woodhouse in his study, the footmen were too busy moving the screens again to show them out, but the men assured their host that they could find their way. On their way down the long hall, bright with sunshine from the many windows, admiring the art on the other wall, they heard the echo of two who clearly thought that they were alone, and had no idea of their voices carrying so far.

“It is beyond the pale, Emma!” George Knightley. “You, who claim to be Mrs Weston’s dearest friend, to have nothing but her happiness at heart, to scorn her invitation so scandalously! Whatever can you mean by it?”

“Knightley, you know that Anne understands I had no option but to decline, considering her guest list. I will not be manoeuvred into an acquaintance with persons who have no rightful place amongst us! I can only imagine their grating manners! My father is not well enough to withstand the anxiety of it.” Darcy and Bingley heard the voice of a woman answer.

“Your father has no objection to knowing Mr Bingley,” growled Knightley.

“And I object strenuously to your bringing the man here! Shame on you, Knightley!” cried Miss Woodhouse.

“They are your neighbours, and Mr Bingley very generously offered to pay far more than his share of the fences that your father has neglected for years.”

“That does not surprise me,” said Miss Woodhouse snidely. “If my father neglected the fences, it is because such things are unimportant in places like Highbury, where

gentility and harmony amongst neighbours reigns.”

“You do not know the first thing about estate matters and boundaries, Emma, so do not use your silly whimsy as a weapon to shield your ignorance and your arrogance!” objected Mr Knightley. “It is helpful for your father to be around other men, and there are sadly not many sensible ones about. Mr Bingley is a good sort. And as far as your prejudices go, I have no complaint with the young woman on any merit, but you must admit your hypocrisy towards the Bingleys when you spend so much of your time with Miss Smith, whose parentage is entirely unknown!”

“It is obvious that Harriet’s parents must be of some great rank, Knightley,” Miss Woodhouse defended herself. “She is very comfortably established, well educated, and her allowance is generous indeed. Does that sound like the daughter of a low-born man to you?”

“She is known to be a natural child, and while I am happy to know her, there are many who would not agree that she is a good friend for you. And yet you snub those of perfectly decent rank,” said Knightley.

“Their father owned a shipyard!” gasped Miss Woodhouse.

“I assure you that Miss Bingley did not assist in building the ships, Emma. I do not even like the woman, but that is no reason for you to refuse the acquaintance,” Knightley groaned. “You are changing the subject. The rank of our neighbours has nothing to do with the fact that your friend Mrs Weston is entitled to this attention from you! And not to mention Miss Bates will enter society again after six months of isolation and mourning for her mother. You did not visit her nearly as often as you ought when she was stuck at home; the very least you could do is be present to welcome her back to society. Mrs Weston feels very strongly about it, for this year has been difficult for poor Miss Bates. You owe this notice to your friends!”

Darcy and Bingley looked at each other uncomfortably, and began to purposely make more noise with their boots as they continued down the long hall, hoping to make their footsteps heard.

“I must insist that it is quite impossible! We cannot possibly attend!” Miss Woodhouse was not to be moved .

“There is one thing, Emma, which a person can always do, if they choose, and that is their duty; not by manoeuvring and finessing, but by vigour and resolution!”

By this point, Bingley was purple with indignation, and Darcy saw fit to clear his throat loudly, and to begin making even more noise with his boots, practically stomping as they traversed the hall in an effort to be heard.

“I believe the exit is this way, Bingley,” Darcy said loudly. He did not have to. He and Bingley could have just crept silently away, but Darcy wanted Miss Woodhouse to know she had been overheard. She ought to be embarrassed by such speech.

They heard a feminine gasp, followed by small footsteps scurrying away, then louder, more purposeful footsteps approaching. Mr Knightley stepped out from behind a column. “Gentlemen, I did not know you were visiting Hartfield today. Have you seen Mr Woodhouse?”

“We have. We are just showing ourselves out. Good day, Mr Knightley,” Darcy said firmly to Mr Knightley, putting an end to further civilities. It was obvious that the pair had been overheard. The least the man could do was allow them to leave without mortifying Bingley any further.

“Of course,” Mr Knightley said, allowing them to pass.

Bingley was quiet for several minutes as they mounted their horses and departed.

“I am sorry, Bingley,” Darcy said to his friend.

“It is all right. I do still experience such prejudices, but not often any more, thanks to your friendship,” his friend replied. “However, I do not think it is gentlemanly of me to force my society where it is not wanted. Mr Jarvis left yesterday, and I am close to selecting a new steward from those your friend Mr Lambert recommended. In the future, my new steward can take up any necessary business with Mr Woodhouse’s man. What was his name? Mr Hunt?”

“Yes, that is his name,” said Darcy. “That is probably for the best. The gentleman himself is a decent enough sort, but it is obvious he is preoccupied with his health and managed by his daughter. She has made it clear that civilities are unwanted. You should not force them upon their household.”

The steward at The Gables had been cheating his employer, by a number of creative methods, all of which Darcy believed he had uncovered. The owner of the estate made it clear when Bingley took it over that she wanted no scandals nor notoriety. The steward was turned out without a reference and with none of the treasures and comforts upon which he had squandered the estate’s funds, but he was not turned over to the magistrate. Darcy and Bingley had assembled a list of candidates for the new steward’s position, and after careful consideration including reviewing the references provided, agreed upon the best. That having been accomplished, they changed and met the ladies for dinner.

“Caroline, I wish you to write to Mrs Weston tomorrow, and say that we are sorry not to attend their dinner party, but that we must tender our regrets due to a family matter for which I must travel to town,” said Bingley.

“Are we to go to town, Charles?” gasped Miss Bingley, “Please say that we may!”

“No, Caroline, you will not go to town unless you plan to remain there and stay with

friends. I am going for one night only,” said Charles.

“What is the family matter, Charles?” asked Mrs Hurst.

“To be perfectly forthright, Louisa, there is not one,” confessed Charles. “We have suspected that Miss Woodhouse has been intentionally snubbing us. I received confirmation of that today, and evidence that she has declined Mrs Weston’s invitation in an effort not to become acquainted with us. It is my understanding that Mrs Weston and Miss Woodhouse are great friends, and that Miss Woodhouse owes Mrs Weston these attentions. I will not be the thorn that grows between two friends. I have already decided that this estate is just right for what I need to learn, but I will not be purchasing it. Since I am not to remain permanently, I will not willingly create fights amongst my neighbours, at least not right away. Perhaps Miss Woodhouse will be obliged to acknowledge us at some point, but I will not force it just now. You two have not led me to believe that you are pining for the company of the neighbours.”

“No, no, of course not!” agreed Caroline.

“It has occurred to me, Caroline, that it is in your best interest to stay here and learn the duties of the mistress of an estate, but if you do not wish to remain, as I said, I will conduct you to London and leave you with friends, if you have one that might invite you.”

Caroline was sorely tempted to escape this backwater, but she would not squander the opportunity to show Mr Darcy how perfect she would be at running his household. “I could not abandon poor Georgiana here, Brother,” she said. “I will remain.”

“It will be enough, I think, if I go to town,” Bingley mused. “Then the rest of you might stay at home without it causing too much gossip.”

“I beg to differ, Bingley,” said Darcy. “Let Hurst and I join you. We can stay at

Darcy house, and return in a day or two. I am certain I will have correspondence waiting for me in any case and could do with an afternoon in my study. With no men in the house, and Georgiana not even being out, it will be more plausible for the ladies to remain at home.”

“If Mrs Weston puts it about that we will not attend, I am certain Miss Woodhouse will change her mind and give her friend the respect she is owed,” said Bingley. “It is better for the neighbourhood this way. I am certain we will dine with the Westons another time. Perhaps we will invite just them and perhaps a few other families here for a meal. They are good people, and this will show that we have not slighted them.”

Miss Woodhouse did indeed change her mind, but it was not only the news that the residents of The Gables would not attend that helped her decision. When the Westons visited Hartfield, they also informed her that Mr Weston’s son, Mr Frank Churchill, would be arriving in time for the dinner.

Mr Weston had been widowed when his son was just a babe, and he had also been experiencing significant financial troubles. His wife’s much older sister had no children, and Mr Weston had been bullied into giving up the boy to the Churchills’ guardianship, to be their heir, for the sake of the child’s future. Mr Weston had been prevented from visiting the boy for many years, but the young man’s aunt had died three months previous, and his uncle two months before that. He had just left off his period of mourning, and would now go out into society with a black band upon his arm.

Miss Woodhouse had been hearing of the merits of two people for most of her life. The first – Jane Fairfax – the niece of Miss Bates, was an orphan that lived with Colonel Campbell and his family as a companion for their daughter, who had no siblings. Jane Fairfax was poor, but she did have access to a superior education, and was better than anyone living at singing, pianoforte, the harp, drawing, painting, dancing, languages, and every possible accomplishment known to females in their

society. Interesting things happened to her constantly; Emma Woodhouse detested her very name and loathed hearing about her.

The second – Frank Churchill – was the other person of whom Miss Woodhouse had been receiving monthly reports for most of her life, and those accounts were of a great deal more interest to her. She had been romanticising Frank Churchill, and waiting impatiently to meet him, since she was thirteen-years-old. It was with great alacrity that Emma Woodhouse accepted the invitation to Randalls once it was offered again.

CHAPTER 5

Perhaps one might say that Miss Woodhouse had been paid out for her snub to the residents of The Gables, for fortune did not smile upon any of her hopes for being courted by Mr Churchill in the following weeks. Darcy, Bingley, and Hurst remained in London for two days while Darcy attended to some business. As planned, the ladies of The Gables stayed home the night of Mrs Weston's dinner.

Emma attended her friend's dinner party, and to say the least, her friend's demeanour towards her had cooled somewhat, though Emma was not concerned. Anne Weston understood Emma, having been her governess and companion for seventeen years, and knew how Emma felt about such matters as rank. Emma knew any discomfort would be smoothed over in no time. For now, Emma was simply enjoying the opportunity to be out of the house. The Bingleys had been invited everywhere recently, so she had accepted no invitations.

That evening, Emma took great care with her appearance, and knew that she looked very fine indeed when she descended the stairs. She was all anticipation to meet Frank Churchill. Like Miss Bates and her letters from her niece, Mr Weston had been in the habit of sharing all the details of his son's correspondence for years. To her, Frank Churchill sounded like the perfect man; well-connected, wealthy, now with an estate of his own. She had heard tales of his grades at school and prowess in gentlemanly pursuits since her girlhood. Since she was old enough to marry she had been certain that if he ever visited his father, he would fall immediately in love with her and take her far away from Highbury.

Perhaps that might have happened if not for the attendance of another unexpected

guest. Mrs Weston had known since the previous day that Miss Bates was bringing a guest of her own and had purposely not mentioned it, for fear of giving Emma another excuse to refuse to attend her dinner party.

Emma entered the hall at Randalls and was introduced to Mr Churchill, who had not so far disappointed her with his manner and appearance. After the introduction, she entered the drawing room with her hand upon the young man's arm, feeling for all the world like the cat who got the cream, when she was startled by someone who rushed up on her right.

“Surprise!” shouted Miss Bates excitedly, shoving a beautiful blonde up to Emma's notice. “Look! Look, Miss Woodhouse, look who has come, it is my niece Jane Fairfax, she has just arrived yesterday, and will stay with me for a month while Colonel Campbell and his family travel to Ireland! Oh, we are to have such good times, Miss Woodhouse, now that Jane has come to join us in Highbury, I am certain we shall get up to all manner of high jinks! Is it not exciting?”

Emma ground her teeth as she said everything that was polite to Jane Fairfax, who had been to Highbury for short visits once or twice in the past. She was not at all pleased to see her. She had spent years waiting for Frank Churchill to visit his father, and now that he was finally here, she was to share his attentions with Jane Fairfax, of all people?

The company conversed in the drawing room for three quarters of an hour, waiting for dinner to be announced. Emma listened to Miss Bates's nonsensical chatter while she glowered at Mr Knightley. Eventually, he made his way over once Miss Bates moved on to speak with Mr Woodhouse, who was sitting quite close to the fire, as always.

“Why are you glaring at me, Emma?” he said, smiling as he joined her.

“Oh! Because it is bad enough that you bully me to come when we had no wish to, and now you leave me to endure not only the excessive attentions of Miss Bates, but also the unpleasant proximity of Jane Fairfax!”

“Why do you dislike her?” he asked curiously.

“Because she is too perfect, and therefore there must be something wrong with her!” Emma insisted. “And because she already knows Mr Churchill from her visit to Weymouth, and she should give the rest of us here the opportunity to converse with him, since we have never had the opportunity to do so.”

“You wish for his attention, then?” asked Knightley. “Whatever for?”

“It would be nice to know him, since we have heard so much about him,” said Emma. “You have not had the opportunity to speak much with Miss Fairfax. You ought to pay her some attention so Mrs Weston and the rest of the party can get to know Mr Churchill better.”

“No, I do not think I will,” said Mr Knightley, obviously piqued, though Emma was sure she did not know why.

During dinner, Mr Churchill ignored Emma, who was seated on his right, in favour of talking over several others in order to converse with Miss Fairfax, who was across the table a few seats down on his left. Emma steamed through the entire meal, having no other conversation except that of Mr Elton, who was on her right, and who rambled on insensibly throughout the entire meal. The man had recently married a tedious woman after being refused by Emma, and he spent the entire meal attempting to make her feel her mistake. All Emma felt was the urge to run sobbing from the room. Why had she attended again? Oh yes. She owed this attention to dear Anne. Well... if she had known that Jane Fairfax would be here and that Anne would be so inconsiderate in her seating arrangements, she very well might have remained at

home.

Over the course of the meal, the new Mrs Elton had manoeuvred Mr Knightley into opening Donwell Abbey for the company's enjoyment. The very first thing Mr Knightley did was get Mr Woodhouse to agree that given the length of time since The Abbey had entertained, that he and Emma certainly must attend. Emma narrowed her eyes at Knightley, knowing that the man intended to use this event to force her into an introduction with the Bingleys and their guests. Emma did know that the tradespeople had a gentleman of great wealth and consequence visiting them, along with his young sister. Emma finally decided that she must, at least, make herself available to this gentleman and his sister, if for no other reason than to give them some genteel company during their visit to Highbury. She could not have it said that the society in their village was lacking.

After the meal ended, and it was time for the ladies to exhibit, Emma performed a piece that was of middling difficulty without error, and which she knew that she could sing very well. The company gave their polite attention, but Emma knew that she may as well have never sat down. Everyone was on tenterhooks for Jane Fairfax, of whose talent they had heard of extensively for years. Jane sat down without any music sheets at all and immediately began playing vigorously and impressively. Emma sat unhappily as Jane Fairfax displayed her superiority at the instrument, and though her own talents were not at all embarrassing, when Jane opened her mouth to sing, Emma decided she had felt enough mortification. She looked out of the window, saw a light drizzle that would not be enough to prevent anyone from getting home safely. However, anything was enough to distress her father.

"Is that lightning?" she said cunningly, interrupting Miss Fairfax's performance. That was all she needed to say to make her father jump out of his chair by the fire and begin his exclamations, setting off Miss Bates and the other neighbours in turn, as Mr and Mrs Weston tried without success to calm everyone. In a trice, the guests were in their carriages, rushing for home in case the light rain outside unexpectedly became a

dangerous storm.

Miss Bates was in the drawing room with Miss Darcy and Bingley's sisters when the men returned from London to The Gables the following day. Mr Knightley was present as well, though the excitement of Miss Bates prevented the man from telling the party why he was there himself. Bingley's neighbour was there to personally invite them to an outing for the entire neighbourhood at Donwell Abbey, to tour the house and grounds and to picnic outdoors. Bingley was hesitant in accepting, but Darcy could see that it seemed important to their neighbour, so he, and then Georgiana, made encouraging remarks about it sounding delightful. Finally, Bingley accepted for their entire household.

Although it was apparent that Bingley's sisters did not care for the older lady, Miss Bates was one of the kind ladies who had called upon the women of the house. The reason for their dislike was evident, for the lady was annoyingly high-strung. However, for some reason, Georgiana had taken a shine to her. Georgiana and Miss Bates called upon each other nearly every day, and Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst found themselves unable to say no to Georgiana's request for their chaperonage. Darcy had noticed that when Georgiana gave Miss Bates her direct attention and spoke kindly to her, with sincere interest, the lady seemed to calm somewhat and babble rather less.

The day of the outing, just over a week later, was a glorious summer day. The ladies all had their parasols to protect them from the sun, and the hood of the barouche was opened. The other guests were mostly there when they arrived, and were beginning to tour the house in small groups. Darcy made sure that he turned away and led Georgiana to converse with Miss Bates and a Miss Harriet Smith when Knightley began to introduce the Woodhouses to Bingley and his family.

Miss Woodhouse behaved as if there was a bad smell under her nose when introduced to the Bingleys. Mr Bingley was extremely reserved in his greeting, then solicited his

host immediately for an introduction to a blue-eyed angel nearby. Darcy smiled. Bingley could find an angel under a rock. He wondered if perhaps this new young lady might change his host's mind about the quality of the neighbourhood.

Another newcomer to the community, a Mr Churchill, looked rather distressed at Bingley's immediate attention to the blonde beauty. Worried for their brother's prospects, his sisters immediately attached themselves to the pair, dragging Mr Hurst with them, and paying as little notice to Miss Woodhouse as possible. The Bingley sisters did not like to be snubbed, and would give Miss Woodhouse very little opportunity to do so.

Darcy was content to trail after his sister, Miss Bates, and Miss Smith as they excitedly toured the house, listening quietly to Miss Bates telling Georgiana amusing anecdotes about how things were when Mr Knightley's mother was mistress. The lady had been visiting the abbey since she was a young girl and recalled details that even their host, eight years her junior, had forgotten.

Darcy was amused by his sister's friendship with the older woman. "She has lost her mother, and is all alone, Brother," his sister replied the day before when he had questioned her about it. "I understand her. What would become of me if anything happened to you and Richard? I might not be poor, but I would be alone. And, please do not let this hurt your feelings, but I have been lonely for the company of a mother or an older sister. She has spent a terrible six months pining for company during her mourning. She is excitable, but she is also harmless, good-hearted, and a truly kind person. This pleases me a great deal more than good breeding or haughty manners."

Later, when they had all explored the house to their content, they all repaired outside to do the same with the intention of exploring the grounds. Spying Mr Knightley striding purposefully towards him with Miss Woodhouse on his arm, Darcy ducked out of the way, heading towards Bingley and the beautiful blonde. Bingley was like a dog with a bone, and Mr Churchill had given up for now. Darcy joined the pair and

subtly began to pay the lady his attentions.

Bingley raised a brow at him, and Darcy gave him a sly wink. They had played this game many times when Darcy was attempting to avoid the company of some shrew. In order to insult the woman, Darcy would pay slight attention to whomever Bingley was following instead. For Darcy, even the tiniest attention to a female was significant and enough to offend and embarrass whichever woman was stalking him, and also served to show Bingley whether he was courting a fortune hunter. Those ladies who were only looking for the largest fortune they could manage all forgot Bingley in seconds once Darcy appeared.

Darcy watched out of the corner of his eye as Miss Woodhouse grew frustrated. She obviously wished to be introduced to him, but he would not humour her after her slight of his friend. That was no way to reward her poor behaviour. Miss Fairfax was obviously bewildered by all the notice she received, and kept looking at Mr Churchill as if he might save her. So that is how the wind blows . Darcy thought to himself. I will have to point it out to Bingley before he makes the girl too uncomfortable, though perhaps her suitor's resolve would benefit from the pressure .

After a half an hour of wandering, the party came together under the canopies to relax and to partake of the marvellous feast their host had provided. Miss Fairfax, rattled from all of the male attention, went directly to the harp, outraging Miss Woodhouse, not because that lady wanted to play, but because she did not know how to play, and her neighbours knew it. Miss Woodhouse sat with Miss Smith, Mr Knightley, and Mr Frank Churchill, while Bingley followed Miss Fairfax as close to the harp as he could, and Darcy sat with Georgiana and Miss Bates. Mr Woodhouse, the Westons, and the other guests paired off into small groups of their own.

After a comfortable hour and a half, Georgiana and Miss Fairfax had exchanged places (Darcy was astonished at Miss Bates's ease in encouraging his sister to perform), and then exchanged them again, and the company sated themselves. They

had not, however, convinced Mr Woodhouse to allow anyone to eat any cake, which he had guarded the entire time on the insistence that “ It is not good for you .” Caroline and Louisa were sitting near Hurst, who had, as usual, fallen asleep.

It appeared that Frank Churchill was feeling quite as neglected as Miss Woodhouse, for he suddenly sat up with a mischievous gleam in his eye, and said, “Miss Woodhouse tells me that she demands to know what you are all thinking of.”

“Did I?” Miss Woodhouse giggled.

“You certainly did!” he insisted. “Knightley, as our host, you should begin.”

“I do not know,” Knightley drawled. “Are you certain you wish to know what I am thinking, Emma?”

“No, I am certain I do not, Mr Knightley,” Miss Woodhouse said quickly. “I would rather hear nearly anything else.”

Mrs Elton, never liking a situation that did not feature her as the centre of attention, expressed a disapproval for Mr Churchill’s deference to Emma’s demands , and insisted that her husband accompany her for a walk.

“You are all so very dull!” declared Churchill. “Very well, Miss Woodhouse demands that each of you must produce one entertaining remark that is very clever, or two that are very dull.”

“Well I shall have no trouble on that last, shall I?” joked Miss Bates, giggling, and nudging Georgiana companionably with her elbow.

“Of course you will, Miss Bates, for however will you limit yourself to only two?” snapped Miss Woodhouse irritably. A shocked hush fell over the entire party, every

person present open-mouthed and appalled by Miss Woodhouse's cruel remark.

"Ah yes," said Miss Bates, blushing scarlet from Emma's insult. "I can see what she means. I talk too much, it is true. I will do my best to hold my tongue."

Mr Weston attempted to enter the conversation and say something very entertaining, no doubt in an effort to lighten the mood, but his effort was wasted as they all watched Miss Bates rise quickly and flee into the gardens, a small sob escaping her as she went. Everyone looked at Miss Woodhouse critically; indeed, even the Bingley sisters were indignant on behalf of Miss Bates. They were obliged to tolerate the older woman's company every day with Miss Darcy, and if they could avoid outright cruelty, then anyone ought to be able to do it.

"Well, really!" Georgiana said, breaking the ice as she rose to her feet. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she snapped at Miss Woodhouse as she followed after Miss Bates.

"Hear, hear," snorted Mr Hurst, who had woken just in time to see the debacle.

The party broke up, everyone pairing into groups and heading in different directions towards the gardens. Mr Knightley took off after Emma when she fled to her carriage, and Darcy set off after Georgiana and her much older friend. He heard them on the other side of a large hedge as he skirted the edge of the garden.

"You do not understand her," he heard Miss Bates say, obviously in tears. "Miss Woodhouse is truly the epitome of goodness, I must make myself very disagreeable sometimes, or she would never have said it."

"You must not tell yourself that," said Georgiana. "I will allow that it is possible that Miss Woodhouse may often be the epitome of goodness, but she was not good, nor was she kind today, and that can only be her own fault, not yours, Miss Bates. You

are all that is kind and good-hearted in this world. I will not let you take the blame for her peevishness! She spent the day attempting to gain the attention of the gentlemen, and when she could not obtain the attention of the men she wanted, she became sharp. It is not attractive behaviour, but she is the one who has indulged in it, and it must be laid at her own door.”

Darcy moved on, impressed by his sister’s acumen. After strolling for some time, he came across Knightley, looking frustrated. “Badly done, Darcy!” he said.

Darcy knew that his old acquaintance from town was referring to his avoidance of Miss Woodhouse all day. “Do not berate me as if I were your young lady friend, Knightley,” he huffed. “She is an insufferable snob, and I hope you did not expect Miss Darcy and me to notice her after her snub not only of my friend and his family, but now, of her own people from her own village! You cannot expect us to reward such behaviour with our friendship. I have seen how you look at the girl, and I comprehend your predicament, but just because you like her, does not make her agreeable. Why do you like her, anyway? She quite ruined your party.”

Knightley, knowing that he could not argue with any of Darcy’s points, stalked away in irritation. When Darcy and Georgiana returned to the group in the company of Miss Bates, Miss Woodhouse and her father had left in their carriage, and the rest of the party was breaking up. The guests were leaving, none having the heart for the open carriage rides Mr Knightley had planned for their enjoyment.

CHAPTER 6

Meryton - July 1811

Elizabeth Bennet followed her three younger sisters into the village of Meryton to see the spectacle of the arriving regiment. Kitty and Lydia were in high spirits, squabbling over who would receive the greatest share of attention from the officers. Mary was discussing with Elizabeth the merits of a book the two of them had been reading together.

Elizabeth did not think her sister was doing it to toady up to her, but since the news of Elizabeth's lottery win, Mary had begun to seek out her company a great deal more. Mary asked her opinion on clothes, ribbons, and new hairstyles after their shopping trip to St Albans, when Elizabeth prevailed, pressing her sister to accept an attractive pale yellow day gown instead of the dark grey frock she had planned for herself. With some light encouragement, Mary had been slowly coaxed to lessen the severity of her looks.

Elizabeth had asked Mary about her sudden willingness to open up to new things, and Mary had replied, "Well, it is not like I am any more likely to marry than before, not with only a few hundred more added to my portion, but now I have the opportunity to perhaps spend my spinsterhood differently than I expected. Before, I thought I would be obliged to live in ignominy in a tiny cottage in the country with my mother, possibly in not only penury, but perhaps even in squalor, considering my mother and younger sister's inability to curb their spending habits. There seemed to be little reason to spend my pin money. Greys and browns are often less expensive, they wear longer, and they are infinitely more practical than wasting my funds on fripperies that

will do me no good.

“And why waste time reading novels before, when I was better served by studying and improving myself? I am not likely to get a position as a governess, with my skills at the instrument, but perhaps I might serve as a companion to someone elderly, or perhaps a nurse. My funds are better saved for my future comfort, if I am to have any. But it has occurred to me that perhaps if I am to live with you in London, that is, if you are still amenable to having us when Papa dies, then I might exert a bit more effort to be open and pleasant, and to read something besides sermons and languages, so that perhaps I might be more interesting company for you.”

“I see no reason why I ought not still be amenable to all of you living with me when the time comes, unless Mama becomes troublesome, and still, that need have nothing to do with you , Mary,” Elizabeth replied to her sister as they stood behind the younger girls to watch the spectacle. “But you work so hard, it is rather wrong of Papa never to have offered you any masters. There are a few from St Albans who travel to Meryton on occasion. I will speak to him. There is no reason why you should not have a few lessons to polish your skills. That is all you are wanting. A bit of polish.”

Things had been difficult for Elizabeth since she won the lottery. Everyone treated her differently. Everyone. Mary and Jane were nearly the only ones who were entirely authentic to her, and never peevish or resentful. She almost wished she had never won. Lydia and Kitty attempted to wheedle funds or fripperies, which was nothing new. The funds Uncle Gardiner had dispensed to her had stretched to two gowns each, an evening gown and a day dress, as well as a pair of dancing slippers, a bonnet, and a quantity of lace, ribbons, and feathers, for all of the Bennet women, and even a fine copy of a book her father had been searching for in its first edition. The gratitude of her mother and two youngest sisters had waned quickly when the money was spent. Then to add insult to injury, Mrs Bennet had attempted to end Elizabeth’s pin money from her father.

“That is rich, considering nearly all of the funds you received from Uncle were spent on the rest of us!” Mary had declared in outrage.

Jane had also argued against such measures against her sister. “Lizzy has already given up her share of Mama’s dowry for us, and promised to keep us should we need it. It is unconscionable that her goodness should be so meanly rewarded!”

Mrs Bennet and her two youngest spent most of their time attempting to wheedle money or promises from Elizabeth, then getting angry and difficult when they were refused or evaded. Or, alternately, Mrs Bennet realised she still depended upon Elizabeth’s good will, and deferred to her decision on matters Elizabeth had no interest in interfering with. Elizabeth purposely did not give her opinions on anything, lest she be accused of using her fortune to bully the others.

Mr Bennet, on the other hand, seemed to have taken exception to Elizabeth now having the power to accomplish that which he had openly declined to do. He was not overly cruel, but it was clear that Elizabeth was his favourite no longer. Elizabeth learned quickly what it was like not to be protected from his sarcastic wit.

Elizabeth said nothing to anyone, not even Jane, but she had already decided to leave Longbourn and live with her aunt and uncle in London when she reached her majority. She would continue to let the house in London until her father died and it was needed. She would take a comfortable income, perhaps two hundred a year, from her interest, and she would stay with her relations until she married, or until she felt that it was time to live on her own. Her uncle had predicted that life would become difficult for her, and made the offer before he returned to London the day of his visit. There were still several months before her majority, so she got along as best as she could.

Every person in Meryton save her father, Uncle Phillips, and the residents of Netherfield had asked her to loan or give them money. Her neighbours had pitched

everything from business endeavours, investments, to outright charity. Every unmarried man in town had now asked her to marry him, and her mother was not pleased that she had declined every one of them.

The only true matter she had been triumphant about was when, out of fear that one of her sisters might be used as a tool to take her fortune, Elizabeth demanded that her father agree that none of the young ladies of Longbourn was to go out alone, including herself, and that Kitty and Lydia only be allowed out with one of the older girls. She and Jane had already encountered a few persistent gentlemen waiting for Elizabeth out on her walks, and after a stern letter from Uncle Gardiner and a talking to from Uncle Phillips, Thomas Bennet had agreed to add his insistence to Elizabeth's, and to enforce it.

What broke Elizabeth's heart most had been the defection of her closest friend Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte, apparently eaten alive with jealousy and spite, ceased speaking to Elizabeth the very moment the news became known, and was only marginally civil to Jane and the other Bennets. The rest of the Lucas family was equally distant with Elizabeth after she had refused John Lucas. Then again when she instructed Sir William to write to her uncle when the man had requested three hundred and fifty pounds to send his youngest to university. Edward Gardiner's response to Sir William held little warmth in it, and so her friendship with the Lucases crumbled. Mrs Bennet and Lady Lucas remained as thick as thieves because Mrs Bennet still complained about Elizabeth all of the time. Charlotte had taken up with the Long sisters and Mary King, and the ladies made one snide comment after another about Elizabeth in company.

Elizabeth, Mary, and the younger girls enjoyed the parade of handsome officers along with the rest of the little town, and spent a merry hour in the village after, allowing Kitty and Lydia to spend time speaking with the other young ladies who had come to the village for the same reason. Elizabeth and Mary strolled up and down the market street, browsing the wares in the shop windows.

The following afternoon, Elizabeth waited with her family for the arrival of her father's distant cousin, Mr Collins. The ladies of the house had only heard of the visit this morning, which had made Mrs Bennet unbearable all afternoon while preparing the house and improving the evening meal.

Mr Collins's letter was everything ridiculous, and Elizabeth dreaded the next s'ennight. It was obvious that the man was completely insensible, and he had also made it clear that he was in want of a wife and was coming to find one from amongst his cousins at the demand of his patroness. Mrs Bennet had latched onto this immediately, hoping that if Jane could catch the man's eye, then perhaps their mother might remain at Longbourn always, and not be obliged to throw herself upon the mercy of that other "ungrateful daughter."

Mr Collins was punctual to a fault, his hired carriage turning down their lane at precisely four o'clock. He was received with great politeness by the entire family. Mr Bennet said little enough to make his guest welcome, but Mrs Bennet was ready to converse, and the young ladies were prepared to hear whatever he had to say for himself. He was a tall, heavy-looking young man of about five-and-twenty, with a grave air about him, and oddly formal manners. He had not been in the drawing room for very long before he complimented Mrs Bennet on her fine family.

"You are very kind, sir," answered Mrs Bennet. "They are all fine girls, though none of them are as well favoured as Jane. I do hope to see them all well settled. It does seem rather impossible to accomplish, with everything arranged so oddly."

"And their education?" asked Mr Collins. "My father always complained of my Cousin Bennet's scholarly nature. I am certain that he must have ensured his daughters received the finest education. Has their governess left them?"

"We never had a governess," said Kitty, unthinking. Mrs Bennet was beside herself. All of these years, she insisted her daughters did not need to be bothered with

education. And the very first time a man actually entered their company with the express intention of finding a wife, she was instantly proven wrong.

“Never had a governess! Why my dear Mrs Bennet, you must have been quite a slave to their education,” exclaimed Mr Collins. “I never imagined that my cousin so neglected his family!”

Mr Bennet was turning rather purple at this, but Elizabeth intervened before her father’s sarcastic wit rose to the fore. “Compared with some families, we might have been neglected, but those of us who wished to learn have never wanted the means. We have always been encouraged to read,” she informed him.

Mary stifled a snort, because Mr Bennet and Elizabeth had disagreed only this morning that although Elizabeth had agreed to provide for his family after his death, it was not her responsibility to educate her sisters, and that Mr Bennet ought to acquire masters for the pianoforte and French for Mary. Elizabeth thought that she might not mind polishing her skills at the instrument and her accent either, but it seemed that she could not ask her parents for the slightest of favours any longer. She knew her uncle would send the funds to pay for it if she asked for them, but she did not wish to encourage her father to continue to shirk his responsibilities.

At dinner Mrs Bennet did everything she could to shove Jane at Mr Collins, but fortunately Mr Collins refused to be interested in her. Or indeed, any of them just yet. Though he had expressed interest in the young ladies in his letter, he made it clear that it was his first intent to learn something about the estate before any other consideration.

“Bennet, might I request to join you in your study tomorrow to learn something about Longbourn?” asked Collins. “I understand that the running and the management of the estate is not yet my business, but I hope you will understand that I was not raised to it as you are. A small explanation of the skills I might need, and your most

pressing responsibilities would be very edifying, if it is no objection to you.”

The rest of the evening was spent listening to Mr Collins praise his patroness to the skies. Lady Catherine de Bourgh was the wisest, the most practical, the most sensible, the most knowledgeable, and the most noble woman who had ever lived. She advised him on everything, even wrote his sermons for him, and he made it obvious that he could not make a single decision without her counsel. It was clear to them all that their cousin was rather dim-witted, and it seemed as if he relied on his patroness for nearly everything. It was a sobering thought for all of the young ladies, the idea of being bartered off by their mother to a man who was run and dominated by his neighbour.

Over the following few days, Mr Collins followed Mr Bennet all over the estate. He watched with concern as Mr Bennet showed him some examples of correspondence from neighbours, attorneys, grain dealers, seed suppliers, and tradesmen, and with outright horror as his cousin attempted to explain the ledgers. Apparently Mr Collins had great difficulty with sums, and struggled with his parish ledgers.

Mr Collins also did not ride, had no talent for talking to the tenants in any sort of tactful manner, and was frightened of the farm animals, especially the pigs and horses for some odd reason. He spent the entire visit waiting for Mrs Bennet or one of the other ladies to instruct him on what was expected of him.

“The man is the perfect husband, Jane,” Mrs Bennet insisted. “I have never met such a perfect specimen in all my years. He is so simple he requires a woman to lead him in all things! If I were not stuck with Mr Bennet, I would marry him myself!”

Mrs Bennet was not wrong about the man needing to be led. Elizabeth had been watching him closely, and it was true. She could tell that when he wed, his wife would need to pick out his stockings for him, he was so uncertain of himself. He was not otherwise objectionable, other than being somewhat unattractive, and rather too

heavy for a petite woman's comfort. He also needed to bathe more, but it was obvious that he would do whatever his future bride required of him.

The man had made it clear that he would not consider Jane. "Though it is tempting to be guided solely by sentiment or appearance, I cannot but comprehend that a wife of practical sense and clear judgement would be my greatest asset," he said to Mrs Bennet's most recent attempts to guide him to Jane. "Lady Catherine has urged me that my lady must be of great intellect to assist me in the endeavour of managing Longbourn, which is no small responsibility." Elizabeth did not know whether to be relieved for Jane, or offended that her elder sister's intelligence had been insulted just because she was beautiful, particularly when her sister was better than even their father with arithmetic. Upon reflection, she decided on the former.

Mary was attempting to gain the man's attention by discussing Fordyce and the most recent tenant issues with him. Her sums were sufficient for the mistress or even the owner of an estate, but Mr Collins seemed intent on not considering a particular wife until he had learned everything he needed to know.

CHAPTER 7

Mrs Bennet was planning a dinner in honour of Mr Collins, but on his third night in the neighbourhood, Mrs Lockhart sent a note inviting him to join their family's invitation to Netherfield for a dinner party. Mr and Mrs Lockhart were a kind couple who added greatly to the tone of their neighbourhood. The gentleman had about seven thousand a year inherited from a maternal relation, was in his early thirties, and was hoping to purchase an estate one day in the not so distant future. Mrs Lockhart was perhaps six-and-twenty, of middling beauty and exceptional kindness, and a true friend and comfort to Elizabeth since she had won the lottery. Mr and Mrs Lockhart were well enough off not to require a handout of any sort, and the lady, so recently married and in possession of most of her greatest hopes, had no cause to be resentful of Elizabeth for any reason.

Mr and Mrs Lockhart had met under interesting circumstances. A matchmaking house party! No one in Meryton had ever heard of such a thing, nor were they certain such a thing could be proper, though Mrs Lockhart assured them that it was. Ever After End was an elegant manor with a romantic name, and placed within an hour's journey of Bath. Owned by a Mrs Theodosia Darlington, it boasted an attractive summer's entertainment amongst others whose primary desire was to find a person who wanted to wed.

“When there are twelve gentlemen and twelve ladies present, and each of them has paid fifty pounds to be among others who are actively searching for a mate, couples tend to pair up rather quickly!” giggled Mrs Lockhart. “And the chaperones, they are all reasonable people who are only there to lend their respectability to the activities. They are all rather eccentric, but none of them sit and gossip over the pairings, nor

create expectations amongst the guests. Compromises are strictly not allowed. If you claim to have been compromised there, everyone will simply say you were lying and that it never happened. Everything is done respectably, but also with a great deal of consideration of all parties involved. Without feeling my mother and her friends hovering over me and supervising my courtship, it took no time at all to fall in love as much as I chose.”

“It sounds like heaven,” said Elizabeth. A courtship over which none of her relations, not even her aunt and uncle, could make her feel awkward? She had met a few tradesmen in London while visiting Gracechurch Street, and though her aunt meant well, her excitement over the attention they paid Elizabeth made her feel self-conscious, even if her aunt did not display such enthusiasm in company.

Mrs Bennet did not like the idea of the house parties in question at all. Her daughters had no need to pay such large sums of money to catch a man. Her Jane could not be so beautiful for nothing, and at least privately, Mrs Bennet occasionally acknowledged that her brother was correct, Lizzy could not be so clever for nothing, and had the family’s safety secured. And though Lizzy was not as beautiful as Jane, with such a sum, it was likely some man would wish to marry her. Mrs Bennet would have to be certain it was not a poor man who would need Lizzy’s house or Lizzy’s funds. And Mary ; Mary was looking very well lately, and as her second most clever daughter, Mrs Bennet had high hopes that she would catch Mr Collins, who wanted a clever wife, obviously to help him with his duties as master of Longbourn. Mrs Bennet had shared this hope with every other matron in the neighbourhood only the day before. No, her girls were well on their way to do well enough for themselves. They were quite above paying fifty pounds to find a husband.

After greeting their hosts, Elizabeth followed her family into the drawing room. Several rooms were opened up, and it appeared that Mrs Lockhart would encourage dancing amongst the younger guests later in the evening, and perhaps cards. Elizabeth had few close friends left in Meryton, but she was, unsurprisingly, very popular

already among the officers, which did not help her difficulty with the local young ladies.

She soon found herself surrounded by three officers, and at least they did have some amusing conversation. Elizabeth did her best not to be too enthusiastic with the men, since she had already been accused of flirting outrageously by Charlotte Lucas and her sniping group of friends that Elizabeth used to call her own before she realised how cruel and resentful they all were.

“Lizzy, come and meet Lieutenant Wickham!” Lydia called from across the room. Rolling her eyes, Elizabeth rose and made her way to her sister before another scene was made. As the introductions were made, Elizabeth eyed the handsome man and wondered what had led him to go soldiering, a young man’s pursuit. Not that he was old, but he was obviously between twenty-seven and thirty years old. Most of the other new recruits were only twenty-one, or perhaps a year or two older. He must have been extremely out of pocket to join the militia at such an age. She had heard the stories of the low pay and discomfort suffered by the officers. No man so close to thirty would choose such a low position unless it were absolutely necessary.

It was certainly to his benefit to have joined the militia, for he was so handsome that his looks could only be improved by regimentals. The ladies in town would be wild over him, though Elizabeth was certain he had nothing with which to support a wife. She had learned to be cynical of men in recent weeks, and with good reason. Every man she had ever met had changed significantly in character since the news had arrived that she now had a fortune, except for her Uncles Gardiner and Phillips. She rejoiced that she had the two men to rely upon. Lydia and Kitty were lured away from their conversation by Captain Carter and Lieutenant Denny, and left quite alone in conversation, Elizabeth heard Mr Wickham’s sad life story in minutes.

The man had been born in Derbyshire, his parents had died, but he had once enjoyed the support of a caring godfather until the man died a year or two after his majority,

and the man's son had refused the bequest left in his will.

"How positively indecent!" Elizabeth exclaimed, wondering why Lieutenant Wickham was telling her such private matters. "Why would you not have sought assistance from the law?"

"Ah, there was just such an informality in the terms as to give me no hope from the law," answered Mr Wickham morosely. "A man of honour could not have doubted the intent, but Mr Darcy chose to do so, and thus has deprived me of my due."

"Has he any other family?" asked Elizabeth, unsure what else to say.

"His sister is an elegant young lady of about fifteen or sixteen, and I am told he is cried up as the best and kindest of brothers, but I fear he has ruined poor Miss Darcy," the gentleman said. "I met her not long ago in Ramsgate and she has grown just like him; very, very proud and spoiled. I was grieved indeed. My godfather would have been heartbroken to see her thus."

Being possessed of four sisters, Elizabeth did not take kindly to those who spoke poorly of the characters of girls who were possibly only silly and young, and worse, not present to defend themselves. However, in the last weeks, she had also learned not to anger men or embarrass them. They were all frightful beasts with dreadful tempers, or at least that is what she had recently observed while making her recent refusals. She was beginning to be sometimes grateful that she had won something. Even if all of her friends were going to be resentful of her, even if Elizabeth partly still hoped to fall in love one day, at least she could avoid being married to some beastly man with a temper if she chose .

The dinner was an absolute misery for Elizabeth. Her younger sisters were loud and vulgar, and her mother did nothing but complain incessantly that Jane was not clever enough for Mr Collins, and of her hopes for Mary. Mr Bennet sat back watching her

and the others. Elizabeth knew that he knew his three eldest were embarrassed, and he thought it was funny. Elizabeth did not know how she had ever believed that she had been special to him, that he had cared for her more somehow, than he had for her sisters.

After dinner, Elizabeth helped Mrs Lockhart pass out cups of tea, and the instrument was opened. Mary good-naturedly agreed to play something sprightly, and the young people, led excitedly by Lydia and Kitty, began to line up and dance.

Captain Carter came over during the second set. "May I have the pleasure, Miss Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth smiled at the officer. He was not so impertinent as the others, but she did not wish to give the men any encouragement tonight. "Thank you, Captain, but I will not dance this evening." It was a shame, Elizabeth dearly loved to dance, and even though she was not at all interested in the officers as marital prospects, they were, at least, charming partners. But since her good fortune, she could not dance with anyone without creating malicious gossip.

"Elizabeth, this is a new blend of tea, you must try it with a slice of orange," interrupted Mrs Lockhart. She knew that Elizabeth had been feeling excessively overwhelmed by the lavish attention she had endured recently. "Captain, would you also like a cup?"

After the guests had all been served their tea, or for some of the older guests, port, Elizabeth and her friend sat in a corner for a few minutes to discuss the evening. "We have decided that we shall not purchase Netherfield," Mrs Lockhart shared with her.

"So soon?" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Why, you have not been here a whole quarter! The neighbourhood must be as abominable as it seems to me just now, if you have decided against it so quickly."

“Not at all, my dear friend, the area requires only your company to delight us at all times, though I sense we are not to enjoy it for too many more months,” her friend insisted. “We recently received word that an estate near Mr Lockhart’s home, that he knows very well, has become available. The idea of making an offer pleased him so much, I could hardly object.”

“Of course not!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Congratulations, Abigail. I hope you and Mr Lockhart will be very happy there. What is the place called?”

“Evesham,” answered her friend. “It is in the north, perhaps five miles from a great estate called Matlock. Nicholas is well acquainted with the earl and countess who live there. I shall depend upon you to visit me when I am settled. Jane as well.”

“I am certain we shall both be delighted!” exclaimed Elizabeth. “You are correct, I plan to live with my uncle in London when I reach my majority.”

“Must you wait that long?” asked Mrs Lockhart.

“If I attempt to go months earlier, the younger girls and my mother will likely cause a fuss that I am always favoured with good fortune and my uncle’s attention,” said Elizabeth. “My mother will fuss so much that my father, who will understand why I am hiding away in London, might forbid me to go in order to restore peace. My uncle would probably come to remove me if that occurred, and he would most likely be successful, but I do not wish to begin such hostilities with my father or mother. I will wait until I have every right to go, and just keep to myself until then.”

“Well if it becomes too difficult for you, I shall feign an illness, and beg you to come and nurse me. Think of the fun we would have here, avoiding all the matrons that come clucking each day!” Mrs Lockhart was a bit young to fall in with most of Meryton’s matrons, yet just old enough that the company of many of the younger ladies was slightly too immature for her. She got along with Elizabeth and Jane very

well, and had also liked Charlotte Lucas a great deal too before she had defected from Elizabeth's supporters.

Elizabeth smiled and shook her head at her friend's high spirits. Abigail Lockhart and her husband Nicholas were estimable people who raised the tone of the neighbourhood just by residing there. It was a shame that they would not remain, though Elizabeth took heart that their friendship would endure the separation.

Just as Elizabeth turned back to sweep an eye over her sisters, a loud cry came from the next room. Elizabeth and their hostess followed several others to the doorway, where, in the middle of a group of dancers stood Charlotte Lucas, her hair falling down, and the front of her dress hanging from where the seam had ripped in the shoulder and sleeve. Mr Collins stood before her in shock. Charlotte burst into tears and fled from the room, followed by her mother and sister.

"I do not understand what happened," said Mr Collins in confusion. "I was not even touching her."

"What are you saying about my sister?" demanded John Lucas angrily.

"I am not saying anything about your sister," said Collins. "I am only confused because the dance had parted us, and I do not understand how she fell."

"Bennet, my father is an affable man, but our family will protect our sister," said Lucas aggressively, turning to Thomas Bennet, who had just entered the room with some of the other men who had been playing cards. "Your cousin will not be permitted to ruin Charlotte."

"Mr Lucas, this is not the proper time or place for such a conversation," answered Bennet reasonably. "My cousin and I will call upon your father after breakfast tomorrow, as is proper. For now, I think it is time for my family to depart." Bennet

left to call for his carriage, as Elizabeth and Jane began to herd their younger sisters and mother to the hall. As they departed, Elizabeth caught a glimpse of Charlotte in the hall, covered by her father's coat and accompanied by her mother.

Elizabeth had known Charlotte Lucas her entire life, and she knew when her friend was distressed or frightened. The expression upon her old friend's face had been neither of those emotions. Charlotte Lucas was triumphant.

CHAPTER 8

The following morning, which was Saturday, Mr Collins sat rather sullenly at the breakfast table. He and Mr Bennet had been up very late the night before, discussing the matter in Bennet's study, and they had both agreed that there was nothing else to be done, Mr Collins must offer for Charlotte, or be called out by John Lucas. Mr Bennet assured Collins that he had never suspected the Lucas family of being capable of such machinations. It was true that Charlotte was ageing, and likely desperate, but chances were, she would not make him a terrible wife.

"Is she at least an intelligent woman? Would she be of any use at helping to run an estate?" he whined rather pathetically, but no one could blame him.

"Charlotte is a sensible woman who can make a little go a long way. It is true that the Lucases have only held land since she was fourteen, and their estate is much smaller than ours, only having two tenants, but she knows the area, and she knows enough to be a helpmeet," admitted Elizabeth.

"We are all dreadfully sorry, Cousin," said Kitty, surprising everyone. "Though it might have been nice if you had decided on Mary and been our brother, we would wish you the joy of making your own choice."

This was echoed by everyone at the table, including Mrs Bennet. "Even if you had not selected one of my girls, we will be well enough looked after by our own dear Lizzy. Those Lucases are out for whatever they can get!" she cried.

"And you all would have been and still will be welcome to remain at Longbourn, Mrs

Bennet, regardless of my choice or lack thereof,” promised Collins. “You have all been exceedingly kind to me.”

“Come on, Collins, let us go to them, before they pretend they had to come to us,” said Bennet, rising from his place and leaving the dining room.

“What will Lady Catherine say?” Mr Collins muttered to himself as he picked at his plate for another long moment. At length, he threw down his napkin and left for Lucas Lodge with Bennet.

Some hours later, he returned an engaged man, though he seemed to be putting a braver face on it. “She is a very genteel woman, which Lady Catherine will appreciate, and does seem to have a great deal of sense, at least in household matters,” he said, attempting to convince himself that it was not that bad. “She was in the kitchens when we arrived, and I visited her there. It looks as if she makes an appetising pie. That is good, since, living in a parsonage, she will find herself helping in the kitchens. I think she will be properly respectful of Lady Catherine’s rank, that is important. That will be very important. Do you believe that she will be appropriately deferential to Lady Catherine, Cousin Elizabeth?”

“I think that Charlotte can be counted upon to always do whatever is in her own best interests, Cousin Collins,” promised Elizabeth truthfully. “And as her husband, what is best for her will also be good for you.”

“It is hard to consider such self-interest to be good for me, but I shall have to take what I can get,” answered her cousin.

The following day, the banns were called in church for Mr Collins and Charlotte Lucas. The Lucases were all as triumphant as Charlotte had been in the hall at Netherfield. Mama is right, the Lucases really are out for whatever they can get . thought Elizabeth. Who would have guessed that Mama would be such an astute

judge of character?

A week after the first banns were called, the marriage settlement was signed, though Mr Collins had little to promise to Charlotte until he inherited something. The marriage settlement only stated that anything Mr Collins owned that was not entailed would become Charlotte's upon his death.

Lady Lucas held a dinner in honour of her daughter's engagement, and invited the entire neighbourhood. Though relations between the Bennets and the Lucases were currently rather hostile, they could not exclude them, considering that Mr Collins was related to them and residing in their house.

Dinner was tolerable, though Elizabeth could see that the neighbours were strained from pretending that all was well between the two families. It was after dinner that everything suddenly became markedly awkward. Charlotte was standing near her mother, assisting to pass out cups of tea, as she chatted on the side with Mary King and the Long sisters.

"Of course that ghastly blue wallpaper with the birds in the drawing room will have to go," Charlotte said to her friends. "The current mistress will have to go before it, but I assure you that once she is gone, Meryton will learn what it is like to see Longbourn done in style. I can hardly wait!" The other young ladies, who had developed a strong dislike for Elizabeth after her good fortune, all tittered unkindly.

"You can hardly wait for my cousin to die?" asked her betrothed in as much disbelief as everyone else except the young ladies his betrothed was speaking to.

Charlotte glanced over at him and gave him a small shrug, and then went on talking to Miss King. "After the drawing room, I shall naturally attack the dining room next. Those chair cushions!"

Elizabeth grasped her indignant mother's elbow and dragged her away. "I have known that girl since she was born. I have worried about her prospects quite as much as your own," said Mrs Bennet sadly. "I cannot believe she could be so cruel."

"You have always been right about those Lucases, Mama," Elizabeth comforted her. "But remember, though leaving Longbourn might be hurtful when the moment arrives, we have nothing to fear from it."

"You are right Lizzy. Forgive me for being so difficult? I know you are not stingy. You are only trying to protect us all," said her mother.

"I shall remind you of that the next time you pester me to give you funds to decorate the drawing room," said Elizabeth. "Why ought we to waste money on Charlotte Lucas?"

Thankfully, many of the older guests took offence at Miss Lucas's manner, and took their leave early, allowing the Bennets to do so as well.

"I am so sorry to connect you all to that woman!" exclaimed their cousin the following morning.

"It is not your fault, cousin," Jane assured him. "We do not blame you."

Mr Collins moped around quietly for several more days. When he was asked if anything else was wrong besides the obvious, he only answered, "I have a great deal to consider."

Three days before his wedding, he approached Bennet and asked him to accompany him to the office of Mr Phillips.

"Whatever for, Collins? You made your will when you created the marriage

settlement.” asked Bennet in surprise.

“I have to sign some documents that I have asked Phillips to prepare for us,” answered Collins. When they were sitting later in the law office, Collins said to Bennet, “Bennet, we are here to sign documents that I have asked Mr Phillips to prepare that will break the entail.”

“Good God,” said Bennet. “Why on earth would you do that?”

“I was considering it when I arrived in Meryton,” answered Collins. “You must have noticed, cousin, that intellect is not my strong suit.”

“Collins, we cannot all be scholars, but you graduated from Oxford!” said Bennet. “It is true, I have noticed that you have some difficulty with numbers, but-”

“Some difficulty?” interrupted Collins. “Bennet, I cannot make heads or tails of numbers at all. It is like they will not lay down for me. They swim all over the page! I am not clever. My father could barely read, and I feel like a scholar compared to him, but I am not you. I do not even write my own sermons. My patroness helps me, or I use another’s from a book. I cannot manage the ledgers. Perhaps I could have a clever wife to help me with them, but I am not much more proficient at anything else, and I cannot expect a wife to run the entire concern.”

“I hate to admit this, Collins, But Charlotte Lucas might be perfectly able to manage the whole concern,” admitted Bennet.

“Bennet, while I would never intentionally ruin a gentlewoman, neither can I, in good faith, reward Miss Lucas’s recent behaviour. Her cruelty to your wife and daughters and her shocking behaviour towards myself is beyond the pale. I cannot reward her by making her the mistress of the estate, especially when it is an estate I desperately do not want.”

“You truly have no wish to inherit Longbourn?” asked Bennet uncertainly. By all rights, he ought not argue with the man, but he had lived in a man’s world all of his life, and he had not been raised to care about his female relations over the livelihood of another man, even a stranger. Such was not the way of the world. Longbourn belonged to the men of his family. If the women wished to live well after the death of the men, then the wives ought to have born sons, or come to their unions with larger dowries. He had never considered it his concern.

“Bennet, I enjoy my life. I am proud of my little parsonage, I tend my flock, and I enjoy the notice of my patroness, a great lady of noble birth. I already enjoy precisely as much importance as I wish for. In a few days, Miss Lucas will be Mrs Collins, she will return to Hunsford with me, and we will stay there all of our days; she will never want for anything. My patroness will see to any deficiencies in her character, and we will learn to get along well enough, I am certain. She will have her own establishment, which is more than Miss Lucas deserves after her shocking behaviour.”

With all of that said, Mr Collins took the pen offered by Mr Phillips, and signed the documents quickly, then handed the pen off to Mr Bennet, who signed his name as well. Mr Phillips’s clerk witnessed it, and another document which Collins signed, attesting that he had not been coerced nor even solicited to sign away his inheritance, and that it had been entirely at his own behest. Mr Phillips said that it would go that very day to the Court of Chancery, and that if it was passed through, they would receive notification by express from his colleague. The notice would be in the newspapers in about a month or perhaps a little more. Collins and Bennet chose not to complicate the rest of his time in Meryton by spreading the news. The wedding would proceed as scheduled, and the Lucases and Bennet ladies, along with the rest of Meryton, could find out later from the papers.

Three days later, Charlotte Lucas was married. Mr Collins had declined a wedding breakfast, stating that his patroness was coming for a few hours only to attend his

nuptials. She would divert her return on her way home from visiting her brother, and that they must leave immediately after the ceremony to share her ladyship's carriage back to Hunsford. There was little fuss or finery. Lady Lucas would have held a modest wedding breakfast, but the Lucases had to be careful with their income, and Sir William would not waste funds decorating the church. Charlotte married in her best day dress, which was a year old, and her one vanity was a lovely bouquet sent from Mrs Lockhart from the conservatory at Netherfield. Abigail Lockhart did not care for Charlotte Lucas, but she had always made such small gestures for new brides.

Immediately after the ceremony, Charlotte Collins was hurried into the carriage of her husband's patroness, and the highlight of her day was a stern lecture from her ladyship all the way to Bromley.

CHAPTER 9

Highbury

August, 1811

In Highbury, the Bingleys began to see more of the Woodhouses, though relations were strained, and by unspoken agreement, the families avoided acknowledging one another. The Westons entertained at Randalls often, and though Miss Bingley did not invite the Woodhouses when she entertained, they still met at the homes of the few other genteel families.

“She would probably accept now, if she were invited, for Miss Woodhouse has a great desire not to let Mr Churchill out of her sight,” said Caroline snidely. “However, I see no need to lower myself to grovel for her notice. I have not failed to apprehend that she was exceedingly disappointed to have been denied Mr Darcy’s and Miss Darcy’s acquaintance.”

Mr Darcy had studiously avoided Miss Woodhouse at all engagements, stopping just short of cutting her directly, which he knew would put Knightley’s dander up. Miss Woodhouse was obviously very interested in Miss Darcy. The company of another very well bred, genteel young lady was always exciting for her, but Georgiana spent all of her time with Miss Bates or Miss Harriet Smith, with her brother always close by to guide them away or provide a distraction when Miss Woodhouse had them in her sights.

“Mr Churchill also needs no distraction from keeping my brother and Miss Fairfax

from finding a moment alone,” added Mrs Hurst. “Charles is meant to be preparing for estate ownership. If he will not marry one from the first circles, it is, at least, his duty to marry a gentleman’s daughter. An orphan of no family is of no help to him at all. He needs a lady of equal birth to the position he aspires to.”

Darcy could not argue with her. He and Hurst had already impressed upon Bingley that if he purchased an estate and married an orphan of no family, he would not be well received anywhere, and Darcy could only assist in society so much once such decisions were made.

Miss Bingley made Darcy exceedingly uncomfortable by taking his disinclination to know Miss Woodhouse as a personal compliment. She spent her time in company in Highbury boasting of Mr Darcy’s virtues and the perfection of Pemberley. Her attentions and deference to Georgiana were so cloying that if the girl had a proper companion, she would have avoided the lady and her sister at all costs, even if it meant isolating herself in her rooms.

The rest of Miss Bingley’s time was spent hanging on Darcy, complimenting Darcy, agreeing with Darcy, and admiring Darcy. Bingley closed himself in his study with his younger sister several times and explained to her plainly that Darcy was literally begging him to stop her behaviour. However, she would not listen, and was certain that Mr Darcy could be persuaded eventually.

If she could only get Miss Darcy on her side.

If they could only have enough society to host some truly impressive engagements.

“You have cursed my efforts by bringing us to this backwater, Charles,” complained Caroline. “How am I to plan events that will show Mr Darcy my suitability when you have moved us to this horrid place?” Her brother did everything that he could to convince his sister otherwise, but nothing that he said made the slightest difference.

One afternoon, an unexpected guest was presented to the drawing room at The Gables. “Lady Catherine de Bourgh,” announced the butler.

The party rose, and Darcy said, “Aunt, we had no word of your coming. Is Anne with you?”

Lady Catherine waved her hand. “I could not very well bring Anne; she is unused to such journeys. She remains at Rosings Park, though it is to your credit that you ask after her welfare so solicitously, considering your long engagement.”

“Aunt, I am not going to begin another discussion of the fact that Anne and I are not engaged in front of my host and his family. Why are you here?” Darcy demanded.

“Mr Darcy, I apologise for interrupting, but Lady Catherine, will you be staying the night? If so, I must prepare a room for you,” interrupted Caroline.

“Thank you for your consideration,” said Lady Catherine proudly. “I will remain until I have satisfied myself that my nephew is not throwing himself away on some unworthy chit. Darcy, I want a word with you in private. Niece, you will accompany us. I will question you as well regarding the situation here.”

Darcy introduced his aunt to Bingley and his family; there was no escaping it if his aunt was to stay the night. “My aunt will be returning to Rosings Park in the morning, Miss Bingley, but I thank you for your care. Bingley, may I beg the use of your library?”

Taking his aunt’s arm, Darcy escorted her, followed by his sister, to the room that The Gables considered a library, though Bingley possessed little in the way of books. Darcy promised that once Bingley settled at a permanent location, he would solicit Hatchard’s in London to assist Bingley with finding a private collection for sale, which was the best way to start a library from nothing. Scholars and book collectors

died all the time, leaving behind collections that must be sold for various reasons. Bingley had not much interest in a library for himself, but he was determined that once he purchased an estate, that his guests would find their desired entertainment in his home.

A tea tray arrived behind them, since Miss Bingley decided to act quickly to defer the family's tea trolley to the library, and ordered another for the drawing room. His aunt sat watching intently as Georgiana poured and served expertly.

"That was nicely done, Niece," the older woman said. "I was concerned when my brother Darcy left you in the care of two bachelors, but I can see that you carry yourself well."

"Thank you, Aunt Catherine," said Georgiana, excessively relieved that she was not to be the target of her aunt's criticism today.

"Be at ease, Georgiana, I am not going to eat you this time. No, today, I am here to question your brother. Darcy, what is this I hear in my correspondence about you courting ladies here in Highbury? Whatever are you thinking, throwing over Anne?" demanded Lady Catherine

"Courting ladies?" Darcy laughed. "Aunt Catherine, I assure you, I never court ladies. That does not mean I will not do so when I consider it appropriate, but I assure you, in all of my eight-and-twenty-years, I have never been guilty of courting a lady. I hardly even dance; it raises expectations, and I never raise expectations."

"I have a letter here from the daughter of an old friend, Mrs Suckling, from Marple Grove. She claims that her sister, formerly Miss Augusta Hawkins, now Mrs Elton of Highbury Parsonage, writes to her that my nephew Mr Darcy has been in Highbury for some time, and has been courting not only a Miss Woodhouse, but also a Miss Fairfax," said their aunt, pulling out the offending letter.

Georgiana let out a tiny squeak of hilarity in her efforts not to giggle. Her aunt looked sharply at her, “What was that, young miss?”

“Do not be cross with her, Aunt. It is all I can do not to laugh out loud heartily at that bit of nonsense myself,” said Darcy with a smile. “Would you like to be the one to tell her?” he asked his sister.

Georgiana nodded, nearly bouncing in her seat. “Thank you, Brother! Aunt Catherine, Miss Woodhouse is a lady who my brother has snubbed quite thoroughly since our arrival here.”

“No!” gasped Lady Catherine. “Darcy would never!”

“He would!” insisted Georgiana. “My brother finds Miss Woodhouse’s society so distasteful he has all but given her the cut direct. We have been in her company many times, but we have avoided all introductions.”

“You are not even properly introduced?” asked their aunt disbelievingly.

Georgiana shook her head. “I assure you, I find the prospect of Miss Woodhouse’s company quite as distasteful as Fitzwilliam does.”

“Miss Woodhouse snubbed our hosts quite scandalously when they arrived, then was all too eager to make mine and Georgiana’s acquaintance,” Darcy explained. “I rarely behave thus, but Georgiana and I can hardly reward such behaviour.”

“Well, I have never approved of your friendship with this tradesman, but I suppose you could not accept his hospitality and this young woman’s friendship,” said their aunt in a rare moment of reason. “What about the other one? The Fairfax chit?”

“I suppose that there might be the smallest substance behind that,” admitted Darcy.

“Not because I am courting the lady, but I have paid her some small attention while in Highbury. Again, not because I am courting her, but for two other reasons. One, my friend is paying her his attentions, and I occasionally pay his ladies some small notice to ensure they are not fortune hunters. Most of them are, sadly. Miss Fairfax has no interest in myself or Bingley, she seems more interested in another man, a Mr Frank Churchill, though Bingley has yet to give up the chase. I am certain it is just boredom driving his interest. Even for me, this area is very quiet.”

“And what was the other reason?” demanded Lady Catherine.

“Ha!” laughed Darcy. “Miss Woodhouse cannot stand Miss Fairfax, it is evident in all of their interactions. Miss Fairfax is also being pursued by the man Miss Woodhouse is very interested in.”

“Ah, so you are only adding insult to injury,” chuckled his aunt. “It sounds like this Miss Woodhouse deserves it. I shall have to chastise Mrs Suckling for passing along her sister’s unreliable gossip. But it is more than time that you finalise matters with Anne, Darcy. She is only three years your junior. You are wasting her childbearing years.”

“Aunt, forcing Anne to bear children will kill her. I have told you this each time you bring the matter up. She was not even well enough to accompany you here. I will not marry her,” insisted Darcy. “I do not need her fortune, nor I do not have the time to manage Rosings Park completely, and I do not agree with marrying cousins. Families who engage in that practice often are always unhealthy. I refuse to be the means to my cousin’s end. Why do you keep insisting on this, Aunt?”

“Who will look after her when I am gone, Darcy?” Lady Catherine asked.

“Any of us, I am sure,” he replied. “She is not without family, and the de Bourghs are just as capable as our side of the family, though you do not like them. You will kill

her if you force her to wed.”

“I do not know what to do, Darcy. I am certain that if I die and leave her behind, she will be forced into marriage,” said Lady Catherine.

“That is not an unreasonable fear,” assured her nephew. “However, her uncle is powerful. Why do you not throw yourself upon your brother for assistance? I am certain my uncle will know what to do. Chasing me across the country is not going to make Anne any safer, for I shall never comply with your wishes. One day, I am going to find a wife, Aunt, and it will not be Anne. I would rather have your blessing than your disapprobation when that day arrives.”

Lady Catherine sighed. “As long as you do not saddle us with someone embarrassing like a tradesman’s daughter, Nephew. I will not tolerate that woman out there in the drawing room for example. I would destroy you both if you tried it. Perhaps I will ask my brother to visit Anne and I at Rosings Park. I should return tomorrow, like you said. I do not like to leave her with Mrs Jenkinson for very long.” She looked at Georgiana speculatively. “Where is your companion, Niece?”

“She was unsuitable,” Georgiana said. “But I have made a new friend, and have decided to ask Miss Bates to accompany me for a lengthy visit to town, and perhaps Pemberley while my brother and I decide on another.”

“Is that so?” asked Darcy in surprise. This was new. Georgiana was not asking permission to select her own companion. She was announcing her intention to invite Miss Bates quite of her own accord.

“I like her very much, Brother,” answered his sister. “Perhaps she is a bit silly, but she is genuine and she is kind. All I truly need just now is someone to keep me company, someone I can trust, and I trust her very well. Later perhaps, someone might be found to go out into society with me when I come out, or perhaps if you get

married, we will need to hire no one. But for now, I believe she suits me very well.”

“Who is this person?” demanded their aunt. “I insist upon having my share of the information!”

“Miss Bates is an impoverished spinster whose mother recently died, and she has been left quite alone. She is perhaps nearing fifty. As Georgie states, she is rather silly, and talks a great deal out of excitement, but my sister’s company seems to calm her a bit, and she is an exceptionally kind woman, and very genteel. I can understand why Georgie trusts her,” Darcy explained.

“I had an unpleasant experience with my last companion, Aunt,” Georgiana confessed, as her brother raised his eyebrows in warning. Georgiana understood. “I will not bore you with the details, but the woman did not have my best interests at heart. I am barely worth a portion of Anne’s fortune, but I share her vulnerability to persons with mercenary intent. Miss Bates might be poor, but she is not untrustworthy. That is what I require at this time — company I can trust.”

“Just because she is poor does not mean she will consent to take a position, Georgie,” warned her brother. “Miss Bates might prefer to cling to her gentility, no matter how impoverished she might be.”

“If I were to invite her to join our family as an extended guest, we could give her an allowance, could we not?” asked Georgiana. “My friend from school did that. The lady they wished for did not wish to be known to take a position, so she was invited to live with the family as a friend, and they provided her with a proper London wardrobe and an allowance. It was more costly, but Miss Chatman was very happy with her choice.”

“Such arrangements are more costly, but you are in the privileged position of being able to afford such eccentricities, Sister,” Darcy said, smiling. Georgiana was

growing up so fast, and he was very impressed by her sense.

Their aunt seemed to be in agreement. “Your logic is sound, Niece,” she said. “I shall go with you tomorrow morning to call upon this Miss Bates before I leave. I am interested to meet her. Darcy, If that Bingley woman has prepared a room for me, I would like to go there now. I am fatigued from my journey, and I will take a tray tonight in my room.”

CHAPTER 10

Early the next morning, Darcy considered the situation. His aunt had obliged him by dining in her room in order to avoid becoming too intimately acquainted with Darcy's low-born hosts, but would be down in an hour or two. He held no affection or even very much respect for the sister of his friend, but it was time he decided how he would allow the matter of her behaviour in the presence of his aunt to proceed. Miss Bingley would, of course, court Lady Catherine's approval assiduously when his aunt appeared, and if she laid it on thick enough, his aunt would allow her attentions. If Caroline did a good enough job of flattering her, Lady Catherine might even invite her to Rosings to help her find a husband, mostly just to ensure she never married Darcy. A number of bachelor gentlemen, barons, and knights graced the company in Kent, and his aunt enjoyed being of assistance in matters such as these, in which she considered herself to be an expert.

That tolerance would vanish in an instant the moment Lady Catherine realised Miss Bingley's marital aims. He knew his aunt meant it. He might – if she did not revert back to her earlier demands of him marrying Anne – get away with marrying a gentleman's daughter, but no less, not that Darcy was planning to look any lower. It was time for Darcy to decide if he should warn Miss Bingley, or allow her to be humiliated when Lady Catherine denounced her publicly, as she was bound to do. As much as he did not care to have a conversation with the young woman, it appeared that he must. She would obviously never listen to her brother. As much as he would relish seeing her taken down several pegs, it would harm Bingley's reputation in town, and Darcy had no desire to see that happen.

He must do it soon. Most of the household was at breakfast, but his aunt would be

down eventually, since she was not an early riser. As they stood from the breakfast table he took a deep breath and said, "Miss Bingley, would you care to take a stroll in the garden?"

Everyone in the room was speechless. Bingley gaped at Darcy in astonishment as Caroline accepted with alacrity, her eyes sparkling with hope and excitement, believing her moment had come. Darcy felt a pang of guilt for the pain he would soon cause her when she realised they were not to have the conversation of her dreams, but he hoped that she would be reasonable enough for them to come out understanding one another better.

As they walked and reached a location where Darcy felt they could converse without being overheard, he looked down to see Miss Bingley staring up at him with her eyes shining and said sympathetically, "Miss Bingley, It pains me to know you will be disappointed that we are not about to have the conversation that you have long hoped for, but I feel that a very different one must be had, for both our sakes."

Miss Bingley was crestfallen, and immediately appeared near tears; Darcy felt even worse. Perhaps she had never taken a hint, but he took no pleasure in devastating any woman's hopes so thoroughly.

"I wonder that you asked me here then, sir," she said bitterly. "But now that you have brought up that conversation, can you not tell me why? I have done everything that I can think of to show you that I would be the perfect mistress of your homes. I have waited for years for you to see that I would be the best possible wife and hostess for you. What do you require that I do not have?"

"Miss Bingley, you say that you would be the perfect wife for me but you see only an ideal. You have never taken the time to know my character well enough to understand we would never suit. You believe you are the perfect wife for the man you think I ought to be. You have no idea what my needs in a wife are, because I have

never been the man of your imagination.

"If you were to marry me, you would be miserable. When you see me standing at the side of the room at parties, I am not disdaining my company. Somehow you have misunderstood my reserve. I do not avoid company for those reasons. I am quite unhappy in town, and among the society you aspire to enter. I am most happy in the country, and among people I know well and trust. My home has been too quiet for too long. I long to see Pemberley come to life once more. When I marry, I will retire to Pemberley with my wife, and I will move in a country society only slightly more distinguished than this one, though rather more varied. Although we might entertain in Derbyshire extensively, much like the locals here, there would be few balls and parties in London, and I highly doubt we would attend the season very often until it was time for our children to marry. You would not be happy with such a life, Miss Bingley, but I believe that you are correct about your skills. You would make some man an excellent hostess, and your talents would be wasted if you married me. There are important men who prefer to live in the city."

"Why would you not wish to take your place in society, Mr Darcy? You are an important man. And why are you telling me all of this now?" Miss Bingley asked unhappily.

"I do what I must to maintain my reputation, but I have little regard for society, Miss Bingley," Darcy said seriously. "I am a boring, stuffy, reserved country farmer at heart, like my father before me. This is why I value my friendship with your brother so much. His ebullience brings much needed light and levity to my life. When I marry, I expect I shall hope to find a similar levity in a country gentlewoman who seeks the same life that I do. In answer to your other question. The reason that I am telling you this now is because my aunt is here."

"Miss Bingley, this is truly a private matter that I hope you will keep in confidence, but you will be pulled into it when my aunt notices your interest in me. To put it

plainly, my aunt has always wished me to marry my cousin. There is no binding engagement; it is merely an idle wish of hers and my mother's. My cousin and I have agreed we do not consider ourselves bound to it. I may have persuaded my aunt yesterday that she should not expect me to fulfil those hopes, but she will not see me married to a tradesman's daughter. Her pride for my mother's credit would never allow it, regardless of what my mother herself might have thought about the matter. The fact that I have told her I will not marry my cousin will not prevent my aunt from ruining you if you give even the slightest hint of your hopes in her presence." He allowed this information to sink in before he continued, "Miss Bingley, my aunt can be a vicious and ruthless woman. Your humiliation would be quite complete. I have no desire to see you and your brother so mortified."

"I suppose we must be grateful indeed then, for your warning, sir," Miss Bingley said resentfully, appearing near tears. "How generous you are to caution us."

"Miss Bingley, I have never wished to marry you, but I take no pleasure in causing you pain." Darcy replied kindly. "I would be happy indeed to see you married to a man of consequence and enjoying society to the fullest. May I give you a piece of advice? My aunt likes to be of help. She is an officious woman who dearly enjoys giving advice and meddling in the affairs of others; she knows many people in Kent and in town. She has been a great deal of help to several young ladies in want of a husband. She also adores being paid court to. If you were to flatter her and gain her good opinion, she would likely see you married to someone with connections. Someone with interests more to your tastes than mine. There are a number of bachelor landowners in Kent, and it is near enough to town to suit you. But if you show even the slightest interest in me as a prospective husband in her presence, she will eviscerate you publicly."

"I suppose I would be foolish to turn down such an opportunity. You are right, Mr Darcy, I would be despondent in the life you describe. I am still disappointed, but I do not wish to spend so much of my life away from town. It would be miserable

indeed, even in such settings as Pemberley. If you do not mind, I would like to return to the house. I need some time to compose myself, and then I shall court your aunt in the hopes that she will take an interest in helping me find a husband. I thank you for the suggestion. As bitter as I feel just now, I cannot deny that you have been very kind," said Miss Bingley quietly.

"Miss Bingley, it is my hope that now that we have settled this matter between us, that we may be at ease in each other's company in the future, and that whomever the future Mrs Darcy turns out to be, that we shall count you among our friends," returned Darcy generously.

Miss Bingley chewed on her lip for a moment, considering her next question. "Mr Darcy, do I behave like Miss Woodhouse?"

"What do you mean, Miss Bingley?" he asked curiously.

"I have always disdained those I think beneath me, or those I hope will one day be beneath me, because that is what the girls at my school did," she answered. "But I see Miss Woodhouse doing it, and it is so unattractive upon her. Is that how I appear to others? Is that how I behave?"

Darcy considered, not wishing to hurt his friend's sister further, but finally deciding that this was his chance to be of real help to the young woman. "Miss Bingley, you behave a great deal worse than Miss Woodhouse, because you are often purposely unkind to others. Miss Woodhouse only wishes to avoid those who she thinks beneath her, whereas you are actively spiteful. For example, I believe Miss Woodhouse's unkind remark to Miss Bates at Donwell Abbey was said in a thoughtless moment that she immediately regretted. I have observed you, on the other hand, make many cruel remarks to other ladies in an attempt to intentionally cause pain and mortification."

His companion gave a small gasp and turned her face away; Darcy felt terrible. Upon their return to the house, Miss Bingley fled immediately to her rooms, followed by Mrs Hurst, who had been lingering near the hall waiting for her sister to return. Darcy made his way toward the library past an open-mouthed Bingley who asked, "Do we need to have a conversation in my study, Darcy? "

"Do not be ridiculous, Charles!" burst out Miss Bingley, from the top of the stairs, her voice breaking with tears. Bingley followed Darcy into the library and said, "Oh ho! Not so fast as that Darcy! You have done all you can to avoid my sister's company for years. Today you invite her to the garden, and she returns practically running away from you. I believe she was actually weeping. What in the blazes is going on, man?" his friend insisted.

"Your sister and I had a conversation that was long overdue, Bingley. It has been unkind of me to allow her to waste years hoping for a proposal. Granted, she should have listened to you when you told her it was not forthcoming, but when it was clear she would not believe you, I should have been more direct. In any case, it was necessary to speak of it today. My aunt will be down shortly, and if she sees even a hint of your sister's hopes, she will destroy her in society. As much discomfort as your sister has caused me over the years, Bingley, I have no desire to see your humiliation in town. In addition, there are many wealthy bachelors in Kent, and my aunt loves to be of assistance.

"If Miss Bingley turns her efforts towards flattering my aunt, Lady Catherine may issue her an invitation to stay in Kent or to de Bourgh House in London, or Bath, and introduce Miss Bingley to eligible gentlemen. She has been instrumental in a number of similar marriages, and it would be advantageous for Miss Bingley to court such an opportunity, considering her social ambitions. She is disappointed, Bingley, but not heartbroken. She saw the wisdom of my advice, and says she is determined to accept it. She just needs to compose herself after such a revelation as she has had this morning. Indeed, I hope that your sister and I can be more at ease in each other's

company in the future."

Lady Catherine broke her fast in her bedroom, then accompanied her niece to visit Miss Bates and Miss Fairfax. Miss Bates was rather intimidated by a visitor of such rank to her tiny rooms but gave an excellent account of herself. Georgiana's aunt declared that she approved of Georgiana's new friend thoroughly, and presented the idea of Miss Bates joining the Darcy household as Georgiana's special guest once the lady's niece returned to her guardian. It was made plain that the Darcys wished for the lady to accompany Georgiana not as a member of the staff, but as a close connection, with a generous allowance from the family to provide for her needs that were not already covered by Mr Darcy. Awed by such notice by a lady of rank, Miss Bates accepted with excitement and gratitude to her new young friend.

When they returned to The Gables, there were other ladies from the village visiting, and Georgiana's aunt did not object to stopping to make their acquaintance. Miss Bingley wheedled Lady Catherine into staying for luncheon, and then for one more night at The Gables, "To have a proper visit with your niece and nephew." Miss Bates and Miss Fairfax joined them for dinner, as well as the Westons and Frank Churchill. Lady Catherine saw the affinity that Darcy had informed her of, the same affinity that others in the village missed between Miss Fairfax and Mr Churchill, and comforted herself that her nephew was not about to waste himself on the orphan. The dinner was a success, and Miss Bingley managed to gain the approbation of Lady Catherine, who mentioned inviting the girl to visit her at de Bourgh House in London the next time she stayed there.

CHAPTER 11

Meryton - September 1811

Mrs Bennet left her sister's home on an early Wednesday afternoon, and made her way to the haberdashers. Usually, she was accompanied on most of her errands by one or more of her daughters, but today they were all occupied. Jane and Mary were visiting the tenants, Elizabeth had walked to Netherfield to visit Mrs Lockhart, and Kitty and Lydia were off somewhere, presumably doing their best to obtain husbands in red coats.

Mrs Bennet and Mrs Phillips had just enjoyed a lively natter about the audacity of the Lucas family. Since Charlotte's terrible behaviour, and the resulting cruelties of the rest of the Lucas family, Mrs Bennet's friendship with Lady Lucas was firmly at an end. Mrs Bennet was therefore understandably spending a great deal more time with her sister.

Mrs Bennet entered the shop and greeted Mrs Cobb, the proprietor's wife. "Good day, Mrs Cobb, I hope you are well."

"Mrs Bennet! I am very well, and you?" returned Mrs Cobb .

"I have nothing of which to complain, except that my daughters are all still unmarried, but that is nothing new," answered Mrs Bennet.

"I am grateful for it every time you come in, if you do not mind my saying so. Longbourn's family are our best customers for lace and ribbon," said Mrs Cobb

good-naturedly. “The new kid gloves you ordered have arrived. I must say, the leather is so soft, I have never seen its equal.”

The gloves were pulled out, and the two women exclaimed over the quality at length before the bill was settled. Mrs Bennet thanked Mrs Cobb and left the shop. She was headed back towards her sister’s house, and her carriage, which were only a few hundred feet away, when she heard the roaring laughter of young men from around the corner, near the entrance to the inn.

“What did she do then, Wickham?” shouted a man that Mrs Bennet recognised as Lieutenant Chamberlain.

“Well then, my friends, Miss Kitty Bennet snapped her legs closed so hard and fast I nearly thought I should lose my hand!” Wickham laughed derisively. “Then of course, she cried, virgins always cry a bit before they give it up, you know, and then after I promised that we would be married before St Valentine’s Day, she promised herself to me the very next time we see one another, presumably after she has mustered her courage, and whenever she can sneak away again. I swear, I would have placed money on the younger chit, Miss Lydia, to be the first to offer up her virtue, but it seems that Miss Kitty’s self doubt has driven her to secure me before her sister can do so. Miss Lydia has done nothing more than sneak out and allow a few chaste kisses, but she will give in soon enough, they all do.”

“What will prevent you from having them all?” an unknown officer said.

“I cannot see much that will prevent me from having them all, except perhaps the pious one, and even then, sometimes those girls can be the easiest marks!” boasted Wickham.

“I do not know, Miss Bennet seems sure enough of her charms and well-bred enough that she might never give in, Wickham, and the next one, Miss Elizabeth, does not

seem to care very much for you. She is clever, that is certain,” said Captain Carter.

“She is a piece, though, is she not?” said Wickham. “I have never intended to throw myself away on such a small sum as fifteen thousand. I am certain that my charms are worth twice as much, but considering her spirit, and the fact that she owns a house in town as well, I might take that one to wife. Miss Bennet is beautiful, but the others are all so intolerably stupid as to make a man die of boredom. Miss Elizabeth is the prize of all of them, in wit and in fortune. I may have to meet her upon one of her early morning walks, and persuade her .”

Mrs Bennet could listen no more. She turned away from the raucous laughter and hurried to the carriage, doing her best not to weep the moment that the horses began to move. How was it that she had done it all wrong? She had raised her girls the way that she had been raised, with only a slightly better education, and she had been certain that it would be enough for all of them to do at least as well as she had done, if not better. Now, it was being thrown in her face again and again, that men did not want stupid wives, not even the wicked ones. Not even stupid men wanted stupid wives any more.

Mr Bennet did not seem to care much about her education when they married. He was immediately captivated by her looks, and though their affinity had quickly diminished after they wed, he availed himself of his marital rights quite often until Mr Jones warned them that future confinements would be dangerous for Mrs Bennet. But it was always clear to Fanny that her husband had married her for her good looks and smiling nature, and no other concern. Believing her daughters would need nothing else, she educated them as much as she saw necessary, though Elizabeth, Mary, and even Jane had persisted in their studies for far longer than she had ever considered necessary.

What was she to do? How could she save them? It was obvious to Fanny that the expectations of men had changed since she was out. When she married, men wanted

stupid wives – probably so that they might carry on with their vile behaviours after marriage – and their wives would be too dull to notice. Now, men seemed to want educated women who could help with their estates. Even fiends like that Wickham seemed to admire intelligent women. Not only was Fanny now faced with improving her daughters so that they would be considered suitable, she also had to prevent them from being ruined, either by the wagging tongues of the officers, or the officers themselves.

When Fanny Bennet arrived at home, all of her girls had returned from their activities, and were in the drawing room together, each engaged in a typical manner for the residents of Longbourn.

She entered the hall, shouting, “Hill! Hill!” The housekeeper came running, as she always did, and assisted Mrs Bennet with her pelisse. “Mrs Hill, no officers are to be admitted to Longbourn ever again!” she cried.

“Mama, whatever do you mean?” asked Lydia, as her daughters poured into the hall to see what was the matter. “Of course, we shall receive the officers, Denny is meant to be coming here for tea later today, and dear Wickham is to accompany him.”

“Dear Wickham indeed! Go to your room, Lydia Bennet, and stay there until I call for you!” said Mrs Bennet, whirling on her youngest.

“Mama, what have we done wrong?” asked Kitty plaintively.

“What have you done indeed, Catherine Josephine Bennet!” shrieked Mrs Bennet in a rage. “As a matter of fact, you will no longer share with Lydia. And Jane will no longer share with Elizabeth. My younger daughters need more attention. Kitty and Lydia have the second largest room, so Mary will share it with Kitty from now on. Lydia will move to Jane’s room and share with her eldest sister. Elizabeth may have the smaller room to herself.”

“Mama! I am not going to sleep with boring old Jane!” cried Lydia indignantly. “I will stay in my room with Kitty as I have always done!”

“You will do as you are told, Lydia Bennet! As a matter of fact, none of you will leave the house for any reason until further notice without my express permission! Now go to your rooms!” Mrs Bennet turned to Mrs Hill and began instructing her that she and all of the younger ladies would take their dinner on trays, and that the family was at home to no callers for the rest of the day.

Mrs Bennet caught Elizabeth by the elbow as she followed her sisters upstairs to move her belongings. “Lizzy, I am not attempting to punish you, but I must curtail your walks entirely.”

“Mama, whatever is wrong? What has frightened you so?” begged her second youngest.

Mrs Bennet only shook her head. “It is not safe, especially for you. Do not leave the house, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth searched her mother’s face for a long moment. “Very well. I shall not go out without permission, Mama. And I shall endeavour to have Mary and Jane help me in watching Kitty and Lydia more closely.”

“Do,” said Mrs Bennet. “You will all remain above stairs today. See if Mary and Jane can persuade their younger sisters to engage in something worthwhile. Those two are finished with wasting their time!”

“I am happy to hear that, Mama. I shall help you in any way that I can,” promised Elizabeth as they parted.

Mrs Bennet remained downstairs for another moment to give Hill more instructions.

As she turned to go up the stairs, she noticed her husband lounging against the door to his book room. “What is the excitement?” he inquired.

“Oh, you are useless!” Fanny waved her hand dismissively as she turned away and ascended the stairs. Thomas was part of the problem, with his wit and his sarcasm, always believing he was better and more intelligent than everyone else. He ought to have made her do something about the girls years ago, if he was indeed so clever. Did he even care about them at all, allowing them to run about as they did? Thomas was a man. He had to know the true nature of officers and other men, and yet he had done nothing to protect their girls. There was nothing that could be said that made Fanny believe that he cared even a little.

The Bennet girls obeyed their mother and remained above stairs for the rest of the day, taking their time moving their possessions, drawing new boundary lines in their new quarters with their sisters. They took trays together in Jane’s room for dinner, and attempted to determine between themselves what must have happened to set off their mother in such a way. Kitty was interrogated, considering Mrs Bennet’s words to her, but though their sister’s head remained bowed in shame over what she suspected her mother knew, she would not confess anything to the others.

The following day, they broke their fast together in the dining room, though their parents did not join them. Their father never did, if their mother dined upstairs. Thomas Bennet had not the temperament to put up with his girls’ antics when their mother was not present, not that she made their conversation any more appealing, but his wife made too much of a fuss about the family dining together when she ate downstairs, and he capitulated in order to keep peace.

The young ladies spent the day in the drawing room, Lydia whining endlessly about going out, insisting that their mother did not truly mean her words, and that surely, when Mrs Bennet eventually returned downstairs to join them, she would let them return to their previous sleeping arrangements, insisting that all of their work moving

possessions the day before had been an utter waste.

Elizabeth and Jane refused to hear her pleas, and demanded that they would all obey their mother and stay home, at least until she calmed, and explained what had upset her. They were not to receive such elucidation that day, nor the next, for Mrs Bennet remained closeted in her rooms for some three days, only sending down instructions with Hill that the family was not at home, and that the young ladies were still confined to the house.

On the third morning, Mr Bennet, at the pleas of Elizabeth and Jane, climbed the stairs and pounded upon his wife's door. "Fanny, I must insist that you open this door and tell me what is the matter!" He went on like this for some minutes before Mrs Bennet opened the door, her face streaked with tears.

"Fanny," he said gently. "Enough is enough. Will you not tell me what has upset you? I promise, I shall endeavour not to be useless."

The door closed behind him as his wife fell into his arms, sobbing out the tale of Mr Wickham's words, and the behaviour of Kitty, the threat to Elizabeth, the laughter and encouragement of the other men.

"You knew, Thomas!" When he raised an eyebrow at her, she went on. "You are a man, you are one of them. You have been more in the world, and to university. You knew what the officers were like, did you not?" Her husband avoided her gaze as she glared at him, refusing to look away. At length he nodded.

"Are they all like that? All men?" she demanded.

"Most of them," he admitted.

"Then why would you allow our girls to run about the village in such danger?" she

cried.

“Fanny, you must take responsibility for your part. I advocated for sense years ago, you have defied me at every turn,” he excused himself.

“ I have never been to university! I have never been around young men to hear what they speak of when they are away from ladies! I know what other ladies know; I know there are dangers, but not that all men are like this !” Fanny protested. “ You have a duty, Thomas, and it is not to exist and read books, as Mary always says. You have a duty to protect us, even from ourselves! You have a duty to care about what happens to those girls. You have done nothing to protect them and educate them.”

“You are their mother. You did not want them to be educated,” pointed out her husband. “As it was, I educated them all far beyond what you approved of.”

“And I was wrong. I was very wrong, and I am sorry you did not make me see it. Men do not want stupid wives. Just you, it seems, for some reason.”

Her husband watched her contemplatively for a long moment. “So what will you do next?”

“What will I do next? I hope you mean what will we do next!” said Fanny indignantly. “You have contributed to this, Thomas, and you will help me to repair what damage we can.”

The two began to discuss matters. Lydia would be brought back in. She was too young to be out. Kitty was of an age to be out in the country, so if they pulled her back in, it would be remarked on by the neighbourhood. Lydia could be considered a failed experiment, her youthful exuberance an explanation as to why she would return to the school room. Kitty was seventeen, old enough to be out in the village, and Mrs Bennet feared that if they removed her from society, that their neighbours would cast

some well deserved suspicion of wrongdoing upon her. As it was, the fear that the gossip of the officers would reach the residents of Meryton was well worth considering.

A companion would be hired for their three youngest, someone who could serve as something of a combined governess in addition to her duties as companion. Mr Bennet would take charge of Lydia's studies. Mrs Bennet brought up that Elizabeth and Mary had been asking for masters, and she was keen to see the educations of them all improved, perhaps save Jane, who was rather old for lessons.

"I hate to tell you this, Fanny, but the budget will not stretch to a governess and also masters for pianoforte and French. Perhaps you should ask your second daughter to help pay for it," said Thomas.

Fanny glared at him. She hoped that she did not sound so awful when she asked Lizzy to pay for things, and decided then and there she would cease such behaviour. "It is not Lizzy's place to pay for the education of her sisters. Come. We will repair to your study, and consult the ledgers. I am certain that room can be made somewhere." When her husband looked sceptical of this, she continued. "I have been managing Longbourn's household for years, Thomas. I know my way around ledgers. In fact, we will bring mine as well. I am sure that there are expenses that I can eliminate."

Thomas followed his wife downstairs. By the end of the day, Jane had been invited into the discussion by Mrs Bennet, though they did not tell her the cause of the new endeavours. Jane was to inherit, so now Mr Bennet was far more obligated to improve the estate for her, and to allow her a say in its running, considering that she was past her majority. At Jane's insistence, Elizabeth had been invited to consult on the new Longbourn budget as well, and had offered many valuable suggestions. By the time they finished, Mr and Mrs Bennet had both given way on a number of sacrifices. Longbourn would entertain slightly less, be less extravagant when the family dined alone, and Mr Bennet had a strict new limit of how much he would

spend on books.

CHAPTER 12

M eryton - January 1812

“Do not lie, Jane. He has frustrated you greatly,” Elizabeth said to her sister, who had just left their father in his study. Emboldened by Elizabeth’s encouragement to take hold of the reins of her future, Jane had become more animated, and played a greater role in the running of Longbourn.

Jane still deferred to her mother in all matters of the household, as was proper, but now she went out and spoke to the tenants every week, accompanied by a footman hired by Elizabeth to accompany her and her two eldest sisters. Jane was learning about crops, drainage, and harvests, and finally convinced both her father and half of the tenants to agree to try a crop rotation method. Mr Bennet had wanted to try the method years ago, but when the tenants proved resistant, he gave up, as he did with everything else. Jane only convinced half of their tenants to try the method, the others were holding out to see what the braver families would make of it.

“It was not so very bad,” Jane lied .

“What did he make you barter to get your way?” demanded Elizabeth. Mr Bennet had recently turned childish and petulant, disliking his daughters’ and wife’s new habit of making demands of him and insisting that he should care more now about the estate, since it was going to Jane. In truth, Mr Bennet had cared about little but books and port for years, and a short period of having his spending curbed for the sake of his family had put him in a sour mood.

“If we make a larger profit, from the next harvest, he must get half for his books,” admitted Jane. “It is not unfair.”

“It is not unfair as long as you get the other half for yourself, considering that you are doing all the planning and management with the tenants. He hasn’t left his book room for weeks now,” said Elizabeth. “If you are the heir, and past your majority, doing all of this work so he might have a few more books, you ought to have the proper allowance for the heir to this estate.”

“I did tell him that,” Jane confessed, biting her lip. “I cannot believe I was so bold. I told him if I am to do all of this work, I would benefit from a proper riding mare, not his dreadful horse, which I fear I will fall off of, or Nellie, who seems as if she might fall down and die at any moment. And it was eventually agreed that the cost of educating my sisters must come off the top of the profit before we split what is left. He did not like that, but I am doing this for them, not for him.”

“I will help however I can with my sisters, as we planned before Mr Collins made his decision,” promised Elizabeth. “You will not have them all with you forever, except perhaps Mama. With not only an estate of your own, and my house in London from which to launch them all one at a time, and my six hundred a year, we will all be well looked after, and I am certain that all three of our sisters will find husbands one way or another.”

It had been assumed by Mrs Bennet once it was made known that Jane was to inherit Longbourn that she and the young ladies would stay there forever, a situation she preferred far better to depending on Elizabeth. It had not made it into the paper until nearly Michaelmas that the entail was dissolved on Longbourn of Hertfordshire, and Mrs Bennet had been in her element ever since. Sadly, relations with Lucas Lodge had been even more hostile ever since, nearly aggressive, even.

“I think that if I were a man, John Lucas would call me out,” Jane had said of the

matter when Mr Lucas had been alarmingly rude to her one day in Meryton.

“If you were a man, you and Papa would have ended the entail between you already, and Mr Collins would have never entered the neighbourhood,” replied Elizabeth. “It is not our fault that Mr Collins decided he did not wish to run an estate. We could never even have predicted he might act in such a matter, but it is not as if Charlotte has any cause to repine. Our cousin’s living is generous. John’s sister will be fine, and the Lucases never had any right to Longbourn. They have all been difficult since I won the lottery. Charlotte changed right away, and you see how the rest of them turned against me when I refused John, and then Uncle would not give them any of my money to educate Henry.”

Lydia had suffered the most since all of the changes to the Bennets’ fortunes, and the new resolve of her parents. Her friendship with Maria Lucas was in tatters, she was no longer out, and she was lonely. She spent her time in the company of her mother, sisters, and their governess Miss Ellis, the thirty-year-old well educated daughter of a parson and scholar, who had left his daughter nothing but his intellect. The uncaring man had donated a fortune in books to a school owned by his friend, and his daughter had been left not even a farthing for her dowry.

Elizabeth, Jane, and Mrs Bennet had insisted that the younger girls compare this with the neglect of their father, and to always remember how selfish men could be. They all promised not to marry without their Uncle Gardiner’s or their Uncle Phillips’ approval, not that the girls had much worth marrying for. At least their uncles could ensure their best possible protection, and that of their children, whatever their situations would be in the end.

Miss Ellis was active, lively, and stern, ensuring that Lydia learned what was expected of her. She travelled to Ware with Mary each week, to visit a friend of Miss Ellis that had a harp-lute, and was willing to give some lessons. So far, Mary had shown great interest and enthusiasm, and Jane promised her that if she showed

progress that they would ask their uncle to look for an instrument in town.

People in town were always selling items out of desperation, there were shops all over town filled with used jewellery, furniture, small instruments, even used clothing and hats could all be purchased in the city for bargain prices. Shopkeepers paid pennies to desperate sellers, and then sold the items for low prices to move them quickly. Mr Gardiner already had furnishings for a third of Lizzy's new house waiting in his warehouses. The house had been taken by a woman whose estate was lost to debts upon the death of her husband, and whose two eldest sons must work in the city. The family had their own furniture that they brought with them, and they hoped to stay in Elizabeth's house for some time.

Kitty also benefited from Miss Ellis's company. Along with a master from St Albans, Miss Ellis began to train Lydia and Kitty both to show some small skills on the pianoforte, and Lydia was also learning to draw. All three of the youngest girls met separately with their father once a week in his study for lessons in their most difficult subjects.

In late January, excitement washed over the town when it was learned that a gentleman with an estate was coming to visit Netherfield Park. Mr Ferrars, an old friend of Mr Lockhart, was coming to visit for one month before travelling on to visit his sister. He was his mother's heir to a comfortable fortune, though it was rumoured that he might take orders until he inherited.

The man was to arrive on the first of February, and Mrs Lockhart had promised the village a ball for St Valentine's Day. By the time the gentleman arrived at Netherfield Park, every shoe rose, glove, and painted fan were cleaned out of the haberdasher, and most of the unmarried ladies in town had converged upon the dressmaker, though the Bennet ladies all agreed that the gowns Elizabeth had purchased for them when she won her prize were little enough used, and would suit perfectly for the evening.

Mr Ferrars was dubbed a fine figure of a man, and everything a gentleman ought to be when he appeared. He was invited everywhere with the Lockharts, who entertained each week that he was with them. Of course, the man gravitated immediately to Jane, as most bachelors did when entering the neighbourhood.

There were grumbles among the neighbouring families that the Bennets had enjoyed more than their share of good fortune recently, but Mrs Goulding, a long time friend of Mrs Bennet's who had not liked the recent tone of relations in the village, pointed out to everyone that it was only to be expected that the man would first be interested in Jane Bennet, every man always was, even before she was an heiress. She was the most beautiful woman for three counties, she was kind, she was gentle, and she was to inherit property. Mrs Goulding pointed out that the sooner Miss Bennet was married, the sooner suitors could be turned towards the other young ladies of the neighbourhood.

As the days passed and Mr Ferrars paid more and more attention to Jane, it was soon clear from the man's quiet, rather unassuming demeanour, that he was perfect for the eldest Miss Bennet, and was drawn to her not for her looks or her fortune, but because their temperaments were very much alike. Mrs Bennet was beside herself with excitement over Jane's beau, and when the man was not calling upon her daughter, she was travelling about Meryton in her carriage, boasting to her friends about every single compliment and attention Mr Ferrars made to Jane.

CHAPTER 13

St Valentine's Day arrived, and Longbourn was busy preparing for the Netherfield Ball. Mr Ferrars had already asked Jane for the first and the supper sets, which she granted, and Mrs Bennet had, of course, relayed this information to her sister, who ensured it was known throughout the village by tea time the following day. It was true that even in the space of two weeks, the man's attention had been so marked that it was noted by all in the village, with or without Mrs Bennet's help.

The Bennets greeted their hosts in the receiving line, then entered a ballroom filled with ladies in white and ivory ball gowns. "I do wish it was the fashion to wear something other than white to a private ball," said Kitty, whose pale complexion was washed out terribly by the lack of colour. "I hate not looking my best, just because I must wear my worst colour."

Her sisters agreed that it was an abominable injustice, but white was the fashion, and any lady wearing anything else at a private ball would stick out like a peacock. There were officers, but the Bennet ladies were not allowed to dance with them, and those men did not approach them. After Mrs Bennet's experience, Mr Bennet had visited Colonel Forster, and banned the entire regiment from his lands, or from approaching his daughters.

The men Mrs Bennet named were each given a week in the lock up for ungentlemanly conduct, Wickham himself received two, and they were all strictly forbidden to speak the Bennet name again, nor even to court ladies in the village. Colonel Forster was horrified to hear that his officers had been speaking thus of gentlewomen in the street, declared that the men had forfeited all rights to such

privileges, and that they were all lucky not to be demoted. They were now rarely allowed outside of camp. As a result, the Bennet ladies danced a great deal less than the other ladies, but they did not repine, for without revealing Kitty's mistake, their parents had explained the dishonour of the officers, and also, Mrs Lockhart had invited another half dozen of her husband's friends for the ball, so the selection of dance partners was not as sparse as it could have been.

Though Miss Ellis was needed at the ball to supervise Mary and Kitty, she had been obliged to stay home to control Lydia, who was heartbroken at being left behind while her sisters danced. Lydia had never attended a private ball of such distinction, only small dances at the homes of the Lucases and Gouldings. Once the Lockharts left the neighbourhood, who knew when another would happen in Meryton again. Elizabeth, Jane, and Mrs Bennet all agreed Lydia needed more society, and that her isolation was making her despondent. She needed more than her sisters' company, she was too lively of a girl.

Elizabeth wrote to her uncle requesting to use some of her ready funds to pay for a term of school for Lydia, and a recommendation from their aunt for a good school for young ladies of Lydia's rank. Uncle Gardiner replied that Elizabeth must be careful not to let her family's needs scrape away at her funds, but because Jane promised that the following year would be paid by whatever additional profits were earned by her efforts on the estate, he did not deny the request. Elizabeth had only so far spent fifty pounds of the seven hundred that was held back from the percents. In another month, Uncle Gardiner would come to conduct Lydia to Mrs Mandeville's Seminary for Young Ladies, a good school located in London, where the young ladies enjoyed the museums, lectures, tours, and other delights of the city.

Mr Ferrars's younger brother had arrived the day before the ball. Elizabeth danced with him, but when she discouraged his second request, and rebuffed his subsequent attentions to her, the man became snide, and rude to all of the Bennet ladies. He then spent the rest of the night attempting to part his brother from Jane. Elizabeth found

the hauteur of Mr Robert Ferrars revolting, and told Mary that she could not repine the loss of his approbation.

Mrs Bennet was, as usual, a problem, and Mr Bennet, as usual, did nothing. In fact he made the matter worse. For once, not only had Mrs Bennet drunk too much punch, but so had Mr Bennet. Mrs Bennet was loud the entire evening, and Mr Bennet embarrassed everyone when Mary attempted to perform on the harp-lute that Uncle Gardiner had just sent from town. She was not very skilled yet, but she had learned a few light, pleasant tunes, and the village had no one who played a lute, although there was a man with a guitar in the village. The harp-lute was a smaller instrument more appropriate for ladies, and Mary was excited to display it.

“Mary, you are always monopolising one instrument or another, let the other ladies have a turn to exhibit,” her father said, waving for a footman to take Mary’s lute and return it to their carriage.

Elizabeth felt terrible for poor Mary, and did her very best to pay attention to her dinner partner, Mr Lockhart’s friend, Mr Osborne, who was a partner at a small bank in London. Suddenly, Elizabeth heard her mother’s shrill tones.

“Did I not tell you, Mrs Long? I knew how it would be! Mr Ferrars has been half in love with Jane since he entered the village!” exclaimed Mrs Bennet, loud enough for everyone in the dining room to hear.

“Yes, Mr Ferrars, the sooner you marry my eldest and introduce my other daughters to your rich friends, the better,” followed Mr Bennet, as inebriated as Mrs Bennet, and equally as loud.

Elizabeth looked over at Jane just in time to see her turn white, though she did not display a hint of distress, or even a flicker of emotion. She turned to the dinner partner on her left, their parson, Mr Abbot, and asked him how he found the pheasant.

Elizabeth saw a look pass between Mr Ferrars, who was on Jane's right, and his brother, and hoped that Mr Robert and her parents would not present too great a challenge for Jane and Mr Ferrars.

The following morning, a note addressed to Jane was delivered at the breakfast table.

Netherfield,

Miss Bennet,

I find that I simply cannot do without yours and your sister Elizabeth's company today at Netherfield. I beg you to return this message to say that you are not too tired from last night's frivolities to come and sit with me in my private parlour. The men are going shooting. I shall send my carriage for you at noon.

Abigail Lockhart

Jane and Elizabeth both thought the invitation was strange, considering the amount of work that must be done at Netherfield after the ball, but they sent their acceptance. Mrs Bennet raved about this distinction somehow being a compliment to Jane by Mr Ferrars. Elizabeth and Jane were grateful that Mrs Lockhart was to send her carriage for them, for Mrs Bennet was not above sending them on foot to avoid letting them use the carriage when it looked like rain. She might have sent Jane on horseback, but Elizabeth would not ride.

When Elizabeth and Jane were shown into Abigail's private parlour, there was a tea service waiting. Their hostess seemed nervous, and unhappy as she poured and served.

When they finally each had a cup of tea and a cake, Jane demanded "Abigail, what is it?"

Abigail hesitated, "Jane I am so very sorry to tell you that Mr Ferrars has returned to London with his brother. I fear that his admiration of you was unequal to your parent's display last night. I cannot account for Mr Robert's dislike of your entire family, but he would not leave Edward alone until he forced him to admit that while you were suitable, your parents and family are not nearly fashionable enough for their mother, who would be furious, possibly even angry enough to disinherit him."

Jane's face was as still as stone, she said nothing, only sipped her tea. "Oh, Jane," said Elizabeth.

"Jane, I am so sorry," said Abigail. "Nicholas is furious with him. He says that Edward carried on too far, and that even after a fortnight, his honour is engaged after such notice, but Mr Robert was unyielding. I do believe that Nicholas and Edward will fall out about it. I could never put such a thing in a letter. I had to ensure that you had some privacy, and your sister with you, when you learned of it."

"Thank you," said Jane. She then sighed. "I am not devastated, but I am disappointed. I did not love him yet, but I was hoping that he would give me some assurance of his regard soon, that I might let my heart be touched."

"Jane, I am grateful, with a mother and father such as ours, that you are so careful of your feelings. Otherwise, with their behaviour and its subsequent results, you would have had your heart broken near to a dozen times by now," Elizabeth said sadly to her sister. It was a shame. And now Jane would be obliged to return to Longbourn and listen to her mother complain to the entire neighbourhood of her disappointment for weeks.

Abigail continued to make comforting little remarks to Jane as Elizabeth contemplated what ought to be done next to help Jane through this regret and mortification. It had been too long since she and Jane had visited their aunt. Perhaps she would send her uncle an express when they returned to Longbourn, asking if the

two of them could visit. It was three months until her majority, and Elizabeth needed a break from the endless negativity she found all over Meryton.

That would only delay the inevitable. Mrs Bennet was equal to displaying her disappointment for the entire village, and then displaying it all over again afresh the moment Jane returned. It felt like an endless cycle. Mrs Bennet had chased away so many suitors, only to bemoan her discontent over the matter for months every time. Heaven and earth, the woman was still bemoaning the loss of a silly youth who had written poetry to Jane in London when she was only fifteen. The young man had not even finished university.

In an instant, Elizabeth suddenly had an idea. “Abigail,” she demanded. “Tell me everything there is to know about Ever After End.”

CHAPTER 14

Highbury - May 1812

“Oh Miss Bates, you look splendid! How was Derbyshire?” exclaimed Mrs Weston, throwing her arms about her old friend as she stepped down from the carriage at The Gables. Etiquette demanded that the ladies of Highbury wait three days to allow the Darcys and their companion to settle in after their journey, but Mrs Weston, impatient, was hovering with her friend Mrs Martin, previously Miss Harriet Smith, at The Gables when the carriage arrived.

Miss Bates did indeed look splendid. She was fashionably attired, her wardrobe selected and pressed upon her by Georgiana. A maid had been assigned to her while she resided with the Darcys, and she looked very au courant. She smiled contentedly and embraced Mrs Weston, who then turned to greet the Darcys.

“Anne, my dear, you are positively radiant!” Miss Bates exclaimed when they entered the house. “Motherhood agrees with you. How is Mr Weston, and dear little George?”

“They are very well, and they cannot wait until you call upon us at Randalls,” answered Anne Weston. “You are to dine with us on Friday, and the entire neighbourhood will attend.” She paused. “Frank and Jane are coming. They arrive tomorrow.”

“Oh, Anne, how wonderful!” said Miss Bates. “I know you were hurt last year when they married as they did, but it is good for Mr Weston and Mr Churchill to be

restored to one another.”

The year before, when Jane Fairfax’s visit came to an end, Mr Churchill followed her back to Colonel Campbell’s home in all haste, and without notifying his father or any of their friends in Highbury, married Miss Fairfax by common licence less than a week after their return, in what was obviously a planned endeavour. Everyone had seen Mr Churchill avoid Miss Woodhouse in favour of Miss Fairfax, but then so did Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy. No one realized, except Darcy, that there had been anything serious to it.

Mr Weston had been exceptionally put out by his son’s obvious successful attempt to evade inviting his father to the wedding. Sympathy had been generous for Miss Bates as well, who adored her dear niece, Jane, and would have been touched beyond measure to attend. Her neighbours would have ensured her safe conduct. Angry words had been exchanged between the men by post, where Mr Churchill made it clear that neither Jane nor he felt that their true families were in Highbury. Miss Fairfax was part of the Campbell family, and Frank that of the Churchills. The newly married couple had married with those that meant the most about them, and Mr Weston had been extremely put out that those of Highbury were not amongst them. Contact between the Churchills and the Westons had ceased for some months.

“I am grateful that perhaps there will be a chance for Frank to know his younger brother,” said Mrs Weston. “But I fear that he will never cease to resent his father for sending him to live with his aunt. He was not unhappy there, but he believes that his father had a duty to keep him, no matter his circumstances, and that he did not because he must not have wanted to. Now, George will enjoy the father that Frank ought to have had. His aunt sunk her claws deep into him as a child, and the bitterness she caused in him has not abated. It is now no longer a secret between us that he did not attend our wedding because he did not want to, and that he visited last year only because he followed Jane to Highbury.”

Mrs Weston looked at Miss Bates and perceived her old friend's discomfort at this picture of her beloved niece. She leant across and patted the older lady's hand.

"Apparently your niece has no particular quarrel with you, nor us, she only wished to be married quickly last year, and acceded to Frank's demand that no one in Highbury know until later. She regrets his harsh words to his father last summer, and wants to see you. She has persuaded him to stop on their way south to visit Mr and Mrs Dixon," answered Mrs Weston.

"Oh! How kind of dear Jane!" gasped Miss Bates. "I had a letter from her last month. I will be glad to look at her again, before she is confined later this year. Oh to see her as a happily married woman!"

Miss Bates had learned to suppress her most effusive enthusiasms, and not because her new friends encouraged her to do so. Miss Darcy liked her just as she was, and Mr Darcy was all generosity. But Emma's words had cut her deeply last year, and she had spent a great deal of time since learning to be calm. It was fortunate that her new young friend's demeanour aided her in the endeavour. Indeed, when she was in London or Derbyshire with the Darcys, there was so much to do that she no longer felt the need for such excitement and excessive speech at every little delight. Before, her treats had been too rare. She had to make the most of them, and to find the delightful in everything, lest she spend most of her time in despair for her circumstances. She was determined not to give her old friend Mrs Knightley any cause to snap at her on this, her first visit back to her home. She could, and would, control her address.

Darcy made his way over to Bingley as the ladies took tea with Bingley's sisters. The Darcys and Miss Bates had remained in Highbury with the Bingleys for the summer last year. They said goodbye to their friends for a time when they went to Pemberley for the harvest, then London for part of the season. Georgiana and Miss Bates spent time with Lady Matlock, who remembered Miss Bates and her sister from a season in

town decades before. The ladies enjoyed all the delights of the city, then, as the heat became unbearable in London, returned for the Bingleys' last month in Highbury. The Bingley household would accompany the Darcys back to Pemberley in June.

"Well, Bingley, do you believe that you learned what you needed here?" Darcy asked his friend.

"I certainly did! I learned a great deal about managing a steward and tenants, how to react to difficulties, and most importantly, I learned that I enjoy the work, which was one of my most pressing concerns," answered Bingley. "I worried at first whether I was suited for it, considering that I have done nothing like it my entire life. I have learned that as much as I enjoy bolting to London for the season or to enjoy the theatre, I am eminently suited for country life. Or, I will be in a more varied neighbourhood."

"How has it been here lately?" enquired Darcy. The Bingleys had spent a portion of the winter in London and then returned for the spring planting.

"Much as it was before," replied Bingley. "Mrs Knightley is entering her confinement in a few months, so they do not go out much. She is not any more pleasant than she was last year. As I told you in one of my letters, Knightley closed the abbey entirely and moved to Hartfield when they wed, for the sake of Mr Woodhouse. Everyone at The Gables is looking forward to moving to Pemberley for the summer."

"Georgiana is looking forward to showing Miss Bates some of the sights that were less easy to visit last autumn. Some views are best in the summer. I am certain your family will be kept busy while you visit. "

Bingley sighed. "I wish things had been different with Miss Fairf- I mean Mrs Churchill last year."

“I did not realise your feelings were so strong for her.” Darcy was surprised. “Will you be equal to seeing her in company again?”

“No, no, they were not,” answered his friend. “Only, I wish now that they had been , and that hers were the same. I am ready to be married, Darcy. I want to settle. I am inclined to purchase an estate in Derbyshire, it would be a lark to be close by, do you not think? But I hesitate to make a purchase before I wed and know what my wife would prefer.”

“I know what you mean,” said Darcy. “I have deferred any number of decisions and tasks until I wed. It can sometimes be an annoyance.”

“At least you did something about Caroline when you were here last.” Bingley smiled. “Darcy, I do not know what you said to her the last time you visited about her behaviour, but it has been evident that she has put a tremendous effort into being more friendly and obliging. She has not thrown a single vase. I am almost hopeful that she will find a husband with her improved manners. Perhaps you might entertain a bit while we are at Pemberley. Maybe Caroline or I will find an affinity for one of your neighbours.”

“Georgiana would benefit from the opportunity to obtain some society in our county,” mused Darcy. “Perhaps we will.”

“It would certainly help her confidence, though it appears that her friendship with Miss Bates has done wonders for her,” said Bingley. “In fact, it appears to have done wonders for them both.”

“Indeed, it has,” agreed Darcy. “Richard will be amazed when he finally returns from the front by how animated our ward is.”

After a polite half hour where the Darcys took refreshment and heard the news of

their hosts and their neighbours, Mrs Weston and Mrs Martin took their leave, and the Darcys and Miss Bates were shown to their rooms.

The party from The Gables attended the dinner at the Randalls the following Friday, and the entire evening was a fiasco from start to finish. Darcy did not envy Mr and Mrs Weston so many guests that disliked so many of the others, or who felt they had reasons to hold grudges.

Mr and Mrs Knightley attended, and as usual, Mrs Knightley was icy to both Mrs Churchill and the Bingleys. Mr and Mrs Martin attended, and they were icy to Mrs Knightley. Mr Churchill and Mr Weston were avoiding one another, and everyone was attempting to avoid Mrs Elton. Darcy felt terrible for Mrs Weston, who only wished to welcome her old friend Miss Bates back to Highbury warmly. Miss Bates was seated between her niece and Mr Woodhouse, to whom she had written faithfully on her travels, and who she was currently assuring that though Derbyshire was fiercely cold, that Pemberley was sound, free from fatal drafts, and that the fires were generous and abundant.

After the meal, the men joined the ladies in the drawing room after their port and cigars, and accepted cups of tea from Mrs Weston, who was encouraging the ladies to exhibit. Georgiana began, in a duet with Miss Bates who had renewed her old skills on the harp while at Pemberley. Miss Bingley went next, and was well received, as she always was. Then, being short on single ladies, the married ones took to the instruments.

Mrs Elton performed, and then Mrs Martin. Mrs Knightley displayed her talents as well, though it was obvious that she had no wish to, and only did so at the encouragement of her husband.

Mrs Elton smiled at Mrs Knightley as she reclaimed her seat. "I do admire how unbothered you are by your little missteps, Mrs Knightley. What strength of character

you possess!” She looked over to see Mrs Churchill approaching the bench. “Now, here is a treat!”

Mrs Knightley’s face flamed with mortification, but Bingley had explained to Darcy that the woman was hardly on good terms with any neighbour except Mrs Weston. She had interfered with Mr and Mrs Martin’s courtship more than once, on the insistence that she was certain her friend was born to parents of high rank and deserved better. Miss Smith, uncertain of herself, persuaded by Mrs Knightley that her high-born father would be disappointed in her choice, had put off poor Mr Martin again and again.

When Harriet Smith finally learned that her father was a wealthy tradesman, she ended her friendship with Mrs Knightley, claiming that she was not worthy of her company, being the offspring of a man who worked, and married Mr Martin forthwith. Her portion purchased a small estate nearby, with only two tenant farms, but it was a start towards gentility for her husband, and Mrs Martin wanted no more truck with friends who had only associated with her because they believed she might be connected to someone important.

As usual, Mrs Churchill played divinely. Darcy wondered why Mrs Knightley seemed to have such an objection to the lady, but she watched Mrs Churchill play with utter loathing in her eyes.

“I commend you for how you always keep a smile, even when someone else is the centre of attention. You are so brave, Mrs Knightley,” said Caroline, unable to resist a jab at the woman who had snubbed her family so scandalously. “It is quite obvious you find your own skills lacking in comparison to Mrs Churchill, but your courage never falters!”

“It is easy to be so accomplished, when one is an orphan with access to education, and without obligation to family,” said Mrs Churchill as she left the instrument and

returned to her husband. “Growing up, I had no duties but to be a friend to Mrs Dixon. If I had a father as kind as Mr Woodhouse to care for during my youth, an estate full of tenants and a home to look after, and the responsibility of offering hospitality and friendship to my neighbours, I am certain I would have had no need to devote myself to my studies so religiously. Mrs Knightley has spent her time much better engaged, and probably found the endeavour a great deal more fulfilling. I know that I am infinitely more satisfied with my new life and all of its duties and blessings. I hope I will care for those I love half as well as I have heard Mrs Knightley has done.”

“Brava, dear Jane,” said her aunt, proud of her niece’s generosity of spirit. “Mrs Knightley’s devotion to her father, and her friends here in Highbury, have been her most glowing accomplishment, and we have all loved her dearly for it.”

Mrs Knightley, now having been defended by two of the people in the room who owed it to her the least, was quiet and contemplative for the rest of the evening, and her husband watched her carefully. He had been displeased with Mrs Elton’s and Miss Bingley’s cutting remarks to her, but relaxed as the kindness of Mrs Churchill and Miss Bates put an end to the matter.

CHAPTER 15

The following afternoon, Mrs Knightley exited the library and bumped into Mrs Churchill. “Mrs Knightley, I am on my way to the confectioners, I find that I crave a packet of pralines nearly every day now. Do accompany me.”

Emma Knightley was shocked by the invitation, but could see no way to decline without being rude. “I do not believe that my husband will object if I return home with a tin of his favourite marzipan,” she said, stepping into place next to Mrs Churchill.

“I am told that you are expecting as well, Mrs Knightley, though you still hide it well. Your maid must be so clever. Have you had any odd cravings?” asked Jane.

“I cannot but confess that for nearly a month now, each night at eleven o’clock, I have craved bread with bacon and a glass of lemonade,” Emma acknowledged. “Knightley has spent a fortune on fruit, for the orangery at the abbey cannot keep up with me.”

“I had a friend whose elder sister craved coal. She actually ate coal! Can you imagine! Eventually her husband sent for her mother to come and watch her, he feared it would harm the child,” Jane laughed.

The two ladies entered the confectioners, and placed their orders, Mrs Churchill purchasing enough packets of pralines to last for what she hoped would be a week. They ordered tea and sat by the window, Emma stirring her tea as Jane gazed out of the window.

“What made you defend me last night?” Emma asked. “They were not wrong, and you and I have never been friends.”

“You do not remember back as far as I. Once upon a time, we were friends. I shared yours and Isabella’s nursery for an entire year, while my aunt and grandmother were nursing my mother.” Jane raised an eyebrow at her. “I returned to my aunt and grandmother when I was four, and I was later sent to Colonel Campbell when I was five. We spent a great deal of time together those years.”

“I do not remember, but it is also true that I do not remember much from before my mother died,” admitted Emma. “I remember my mother and I remember what my father was like before she died, but I do not have many particular memories. My father says that I took her loss very hard.”

“I do understand,” replied Jane, “Just as I understand why we have not been friends since.”

“Why is that? Because I am so tired of hearing of your endless talents that I cannot bear to be in the same room with you?” asked Emma honestly.

“Yes,” said Jane. “That and because I am so jealous of you, and your lovely home, and your loving father, and your devoted sister, and your adorable nieces and nephews, and your duties, and your friends in Highbury, and how well they think of you.” Jane nodded as Emma looked disbelieving. “I would wager every time my aunt received a letter from Mrs Campbell, that you were obligated to listen to my endless charms and liberties at length.” Emma nodded. “Mrs Knightley, you have no idea that you are the Jane Fairfax of Highbury.”

“I am the what?” laughed Emma.

“It is true!” exclaimed Jane. “Every single letter from my aunt – and I received a

letter from my aunt weekly, if not more, the whole of my life – has been filled with endless praise of you. Every single one since I was five, even the ones she writes from Derbyshire, when she has not seen you in months. Sometimes she has covered four sides of paper with her effusions. I understand my aunt better now. I also remember when it was time for me to be sent away, her weeping at the prospect of separating us, for we had grown so close. I do not remember very much of that time, but I think that she spent the years doing her best to bring us tidings of each other, to preserve our friendship. She praises us both to each other because she loves us. Because we are all that she has to love and care about. It is quite beautiful, if you think of it. We have been so blessed by her care of us, even if she had nothing else to offer.”

“I never knew,” Emma marveled. “I have been so unworthy of her regard.”

“It has been enough to drive me quite mad, and I loathed you quite thoroughly throughout my youth,” continued Jane. “But my youth is over, and so is yours. What truly matters now, Mrs Knightley, is how we move forward as women.”

Emma was contemplative for a moment, uncertain how to respond. “Please, call me Emma,” she said finally to her new friend.

“Nothing would make me happier, Emma. Please call me Jane.”

The following day, Mrs Knightley called upon Miss Bates at The Gables, accompanied by Mrs Churchill. Everyone was indeed shocked, until, apparently realizing that she could not call upon their house without an apology, she said to Caroline and Louisa, “I admit that when you entered the neighbourhood, I was beset by prejudice, and I gave you a very poor welcome. I know that apologies are not enough for the way I have acted, but I offer them to you anyway, with all sincerity, and I hope that you will dine with us at Hartfield.”

Caroline thanked her in wonder, and the conversation turned to pleasanter topics. Mrs Knightley and Mrs Churchill both expressed a desire to spend as much time as possible with Miss Bates during her stay in Highbury, and at their next meeting, Georgiana asked Caroline to formally introduce her to Mrs Knightley. Darcy had accepted an introduction once she was married to Knightley and had no other option but to do so, but Georgiana had still managed to evade the introduction until now. If the lady was finally willing to behave like a proper gentlewoman, then Georgiana had no more objection to knowing her.

Their party did indeed dine at Hartfield, and the Knightleys and Mr Woodhouse dined at the Gables. The ladies made very merry when they met, which was often, and Emma and Jane paid a great deal of attention to both of their dear friends, Miss Bates and Mrs Weston, who had both worried over them so well through the years, as well as dear Miss Darcy, who had been so kind to their friend, even when they had not.

A week after the dinner at Randalls, Jane and Emma declared that Donwell Abbey was to be opened again, and there was to be a grand picnic in Miss Bates's honour before she left the neighbourhood again with the Darcys, to show how much they had missed her while she was gone, and how much they valued her when she was with them. The entire village was invited, competitions were planned for the children, and lawn games for the ladies and gentlemen. There was to be a rowing competition amongst the men, and archery for the ladies.

The day went off perfectly. Every guest enjoyed themselves, and all grudges were put aside for the day. Jane Churchill persuaded her husband to be more generous with his father, while he still had the opportunity, lest he regret it later. Mrs Weston and Mr Knightley persuaded Mr and Mrs Martin to accept an invitation to dine at Hartfield with the Bingleys, and Mrs Martin and Mrs Knightley were slowly rebuilding a friendship based on mutual respect. The only person who could not be entirely happy was Mrs Elton, but then she never could when she was not the guest of honour.

Miss Bates was in her element all day, enjoying the many activities, and the company of all her oldest friends. She even managed to not only persuade Mr Woodhouse to allow the guests to enjoy some cake, but also to risk partaking in a very small slice himself, with no adverse effects upon his health.

CHAPTER 16

The day after the picnic, Darcy received the following letter from his godmother.

23 June, 1812

Ever After End

Dear Godson,

You will not like what I have to ask of you, but I have no other alternative that I can think of. I am experiencing difficulties on my estate, and I need the assistance of someone I trust. I have always been celebrated for my independent nature since the loss of my husband, and have managed as well as I could, even on my own with no steward. I am having a dispute with my tenants, and they will not bow to my decisions, nor pay their rents, until I settle the matter to their satisfaction. Of course, the satisfaction of some, is not the satisfaction of the others.

I know that you avoid Ever After End during my summer parties, and with good reason, but I implore you to consider making a visit and help put my tenants back in their place. They are squabbling over fields and boundaries, and many of them have begun pulling down fences. They have missed their rents for two quarters. I would rather not have the magistrate intervene.

I will ensure that my other guests understand that you are not a member of the house party, and that your time here is undisturbed. I will not lie and try to suggest that it would not also make my heart very happy to see you.

Please take pity on an old woman,

Aunt Theodosia

Postscript: I am short a female guest this year. Can you recommend a lady?

“Bingley, I believe I have a problem,” said Darcy as he entered his friend’s study. “I do not think I shall be able to accompany you to Pemberley, though I suppose I could send you with Georgiana and Miss Bates. Georgie could play hostess to all of you if you do not entertain in my absence.”

“What has happened, Darcy?” exclaimed Bingley.

“It is a funny situation. The daughter of the local rector was my mother’s best friend growing up, and they shared lessons together, considering that my aunt was rather older than them, it gave my mother companionship. She married a clergyman, and shortly after their wedding, they unexpectedly inherited a mostly bankrupt estate. The house and grounds themselves are quite beautiful, which is where a great deal of the previous owner’s money went. Mr Darlington allowed his wife, who is my godmother, to rename the estate something silly and romantic, it is called Ever After End now.”

“That is charming!” said Bingley, waiting for more information.

“Well sadly, my godmother’s husband did the best he could to return the estate to its former prosperity, but with no ready cash of his own, it was very slow work, and he died before he completed the task. My godmother is very independent and stubborn. She will not allow me, nor any other, to assist her financially. I do visit once a year just after the harvest, when I am permitted to review the books and her methods, and make suggestions for improvements. It is slow because she will not even take a loan to make those improvements, so it must all happen as she can afford it.”

“However does she survive, if her house is rather grand but her estate barely supports itself?” asked Bingley.

“Every summer, she throws matchmaking house parties for people of gentility, who wish to mingle amongst others who are also actively hoping to wed,” said Darcy.

“And what does she do, charge admission?” demanded Bingley. When Darcy nodded, grimacing, Bingley continued, “Darcy, you cannot be serious.”

“Fifty pounds per guest is the going rate,” said Darcy. “She accepts applications for twelve ladies and twelve gentlemen each summer, the most that her house can easily accommodate, and the guests have two months of dances, dinners, and activities to help them in getting acquainted with one another and developing attachments. It is all very proper. She has a group of friends who live with her and act as chaperones. They are all eccentrics of reduced circumstances who she takes in. All estimable people, but odd, every one. They live with her all year, and provide her with company.”

“Twelve hundred pounds a year must be very helpful, even after the costs of such a house party. Does it make her solvent?” said Bingley.

“Just about,” said Darcy. “With a bit more left over for improvements each year, and sometimes something to set aside for the future, but not much. She has no children, obviously. However, there is a problem on her estate. The tenants are fighting over boundaries, ripping up fences, and refusing to pay their rents unless she satisfies them, which is likely impossible. I must travel there and assist her with the problem. She cannot afford to lose any income, nor have any damage done to her estate in the way of fences.”

“ You are to attend a match making house party? You , Darcy?” Bingley cackled.

“I am not to attend it as a candidate for marriage, Bingley. My godmother, whom I

call Aunt Theodosia, by the way, will ensure that I am not disturbed by her guests.” Darcy was certainly not going to be participating, though he supposed he would have to dine with the others. “Do you know of a lady who may be interested in attending as a guest? My aunt is a woman short this year.”

“Indeed, Caroline, of course,” said Bingley. “She has become determined to find a husband since your conversation last year. She might view this as just as good of an opportunity as waiting for an invitation to visit your other aunt. What sort of men will be there?”

“My aunt has a rather equal mix of persons with fortune, and also some who have rather less,” answered Darcy. “There are often one or two guests of noble birth who dislike society or have reasons not to participate in the season. Second or third sons looking for women with dowries. Men with modest estates or reasonably comfortable incomes. The women are the same. Some with dowries, a few with little. Aunt Theodosia boasts of at least a fifty percent success rate every year.”

“Well that is good enough for me, Darcy!” exclaimed Bingley, slapping his hands on his knees and rising to his feet. “Do you think she would mind if I joined you? I would be interested to see you manage this estate issue.”

“I am certain she would welcome your assistance as well as mine, Bingley,” assured Darcy. “Do you really believe that Miss Bingley will agree?”

“Let us go and persuade her,” declared Bingley, exiting his study and leading the way to the drawing room.

CHAPTER 17

L ondon - May 1812

“There is a letter for you, Elizabeth,” said Mrs Gardiner, holding out a thick packet as she reviewed the incoming post.

“It is from Mrs Darlington!” exclaimed Elizabeth, opening the letter. “It has three copies of the list of guests and their situations, as well as the list of rules, expectations, and the summer’s programme of activities.” Elizabeth passed them around as she opened the envelope.

“They give a copy of the entire guest list’s circumstances to everyone?” asked her aunt in surprise. “That is rather forward.”

“The entire endeavour is rather forward,” grumbled Uncle Gardiner, who had expressed his uncertainty since Elizabeth had suggested visiting Ever After End months before.

“It makes perfect sense,” said Mary pointedly, perusing the information carefully. “If every guest is actively pursuing marriage, then it goes without saying that all parties involved would wish to know the situations of everyone there before even meeting, so that we know from the beginning who we are interested in from a practical standpoint, and who might not be interested in us, due to our rank or fortune.”

“Precisely, I agree that it is eminently sensible,” agreed Elizabeth.

“There is a great disparity of gentlemen of varying rank and fortune,” observed Jane “A few who are second sons and will likely require a dowry, some with modest or greater wealth that may have less expectation in terms of a lady’s fortune. Even an earl. A wealthy one.”

“Listen to this one,” exclaimed Elizabeth. “Mr William Talbot, a charming second son from Surrey with a lively and playful nature. Mrs Darlington’s inquiries suggest that he may be still unmarried due to fears of a lack of seriousness from the fathers of the ladies he has courted.”

“She said that?” gasped Aunt Madeleine. “She politely called him a libertine.”

“Mrs Darlington writes to the rector and local doctor or apothecary of every village of her prospective guests,” Elizabeth explained. “Obviously, no one would pay such a sum to find a mate this way unless they have had some trouble in the marriage mart. Mrs Darlington ensures that everyone begins the house party in possession of as many facts as possible in regards to fortune, rank, and reputation.”

Elizabeth looked over the list and read aloud, “Mr Arthur Pemberton is a shy third son of a baron who has a passion for poetry. He has an income of one thousand a year. And this one, Mr Lawrence Audley, a gentleman of four thousand a year, seems to be unmarried because his passion for horses and breeding exceeds his enthusiasm for ladies.”

“She included information about our competition as well,” said Mary. “The Honourable Miss Julia Bertram and Miss Mary Crawford, have ten thousand and twenty thousand to their dowries, and have struggled to find husbands after Miss Bertram’s elder married sister eloped and ran away from her husband with the brother of Miss Crawford. ”

“I shudder to see what they have written of us,” said Jane nervously.

Elizabeth turned her page over and read aloud, “The three Miss Bennets are known as the jewels of Meryton in Hertfordshire. It is presumed that the reason they have not married is due to a recently broken entail on their family estate, their previously small dowries, and the fact that their mother is the daughter of a solicitor, who pushes suitors at her daughters too desperately.

“Miss Jane Bennet, twenty-three, has unexpectedly become the heir to her father’s estate of two thousand a year, and is gentle, kind, and uncommonly beautiful,” Elizabeth continued. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, age twenty-one, recently obtained a fortune of fifteen thousand and a house in London from a lottery. She is known for a love of nature and books, and has a lively demeanour and wit. Though Miss Mary comes only with one thousand and six hundred, she is known as the most pious and hardworking of her sisters, and is a treasure to her parish.”

“That did not sound too bad,” said Mary brightly. “How kind of Mr Abbot and Mr Jones to give us such glowing recommendations.”

“There will even be an American heiress who has had trouble finding a sponsor in London,” observed Jane. “How interesting.”

“I suppose it is best to begin with all of the facts,” grumbled their uncle. “I will, nevertheless, remain at the inn for some days in case you need me.”

“There is truly no need, Uncle, when you have hired me a carriage for the entire duration, with its own groom, and my footman and maid will attend us there,” said Elizabeth. “If, for some reason, we find ourselves dissatisfied with the house or its society, we can simply board our carriage immediately and return to London.”

“I will stay close for some days, just in case,” insisted Uncle Gardiner. “I have it from the owner of the inn that I am not the only relation to do so or to have such concerns. He claims to have a number of relations staying close to Ever After End for at least a

week or more each summer, though he does also say that he has never heard of anyone leaving the place dissatisfied. ”

“We shall send you a note each morning then, with our thoughts on the place, so you will know when we are feeling quite secure,” promised Elizabeth.

“Abigail has nothing but wonderful things to say about Mrs Darlington and her annual endeavours,” said Jane. “I am not certain that we will meet our matches there, but at least we know that every man there is actively searching for a wife. It will be refreshing to have the opportunity to learn if I could care for a gentleman before my mother gets carried away.”

“Well if the amount of money Lizzy has invested in this venture has anything to do with it, you shall all be married in no time,” grumbled Uncle Gardiner.

Elizabeth had spent a great deal of her money. She had begun with seven hundred in ready funds when she first won her prize. Fifty had gone to treat her mother and sisters to new clothes. Then twenty to pay for Lydia to attend the end of the current school term, and another one hundred and fifty to secure places for the three eldest girls at Ever After End. Another hundred had been spent to rent a coach and groom for the summer in case it was needed, and for an incomparable wardrobe for all three sisters. Elizabeth had earned seventy five pounds for a year’s lease on her house, though fifty of that had gone towards furniture that was waiting in her uncle’s townhouse. She had just over four hundred pounds of ready funds left, twenty-five of which Mr Gardiner turned over to Elizabeth before their journey.

Mrs Bennet was put out with Elizabeth, and Elizabeth was incredibly pleased to be away from Longbourn, and entirely independent. Mrs Bennet hated the idea of Jane paying to find a husband, like some man ordering a bride from a far off country. Jane was beautiful. Jane was an heiress, and Mrs Bennet had no objection to Jane not marrying at all now that Longbourn was saved. If Mr Bennet died and Jane brought

home a new husband, who knows what restrictions he might place upon Mrs Bennet and her spending habits and activities. Jane could remain single forever now, unless she was to marry a man of great fortune and move away, leaving Mrs Bennet as mistress of Longbourn permanently. She had thought Mr Ferrars would be such a man.

When making her plans, and seeing what a state Mrs Bennet was in, Elizabeth could not bear to leave Mary behind to bear the brunt of her ire. Mrs Bennet would not hear of Kitty being allowed to go, insisting that Kitty was not old enough for such a scheme. Elizabeth quite agreed, and was perfectly happy to leave Kitty to Mr and Mrs Bennet's undivided attention. Mrs Bennet did not snipe at Kitty as she did Elizabeth and Mary, and since Lydia had gone to school, Kitty had benefited from more of her parents' attention. She remained at Longbourn with Miss Ellis, though Aunt Gardiner had invited her niece and her companion to visit London for a month while Elizabeth and the others were in Somerset.

They visited Lydia at her school a few times since arriving in London in early March. Each time, Lydia hardly had a moment for them. Her class was always on their way to see something, a museum, a lecture, to tour a warship, or to pay calls upon the ladies of other schools to polish their manners. Lydia was busy and happy, and had made many friends. She would leave school in June for the summer, and spend a month with Kitty and the Gardiners, who agreed that the youngest girls needed more society and better examples than only their parents. The younger girls would return to Longbourn in July, where Lydia would visit home until she returned to school in September.

CHAPTER 18

O n Monday, the first of June, Elizabeth, Jane and Mary accompanied their Uncle Gardiner into Glastonbury. They rode in their uncle's carriage, Elizabeth's hired carriage following behind with the luggage. Suddenly they heard a shout from outside, the carriage stopped, and after a moment, their groom appeared at the window of the carriage to inform them that a carriage on the way to the same place was on the side of the road, one of their horses having thrown a shoe. The company wished to know if their groom could ride on the back of their carriage into the village or to Ever After End, so that he might return with a fresh horse.

Their uncle agreed, and upon learning that the other party had only two passengers, began to offer for them to follow them in Elizabeth's hired carriage instead of waiting for their servant, who could follow them later.

Before the offer could be made, however, another head popped up beside the groom, and a young woman with a mischievous expression peered in. "Are you all going to the fairy tale place too? Can we travel with you?"

Uncle Gardiner nodded his head but before he could offer the use of the second carriage, the young woman had grasped the carriage door, opened it, then reached behind her and pushed an older woman up and into the carriage, then climbed in after her, squeezing in beside her companion and Uncle Gardiner.

"Cramped isn't it?" The young woman remarked to them in a rather grating tone, "Thanks for the ride."

“You must be Miss Abigail Dutton!” exclaimed Elizabeth.

“You got the lucky one, me being the only American, but let me see. Hmmm. There are three of you ladies, so you must be the jewels of what was the town, Aunt Martha?”

“Merryville,” the older woman supplied.

“That was it, the jewels of Merryville. You must be the Bennets!” Miss Dutton said.

“It is Meryton, but yes, we are the Bennets,” answered Elizabeth easily, liking the young woman’s refreshingly forward nature.

“We are putting the cart before the horse, are we not?” asked Uncle Gardiner. “Allow me to start the introductions. I am Mr Edward Gardiner, of London. These are my nieces, Miss Jane Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and Miss Mary Bennet.”

“Well, like Elizabeth said, I’m Abigail Dutton, from Tennessee, and this is my aunt, Mrs Martha Sprague of Chilbolton, Hampshire.” She looked over at Mary appraisingly. “You’re the sister that’s as poor as Job’s turkey. Don’t worry about it. You’re pretty enough, and there’ll be gentlemen aplenty here. Mrs Darlington must have invited some gentleman looking for a pious wife.”

Mary and Jane’s eyebrows rose high at her forwardness as the young woman’s aunt sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. “Abigail, I have told you a hundred times, if you do not stop speaking of money and using slang, you will never be wed. They don’t do that here.”

“Well we had nothing to talk about before the money, did we?” retorted Abigail. “Then Pa found coal and iron on our land, and though we finally have something to talk about, we have to keep it quiet, meanwhile, everyone calls us codfish

aristocracy.”

“We have no idea what that means, but I am certain no one will call you that in Somerset,” promised a wide-eyed Jane.

“They did when we got to Manhattan. Means new money ; the old dutch in New York hate new money,” said Miss Dutton. “My parents died in a carriage accident last year, after we arrived in London. They hoped to buy me a noble husband, but I can’t get a sponsor. My aunt’s husband was an English merchant she met in Charleston, so her connections can’t help me. A girl I met in town told me about this place. Said maybe I’d find an Englishman cracked enough in the head to take me. My ma was set on me marrying a proper gentleman, but only scoundrels and adventurers want new money in America.”

“We learned of Ever After End from a couple who met there. They are leasing an estate near our home,” Elizabeth shared.

“What was it like, winning the lottery?” asked Miss Dutton of Elizabeth.

“To be entirely truthful, it has been bittersweet,” said Elizabeth candidly. “No one except a few close relations, such as my sisters and my uncles, treat me the same any more. Everyone instantly wanted something, and because my uncle placed my funds in trust, I cannot give them away. I have lost friends I cherished dearly. But the entail on our estate had not been dissolved yet when I won, so it was a great relief to know that I could assist my family, should it become necessary.”

“I heard about those entails. We don’t do that in America, not since before the revolution, Pa told me,” said Abigail. “I had problems like yours when Pa got rich. All of a sudden if we couldn’t or wouldn’t give money away, we weren’t friends anymore with people we knew all our lives. Once they’d ask for money, things’d never be the same again. I’d be sitting on the curb with a cup collecting coins if we

had given everyone we knew everything they asked for.” She sighed heavily. “I still miss Suellen Roy. She was my best friend.”

“My best friend turned against me too,” Elizabeth said sympathetically. “I miss Charlotte Lucas every day.”

Less than a half hour later, their party pulled up in front of a very attractive eighteenth century stone manor surrounded with abundant gardens. Somewhat larger than Netherfield, the park was stunning, and Elizabeth was already fantasizing about taking a walk when she was handed down.

A lady with a motherly demeanour in a high-quality gown that was two seasons out of fashion waited on the steps for them with a man in his fifties, who stood next to her with a military bearing. The gentleman was wearing an odd assortment of faded military regalia and attire appropriate for a country squire. The regalia and the attire was all quite obviously out of order.

“Well met!” said the lady. “I am Theodosia Darlington, the mistress of Ever After End. Welcome to my home, I am very glad to have you all. May I introduce our senior gentleman chaperone, Major Archibald Bartholomew? Major Bartholomew resides here at Ever After End, along with a selection of my close friends who serve as chaperones.”

“Thank you for your kind welcome,” spoke up Uncle Gardiner. “I am Mr Edward Gardiner of London, and these are my nieces, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and Miss Mary Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire. And unexpectedly, we also have with us Mrs Martha Sprague, and her niece Miss Abigail Dutton, whom we found on the road with a lame horse.”

Greetings were tendered to everyone, and Mrs Darlington invited them all to take tea in the drawing room, so that the ladies might take refreshment, and their relations

could ascertain their well being before leaving them there.

“I assume you have rooms at The Somerset Arms?” Mrs Darlington asked Uncle Gardiner and Mrs Sprague, who nodded. “Mr Atkins will have you well looked after there, I assure you. They take particular care of our friends.” They all followed her inside, Elizabeth innocently avoiding her uncle’s pointed glare at Major Bartholomew’s mismatched boots.

There were three young ladies, and five gentlemen in the room, along with three older women, two of whom were presumably chaperones, but were playing chess alone in the corner. From the guests, they were introduced to Miss Charlotte Abernathy, the Honourable Miss Aurelia Winslow, Miss Lavinia Blackwood, Mr Samuel Fletcher, Mr Thomas Elwood, Mr Lawrence Audley, Mr Edmund Cartwright, and Lord Charles Montague, Earl of Chesley. There was also a Mrs Edwina Abernathy, the grandmother of Miss Abernathy.

The older guests and their host took tea and made pleasant conversation at one side of the room while the younger sat on the other side and began the slow business of becoming acquainted. Jane tried to make pleasant conversation with Miss Winslow, who snubbed her immediately, while Elizabeth made friends with Charlotte Abernathy. Miss Abernathy was a sweet but guileless girl of about nineteen, with a dowry of three thousand. Mrs Darlington’s report stated that her grandmother was growing frail, and that the woman wished to see Miss Abernathy settled before she passed, for she had no other living family. She would inherit her grandmother’s small house in the country, but her grandmother’s insubstantial portion would immediately revert to a distant cousin after her death.

Miss Lavinia Blackwood was the daughter of a gentleman from Exeter, aged twenty, with a dowry of five thousand and very unfortunate teeth. She had, somehow, managed to gain the approbation of Miss Winslow, which Jane had not accomplished.

Miss Winslow was the daughter of a baronet from Birmingham with a portion of ten thousand pounds. There had not been a mention of why the lady might be twenty-four and still unmarried with such a dowry, but Elizabeth suspected it might be because she was so unpleasant.

The gentlemen looked terrified. They all appeared as if they suddenly realized that they were here to court women and drink tea, and they were all out of tea. Mr Samuel Fletcher was the twenty-four year old second son of a very minor gentleman from Surrey, who was a cousin of Mrs Darlington. Presumably he needed to marry a dowry, or perhaps Jane would be his target, being the heiress of an estate herself.

Mr Thomas Elwood was a twenty-nine year old philanthropic man of about two thousand a year, with no estate of his own. He was from London, and had inherited his fortune from a maternal uncle. He reportedly spent a great deal of time in charitable endeavours in the city.

Mr Lawrence Audley was the thirty-five year old master of an estate of about four thousand a year in Bedfordshire, who was a skilled equestrian and horse breeder. Presumably he was still unmarried because he had not found a lady with the right enthusiasm for his interests.

Mr Edmund Cartwright was an substantially wealthy self-made businessman of only twenty-seven. He was unmarried because he was devoted to his work, but he was now in the market for a wife, presumably a genteel one. It was said that he was also looking for an estate within a reasonable distance of London. His business had recently matured into something extremely profitable, Uncle Edward said he knew the fellow from town, and they had exchanged friendly greetings when they entered the room.

Lord Charles Montague, Earl of Chesley, was reportedly a wealthy nobleman with an estate worth twelve thousand a year, and was presumably the prize of the party. The

reason he reportedly had not married was because though he was a social creature, he could not bear to be managed, and there had been too many compromise attempts in London. He had remained in the country for some years after, but had never met any ladies who interested him in his county. He had attended at the urging of Lady Jersey, who had known Mrs Darlington through Lady Anne Darcy and Lady Matlock for years. The Almack's patroness referred a guest or two to Ever After End every summer, and the Earl had lately, being nearing thirty, expressed the desire to find a match and begin to fill his nursery.

When the ladies finished their tea, they said goodbye to their relations, and headed upstairs with the housekeeper, while those who had already seen their rooms dispersed to explore the house. Mrs Darlington prepared to meet the next group of guests on the stairs.

CHAPTER 19

All of the guests had arrived that day, save one. “Miss Bingley will not arrive for three more days,” said Mrs Darlington at dinner. “I lacked a twelfth lady, and so one is coming by recommendation of my godson. Miss Caroline Bingley is twenty-three, and the daughter of a tradesman from Yorkshire. Her parents are deceased, and the family departed from trade some years ago. She attended a costly ladies seminary in London, has a dowry of twenty thousand, and hopes to marry into the gentry or the nobility. Preferably a gentleman who enjoys London.”

She looked around the table and continued on. “There will, unexpectedly, be two additional gentlemen accompanying her, and staying in the house. One is my godson, who is admittedly an exceedingly well-favoured and eligible gentleman with a generous fortune and estate. The other man is Miss Bingley’s brother, who is, I am told, also very wealthy, and who hopes to be among the landed gentry one day soon. It is extremely important that despite the gentlemen’s manifold attractions, you ladies should not pursue Mr Bingley, nor my godson Mr Darcy, whilst they are here. They are only staying to assist me with a matter concerning my tenants, and should not be considered part of the house party. If it were not absolutely necessary, they would not be coming during the party at all.”

‘I am certain we have enough eligible gentlemen as it is,’ said Miss Diana Ashford. ‘I have certainly never been in the company of so many eligible men all openly searching for wives in one place. Of course, London is filled with people wishing to marry, but there are so many complications, courting amongst the gossips of society.’ Miss Diana Ashford had experienced a season in town six years earlier, but her penchant for rising early to ride in Hyde Park accompanied by her father’s grooms

had complicated things for her. Rumours had travelled amongst society that she was going to the park early to have pre-arranged trysts with men.

“Obviously you do not possess the right connections in London, or you would have been much more successful, Miss Ashford,” said Miss Winslow snidely. “Those of us with connections find themselves simply surrounded by eligible men.”

“And yet, here you are, paying fifty pounds to find a husband along with the rest of us,” said Miss Dutton. “I wonder why.” Then in an aside to Mr Mercer, “That one thinks she’s a huckleberry above a persimmon? 1 .”

“It can be excessively difficult to form meaningful attachments with the opposite sex when fettered by the expectations of society in London,” said Lord Chesley, as the rest of the table wondered what in the world Miss Dutton’s slang meant. “I enjoy society very much, but I wished for a marriage of affection like the one enjoyed by my parents. Sadly, when you arrive in London, you must only speak with those ladies that society deems are acceptable for your wealth and rank. Then when you do pay the slightest attention to a lady, society immediately pounces upon you and begins to speculate. You cannot bring a lady a glass of lemonade after a dance without speculation, and then the envy and interference of others begins. If you persist, then you find yourself obligated to a woman that you would rather not marry, but society expects you to do so because you took the time to get to know her character, and you ought never to have done so unless you intended to wed the chit. And if you pay any attention to one that society deems beneath you, the women of your rank panic that a man might be lost to a lesser woman, and then the attempted compromises begin.”

“It is not any easier for the ladies, who feel interest in a gentleman, only for him to be scared away by society, because even if he thinks he might like you, he has no desire to marry you only because he danced with you thrice. The best gentlemen get frustrated and give up the entire situation as impossible,” said Miss Crawford.

“Then there are those of us who have no connections, and have never had the opportunity for a season in London. What does a lady in that circumstance do, Miss Penfield?” asked Miss Blackwood spitefully.

“We take positions as governesses, and educate the children of those who degrade us very ill,” said Miss Penfield drily. Miss Penfield had been a governess with no prospects of any kind. The daughter of a parson who left his family with little, she had recently inherited a fortune of thirty thousand from her father’s aunt, a woman whom she had never even met. She was twenty-nine, and the oldest of the female guests. Her gown was of decent quality, but lacked embellishment or adornment. Elizabeth wondered if she preferred it that way, or if the young lady lacked experience choosing clothes.

“Why have you chosen to come to Ever After End, Captain Lytton?” asked Elizabeth of her dinner companion.

“It was a lark for me,” answered the man on her left easily. “My friend Captain Wentworth and I won our share of prize money, and were informed by our admiral that it was high time we found wives. We made a bet, and I lost. Wentworth found a charming wife, I think it was cheating, he went right to his old sweetheart. Since I did not find a wife, I was sent here by my friends. I do hope it’s a fruitful endeavour, I am certain it will be, with all of the feminine beauty we see before us, how could it not? What about you and your sisters, Miss Bennet? How came you to Ever After End?”

“Well, it is a bit of a long story. There are five of us,” answered Elizabeth carefully. “And my father’s estate was entailed, we each only had a thousand to our name upon my mother’s death. My mother was not raised a gentlewoman, so her enthusiasm and fear of the hedgerows gets the better of her, causing her to push us at suitors unbecomingly, and they all run away. Last year, our fortunes changed. I won a lottery from a ticket my uncle gifted me for my birthday, so I now have a portion of my own. Then our father’s cousin unexpectedly decided he had no desire to run an estate. He is

a parson and was not raised to it. He enjoys his situation as it is, so he and my father ended the entail, making my sister Jane the heiress. This raised the fortunes of our younger sisters slightly, and ought to make it easier for us all to find husbands now that we have the means to take care of our own, but my mother's habits die hard. Her behaviour remains the same. When our neighbours who met here, Mr and Mrs Lockhart, told us about this place, I was determined that the two eldest of my sisters and myself should avail ourselves of the opportunity without delay."

"You and Miss Penfield have both been struck by fortune, or so I have heard," said Miss Julia Bertram.

"I never knew my father's aunt, though I am grateful she thought of me in her will," said Miss Penfield. "I came to Ever After End for similar reasons as Miss Bennet, I believe. My good fortune made every single man for ten miles propose, never mind that I had been completely invisible to them before, and the denizens of my village were all too keen to watch the spectacle of my courtships and remark on them. There is a couple in the neighbourhood in which I grew up, a Mr and Mrs Crookshanks, who recommended Miss Darlington's arrangement to me, and I am grateful to have been included."

"I must send a card with my gratitude to Mrs Lockhart and Mrs Crookshanks," said Mrs Darlington. "How kind of them to give such glowing reports of their experience."

"I am curious about the history of Ever After End, Mrs Darlington," said Mary meekly. Her cheeks burned at calling attention to herself.

"I was a parson's daughter from Derbyshire," answered Mrs Darlington. "My father educated the children of a local nobleman, and I became very close with their daughter, Anne, for we shared lessons. It was a connection I would value all of my life, for many reasons, not least because Lady Anne was the kindest woman I have

ever met. I am godmother to her darling boy. I married a parson myself, and we were shocked when a year after our nuptials, we inherited a property from a distant cousin that my husband had never even heard of.

“The cousin had been a gambler, and he allowed his wife to spend far too much upon the beautification of the estate, which was previously called Oakley Court. I detested the name, thinking it was too boring for such a beautiful and romantically set home. My husband was indulgent, and allowed me to change the name to Ever After End. The neighbours were outraged, calling us whimsical and tawdry. We were not welcomed into the neighbourhood for years. One might have thought we had once been shopkeepers. But it mattered little, for there was work to be done to make the estate profitable. Having little ready funds, my husband did his best, and increased the income of Ever After End by the time he passed, but I have struggled to continue the growth of the estate. It brings in enough that I might just about be comfortable here, and get by with few servants, but the house would fall apart if I were to do that, and the estate must continue to improve for the sake of the tenants, who have stayed and worked hard with us for years.”

“It is to yours and your husband’s credit that you did not just sell the place, and purchase something within your means,” observed Mr Elias Brentwood, who was reported to be a reclusive scholar who rarely attended social events.

“We were young, and saw it as a grand adventure, and it was,” smiled Mrs Darlington. “When he passed, I had to do something to keep everything going, and so, the idea of the house parties was born. My friendship with Lady Anne had ensured a great many invitations to visit her lovely homes in Derbyshire and London during my marriage. Our husbands got along well, and hers was a fount of practical knowledge who had assisted Mr Darlington in his efforts on the estate greatly before he died. The association gave me many friends whom I could call upon for assistance. I reached out to Lady Jersey and a number of others in town and around the country for recommendations of people who would pay for such an endeavour, and slowly, I

managed to improve the parties each year. Our first only saw six guests, but four of them were married by the end of that summer!”

“How wonderful that you found a way to achieve your independence, improve your home, and help others all at the same time,” said Jane. “Perhaps we might discuss our experiences in estate management sometime this summer, Mrs Darlington. I have recently begun to make improvements on my father’s estate myself.”

“That would be lovely,” said Mrs Darlington. “I look forward to that, Miss Bennet.”

1 ? 19th century American slang for ‘superior.’

CHAPTER 20

The following morning, Elizabeth and Mary descended the stairs to find Mr Cartwright and Captain Lytton waiting for them along with Elizabeth's footman. "May we escort you ladies on your constitutional?" asked Captain Lytton chivalrously. "I find I cannot lie abed after all of my years in the navy, and would be glad to explore the lovely gardens."

"I intend to walk a great deal farther than the gardens, Captain, but we have no objection to your company," Elizabeth answered with a smile.

Mary took the captain's arm when it was offered, giving Elizabeth a silent look of excitement at having been singled out in any way so soon. Elizabeth took the arm of Mr Cartwright, and set off outdoors, the small group followed by Elizabeth's footman.

As they passed the lake there was a great squawking about by the water, and they looked over to see one of the chaperones, Mrs Higglebottom, running as fast as she was able in her skirts while being chased by an enormous hissing swan.

The lady was giggling and exclaiming, "Barnaby, you rogue!"

"That bird will break your arm one day!" shouted another of the chaperones, Mr Ignatius Wifflethorpe, shaking his head in disapproval as he made his way to the gardens.

"What do you suppose that is about?" Mr Cartwright asked their group.

“One of the chaperones last night, oh dear I forgot her name, told me that Mrs Higglebottom believes that the widowed swan is the reincarnation of her husband, Barnaby.” Mary watched as the lady sped by them, giggling, as the swan returned to the water.

“You cannot be serious.” Mr Cartwright looked after the swan as it departed their vicinity. “That does not make any sense.”

“Perhaps it brings her comfort,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Let us hope that it does not, as the other chaperone suggested, bring her a broken arm.” Captain Lytton turned with Mary away from the water. “Swans are impressively strong. I would hate to see the lady harmed.”

“So Mr Cartwright, please, tell me about your business,” said Elizabeth, as they headed beyond the green into a small lane that headed towards the fields and tenant farms.

“My business is in steam engines,” answered Mr Cartwright easily.

“Truly? Like machine powered ships?” asked Elizabeth.

“Yes indeed, my engines power ships that travel the canals, and are also used in mills, factories, and even in mines, to pump out water,” said Mr Cartwright. “You probably would not like to hear how they work.”

“Indeed I would, I am always interested in edification, even about trade. The world around us is such an interesting place, is it not?” said Elizabeth.

Mary and Captain Lytton walked behind them as Mr Cartwright began an explanation of the steam engine, and how it operated. Elizabeth found the information interesting,

until it would not stop. After an hour, Mr Cartwright would not cease speaking of steam engines, no matter how many times Elizabeth attempted to turn the conversation. She looked back at Mary in a panic, but Mary was enjoying the attention of the captain, who was regaling her with tales of his exploits in the navy.

They returned after an hour and a half of exploring, Mary was fatigued, and the gentlemen went off to do whatever it was that men did in the early mornings. Elizabeth and Mary went to change out of their walking gowns, finding Jane at her vanity putting the final touches on her hair.

“I can see that you two have been up for hours,” she teased. “Have you made a head start on courtships?”

“Perhaps Mary has, but I have heard enough about steam engines to last me a lifetime. I could build one myself,” answered Elizabeth.

“You did invite him to edify you on the subject, Lizzy,” laughed Mary.

“That is a mistake I shall not make again. I thought he would turn the conversation eventually,” said Elizabeth. “How did you find Captain Lytton?”

“I never thought I should be interested in a man in uniform, but he is exceedingly kind and funny,” answered Mary. “Who knows if his interest will continue, or if I was a convenient ear while the other ladies were still abed. It is too early to start having hopes anyway, we know none of these men properly.”

The ladies went downstairs to breakfast. Some of the chaperones were absent, preferring to break their fasts in their bedrooms. There were six of them, and they were all highly interesting people. First there was Major Archibald Bartholomew, a retired officer from the revolutionary wars who had come home with a head injury, and presumably had not been quite right ever since. His family had no desire to

manage him, and his clothes did not match, but he was a harmless man, good-natured, and ebullient. He was the proclaimed chaperone of the gardens, having a great interest in botany. Mrs Darlington warned the guests to request his assistance when cutting flowers in the gardens, for he expended a great deal of labour on the care of the verdure, and was particular about his plants. Mrs Darlington sought his advice on all subjects, and though his answers sounded preposterous, his advice always made perfect sense once one considered the matter.

There were two writers, the first a gentleman in his fifties, Mr Ignatius Wifflethorpe, a scholar who was writing about the history of the local attraction, a work that was published in small volumes, called *Secrets of Avalon - The Unveiling of Glastonbury Tor* . His silver hair had tell tale streaks of the auburn it had once been, and his eyes betrayed the exhaustion of too many sleepless nights spent over his manuscripts. He carried everywhere a battered leather satchel held together with makeshift repairs. His hands and clothing were stained with ink. He had a mischievous wit, and a dry humour that Elizabeth found endearing. He was the chaperone who would be in charge of all tours of the local historical attractions, which in the surrounding villages were many.

Mr Wifflethorpe was rather disdainful of Miss Prudence Larkspur, a romance authoress, age forty-one, who found inspiration amongst the characters and courtships at Ever After End. She carried a small journal and pencil everywhere, making notes and muttering dialogue to herself, much to the bewilderment of the guests. She was rather more particular about her attire than Mr Wifflethorpe, but there were telltale streaks of ink on her hands. She collected souvenirs from the romances of the house parties, pressed flowers, scraps of ribbon, place cards, as mementos in a scrapbook, and though she had written five books already, – four of which Elizabeth had read by monthly pamphlet and loved – she yearned to earn enough to live properly by her pen. For now, she was content to remain at Ever After End with dear Mrs Darlington, who had a penchant for taking in strays.

Lady Millicent Snogswell seemed to be the harbinger of propriety. A formidable spinster with a booming voice and sharp tongue, she obviously prided herself on keeping the young ones proper. She carried a large feathered fan everywhere that she used to swat the young people when she thought they were too boisterous.

Mrs Octavia Higglebottom was a lively and perpetually distracted widow who constantly misplaced her spectacles, leading to mistaken identities and comical misunderstandings. She spent a great deal of time by the lake, harassing a widowed swan that had never taken another mate.

Miss Euphemia Marmaduke was the daughter of a famous music master who left his daughter in penury. The man had been the music master of Mrs Darlington and Lady Anne when he was very young, and Miss Marmaduke had been born his natural child late in his life. Miss Marmaduke's mother died at her birth, and her father, not knowing what else to do with her, had largely left her to the care of a maid, when he was not training her on various instruments. The instruments he had not taught her to play, she had learned on her own from experimentation and practise. The lady gave music lessons to children around the county all year, but in the summer, devoted herself to Mrs Darlington's annual house party. She was emphatic about playing "romantic music" for the guests, and had made plans already to assist Mary with her harp-lute, which the girl had brought with her from Longbourn. Miss Marmaduke was the self-imposed chaperone of the music and drawing rooms.

Of all the chaperones, Major Bartholomew, Mr Wifflethorpe, and Miss Larkspur were present at the breakfast table. Lady Millicent and Miss Marmaduke preferred to break their fast in their rooms, and Mrs Higglebottom was said to prefer enjoying a muffin by the pond with the swan.

Mrs Darlington sat at the head of the table, and the guests sat where they liked. Elizabeth took her seat and smiled graciously when Mr Brentwood offered to make her plate. Jane did the same with Mr Pemberton, and Mary with Colonel Gordon.

Mr Pemberton was a shy young man of about twenty-five who enjoyed poetry a great deal; reading it, quoting it, and writing sonnets. He had a small house in town inherited by a maternal relation, and enough income to provide for a modest family. He was not, according to Mrs Darlington, particular about fortune, which Elizabeth thought was nice, a gentleman who was not always grasping for a dowry to improve his lot.

Colonel Gordon was nearly forty, and had resigned his commission after the last conflict on the continent. He had a gruff exterior, but seemed to be gentle with the ladies. He had some prize money from the wars, and the promise of a family property to manage for a relation, and could support a wife comfortably.

Mr Lawrence Audley paired quickly with Miss Diana Ashford, the two had presumably met on their ride this morning, and were already on their way to being fast friends, or, with luck, something more. Miss Blackwood was seated by Mr Jonathan Whitaker, a quiet, bookish gentleman with a large estate in Lincolnshire, and a reported income of six thousand a year.

Miss Abernathy was seated by Lord Chesley, not because he was interested in her, but because he was a true gentleman who understood that they would all look like fools if they began fighting over the women the first day, and that all of the ladies deserved the respect and attention of the men.

Miss Mary Crawford allowed Mr Alastair Mercer, a man with no estate but a fortune of four thousand a year, to seat her at the table. Elizabeth had learned the evening after dinner that Mr Mercer was a rattle who never shut up, and planned to avoid him if she could. The others paired up cheerfully as well, except Miss Winslow, who appeared discontented with the arm of Mr Fletcher, who grew frustrated by her rebuff, and stalked away.

Mrs Darlington cleared her throat once they were all seated to gain the company's

attention. “As you were all informed in your welcome letters, there will be planned activities a few times a week, in the evening, and during the day, though I will not monopolise all of your time. The rest of your time can be spent as you like. I hope my library has something to delight everyone, the gardens welcome you, and my godson sends a few riding horses each summer for the use of those who did not bring mounts of their own. I encourage you all to get to know Ever After End over the next few days, and perhaps as you do, you will naturally gravitate towards others who enjoy spending their time as you do. Once a week, we will separate the ladies from the gentlemen, while the men participate in manly activities such as fishing and hunting, and the ladies may join me in sewing for the poor basket, or whatever other pursuits that you enjoy on your own.

“The first day, when the weather is fine enough, is usually spent in the gardens. It is often a welcome occupation after spending days in your carriages travelling here. The gardens are extensive, you may tour them, sketch, or rest at your leisure. Shuttlecock may be played on the green, and a grand luncheon will be served al fresco. The harp will be removed to the garden, and if no one wishes to play, Miss Marmaduke will oblige us.”

CHAPTER 21

Ever After End

Near Glastonbury

2 June, 1812

Dear Uncle Edward,

I write to assure you of our comfort at Ever After End. The gentlemen, what we have so far seen of them, have behaved with propriety, and the chaperones are quite friendly and amusing. Mary and I walked out this morning of course, and we were accompanied by Captain Lytton and Mr Cartwright. Pardon my saying so, but if a proposal were to come from Mr Cartwright, I could not possibly accept. After a walk of one and a half hours, I could now build my very own steam engine! I fear that despite my appetite for edification, I lack the proper enthusiasm for his career, though I am certain that someone here will suit him.

I know you did not beg the favour, but I asked Mrs Darlington if there was any place that a city gentleman at leisure such as yourself might enjoy some fishing hereabouts, and she has offered for you to fish in her river. There is a location where the river runs quite close to the road, where her border meets with that of a place called Folly Farm. Some tackle accompanies this note, and Mrs Darlington advises you to have Mr Atkins at the inn send you with a boy to show you the location. If you must waste time sitting around in the country, you ought to have a treat, particularly considering that you are the very best uncle in all of the world.

Hoping you enjoy the delights of leisure,

Your Lizzy

The afternoon of shuttlecock on the green was, as Mrs Darlington promised, the perfect way to spend the day after so many hours and days of travelling. Elizabeth got to know most of the other guests, some quite as well as she wished to. As women with property, Elizabeth and Jane received a great deal of male attention. Even a modest freehold house in London was a great asset to have, and while it may not be the equal of some dowries, Elizabeth's fifteen thousand was an extremely respectable portion. Jane's future inheritance of an estate of two thousand a year was even more attractive, even without Jane's beauty. Jane's beauty was, however, very much present, and blooming as usual, so most of the men spent the day flocking about her.

Elizabeth and Mary enjoyed their share of male attention. Elizabeth, from Mr Cartwright, Mr Brentwood, and Mr Mercer. Mary, from Colonel Gordon and Captain Lytton. Lord Chesley, Mr Pemberton, Mr Fletcher and Mr Whittaker all buzzed around Jane like bees, while the remaining men did not select any particular quarry, only joined the others on the green for good-natured exercise and frivolity.

After playing for over an hour, Elizabeth sat to rest on a blanket for a moment. Perhaps ten feet behind her were Miss Winslow and Miss Blackwood, resting on another blanket with Miss Crawford, Miss Bertram, and Mr Elwood. "I heard the most peculiar thing about Miss Bennet ... though I am certain it is only idle talk," said Miss Winslow.

"Do tell!" exclaimed Miss Blackwood .

"I heard she paid the fifty pounds because she is in trouble , and must marry!" continued Miss Winslow in a hushed tone.

“From who?” Elizabeth said loudly behind the little party, making Miss Winslow jump nearly out of her skin.

“I beg your pardon?” asked Miss Winslow.

“I asked from whom you heard the scurrilous lie about my sister, Miss Winslow,” Elizabeth demanded with a completely straight face.

“Oh... I- I’ve quite forgotten,” stammered Miss Winslow, knowing she had been caught out, and in front of the others too.

“You ought to forget the rest of it then, as well. Unless you wish to claim yourself as the source.” Elizabeth stood and shook out her skirts. “You should just be patient. I have been Jane’s sister all of my life, and she has always been this beautiful. She can only be courted properly by one man at a time, and I assure you, my sister is always proper. She will make her preference known in due course, and the gentlemen will disperse to other ladies. They always do. You have no need to be spiteful. She is a kind person, and cannot help her looks.”

“Hear, hear,” said Miss Crawford, rising and going over to Elizabeth, followed by her friend Miss Bertram. “Miss Elizabeth, have you seen the folly on the other side of the garden? It is simply delightful!” She linked arms with Elizabeth, and along with Miss Bertram, they left the others.

“I do applaud your defence of your sister, Miss Elizabeth. I have known a few pairs of sisters in my time, and not many are as loyal as you,” said Miss Crawford as the three ladies made their way around the garden to the folly.

“I know my sister was never so loyal,” said Miss Bertram. “My sister had to have the best prize for her husband, because she was the eldest, the most beautiful, and had the best dowry. Mine was only half of hers. Then to make it all worse, she could not be

content with the kind and vastly rich husband she had. She would take every prize. Instead of being happy with her lot, she panicked that the more dashing suitor paid court to me after her nuptials, and she had to take him too! She was willing to ruin us all in order to have every man for herself. They never even thought, the pair of them, that they were even harming not only me, but also poor Mary.”

“Jane could never behave like that,” Elizabeth insisted. “She truly is an angel. She would never harm another or even speak unkindly, and I will defend her with my last breath against anyone.”

“You are so fortunate to have such a sister,” said Miss Crawford. “Are the others all as amiable? I understand that there are five of you.”

“Well, none of us could be considered as good and kind as Jane, but all the same, Mary has her merits,” mused Elizabeth. “She used to be rather pedantic, though in recent months, she puts more effort into being amiable. She is certainly kind, though in a different manner than Jane. Mary has greater expectations of her fellow man, and is more likely to see the imperfections of others. My other two sisters are good girls, but they are full young, and have much growing up to do.”

“Have you found a gentleman that you like here yet?” asked Miss Bertram.

Elizabeth laughed. “Hardly. A few of the gentlemen have made themselves agreeable, but I am certain I could not make any selection so soon. We know only what is practical about them so far, nothing about their characters.”

“I agree with you completely, but I would not object to more notice from Mr Mercer,” observed Miss Crawford.

Elizabeth gave another peal of laughter. “It is a good thing that we all appreciate different qualities, or we would be at one another’s throats. I think the gentleman

talks far too much.”

The three ladies explored the folly and gardens thoroughly, and by the time they returned to the others, were fast friends.

CHAPTER 22

Ever After End

Near Glastonbury,

5 June, 1812

Dear Uncle Edward,

I do hope that the best uncle in all the world has enjoyed his time fishing in the country. Will you return to London, or shall you linger in Somerset on the grassy bank of a well stocked river? The last female guest is to arrive today, and everyone is already waiting on pins to see who the last character in our plot is to be.

Jane is still beset by gentlemen, and receives so much attention that she cannot select a suitor to favour, but I keep assuring the other ladies that the men must disperse at some point, as they always do. There are a few men here who must marry with some attention to fortune, but none seem decidedly avaricious.

Once a week, the ladies and gentlemen separate for a day, and two days from now, the men will go fishing and you are invited to join their party. The ladies will remain at home and receive Mrs Darlington's neighbourly callers with her, help sew for her poor basket, and attend our correspondence. Mrs Sprague and Mrs Abernathy have been sent a note inviting them to join us, along with the vicar's daughter. Mary has deemed it an excellent opportunity to practice her harp-lute with Miss Marmaduke.

I feel that I am looking forward to the afternoon, as odd as that seems. The gentlemen are all very nice, and obviously we came to enjoy their company, and we do, but the ice has not broken amongst us as a group, and the expectation, though the chaperones display little interest in our affairs other than to see to propriety, wears on everyone, I think. It will be a relief to escape it for an afternoon.

You should attend the fishing party. Some local men are to attend as well, I believe. The magistrate, the parson, and a few other local gentlemen. Perhaps if you got to know the men from the house party a little, you might feel comfortable returning to London. Do you not wish to spend three weeks with your favourite nieces, Kitty and Lydia?

Your Most Troublesome Niece,

Lizzy

Three days after the garden party, Elizabeth Bennet found Mrs Darlington in the hall. “Good morning, Mrs Darlington, are you well today?”

“I am, Miss Elizabeth, thank you for asking,” the older woman smiled. “I have just received an express from my godson confirming that he arrives today. I did not realise that he was bringing his younger sister with him. I hate to do it, but I must move someone from their room, and I do not know what to do. My niece is accompanied by a close family friend, and they ought to have an apartment with two bedrooms, but the family wing and guest quarters on the second floor are completely full of ladies, and I simply cannot put them on the third floor with the men. ”

“My sister Mary is in a two bedroom apartment with no one in the other room,” said Elizabeth.

“She is the only one I paired that way, it was the only room left in that wing, and I did

not wish to place her too far from you,” said Mrs Darlington.

“Well, there is our solution. I will invite Mary to share my room. Or perhaps one of us will share with Jane,” said Elizabeth. “We have been accustomed to sharing our beds with one sister or another our entire lives.”

“Miss Elizabeth, you did not pay one hundred and fifty pounds to share a bed,” laughed Mrs Darlington.

“Oh pish,” laughed Elizabeth. “I am not so spoiled, I assure you!”

“I could not possibly allow you to share rooms,” said her hostess. “I believe I shall bunk with one of my chaperones. We have never had the call to do so before, but Georgiana may have my room, and we shall open the master’s suite for her friend.”

“Now that I could not possibly countenance!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I would never dream of letting the mistress of an estate give up her rooms when my sisters and I will be quite comfortable sharing as we always do. Indeed, I suspect that Mary was getting lonely by herself. Like I said, we are accustomed to sharing at home, and she has been staying up late with Jane and me every night talking since we arrived. Now she will not be obliged to walk across the hall to return to her rooms in the darkness.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” asked Mrs Darlington uncertainly.

“I assure you that I am,” promised Elizabeth. “And your niece and her friend will be very welcome to join us in our parlour for late night shenanigans.”

“That sounds like just what Georgiana needs,” said Mrs Darlington. “My niece is very shy, and had difficulty making friends at school. She has been very sheltered. Her brother may wish to shield her from the company of the house party, but if she accompanies me during the day, it might be very nice for her to have some young

ladies for her to speak with.”

Mrs Darlington accompanied Elizabeth to speak with Jane and Mary, who were entering the music room. Jane refused to allow Elizabeth to share her bedroom.

“Lizzy paid for all of us to come with her, the least she should receive is her own bed. Besides, I have never shared with Mary before in all of our years as sisters. I believe we must take this opportunity, which may be our last if either of us marry, for that sisterly intimacy,” Jane insisted.

Mary was thrilled to no longer stay in the enormous suite by herself. Perhaps it was silly, because the rooms were so delightfully furnished and decorated, but she was unused to so much space by herself, and the darkness of the empty adjoining room and parlour made her frightened at night. She could hardly wait to move her belongings, and went directly upstairs to see to the matter.

“Miss Bennet, I must find some way to express my gratitude,” insisted Mrs Darlington.

“Point me and my sisters in the direction of your most eligible bachelors, and we will call it even,” Elizabeth teased.

The party guests were on a visit to the market town with Lady Millicent, Miss Larkspur, and Miss Marmaduke when Mrs Darlington’s godson arrived with his party. Theodosia Darlington embraced her godson and kissed his cheek once he climbed down from the carriage and helped his sister. Bingley’s carriage followed with Mr and Miss Bingley. The Hursts had traveled to visit Mr Hursts family estate in Yorkshire.

“How bad is it?” Darcy asked his aunt as they made their way to her private parlour for refreshment.

“The tenant problem?” asked his godmother.

“The house party.” Darcy scowled.

Mrs Darlington laughed. “It is delightful, as always.”

“I am certain that it must be a horrid spectacle. Grasping men and desperate women, all fighting for the biggest prize,” muttered Darcy.

Mrs Darlington patted him on the hand. “I know that the idea of a house full of marriage minded women must alarm you, dear Fitzwilliam, but you must not concern yourself. They are a good bunch this year. And you must give me, and dear Lady Jersey, and my other friends some credit. They would not recommend those who are unworthy. You must learn to give these ladies some respect. They have put forth some degree of effort and expense to place themselves in the paths of men who are actively seeking wives. They have tired of courting skittish bachelors such as yourself under the scrutiny of the gossips in their villages, and many of the men are actually very much like you. I get more quiet, bookish sorts of men who do not get out into society than I know what to do with each year.

“I have warned my guests not to disturb you and Mr Bingley,” said Mrs Darlington. “I did not anticipate your bringing Georgiana, but she and her friend may accompany me while she is here, and she may make as much use of the music room as she likes. You will find a friend in Miss Marmaduke, my dear. But enough about your worries, dear Godson, what about you, Miss Bingley? I am very happy to receive you at Ever After End, and the other guests have been keen to meet the lady who will complete their group. Did you familiarise yourself with the list of guests and their situations?”

“Yes, I did, Mrs Darlington,” answered Caroline. “I confess, I am unsure about this endeavour, but I have been persuaded by my brother and Mr Darcy to give it a chance.”

“We all familiarised ourselves with your guest list, and the list of your chaperones, Mrs Darlington,” said Bingley. “I am certain we will be dining with them each night, Darcy cannot mean to be so reclusive as to dine apart from his aunt and her guests, and so we all made an effort.”

“That is very kind of you Mr Bingley,” Mrs Darlington said graciously. “Georgiana, do tell me about your friend.”

“We met Miss Bates when visiting Mr Bingley in Highbury,” Georgiana explained. “My companion left me, and when I made friends with Miss Bates, we decided to invite her to join our family as my guest.”

“Georgiana decided, she means.” Darcy smiled at his sister. “She decided it all of her own accord, and informed me of her plans in the presence of Aunt Catherine, no less.”

“Did you!” exclaimed Mrs Darlington. “I know you used to fear her, and I cannot say I blame you, for I did as well at your age. What did Cathy say?”

“Aunt Catherine was very approving of my plan, and accompanied me to present my invitation to Miss Bates herself.” Georgiana grinned.

“A high compliment indeed, to both of you,” said Mrs Darlington in approval. “What restored your courage, dear one?”

“Last summer at Ramsgate, I learned that I can trust my instincts, and my brother has helped me to have more confidence in my discernment,” said Georgiana.

“I could not be happier to hear it, my dear.” Mrs Darlington looked over to Georgiana’s friend. “Miss Bates, you are very welcome at Ever After End. I do hope that you will enjoy your visit.”

“Thank you Mrs Darlington. I am sure I will,” agreed Miss Bates, as they all rose to be shown to their rooms.

CHAPTER 23

Considering the availability of many carriages, between Mrs Darlington's own and those of the guests, the journey into the market town was comfortable for all. Their host's library was not inferior, but it had not been significantly updated in some time, and Elizabeth could not live anywhere for two months without a subscription to the library. Miss Dutton fell in with the Bennet sisters as they were handed out of the carriages and followed by Jane's retinue of men to the library.

"The fairy tale place is pretty and all, but I sure am glad we get to escape into the local villages every week," said Miss Dutton companionably. "Then again, here I am somehow on my way to the library instead of seeing the elephant."

"Is there an elephant in Glastonbury?" Mary asked in confusion, as many did when Miss Dutton fell into her slang, which was whenever she spoke.

Miss Dutton stopped and doubled over in laughter. "Not by a jugful! You're funny, Mary! Seeing the elephant means to see all the sights of a new place, especially some of the more exciting sights... like where the gentlemen have their boxing matches."

Miss Dutton always used everyone's first name, even Mrs Darlington. It was no use attempting to explain that it sounded inappropriate to the ears of those she was attempting to persuade to marriage. The lady had little interest in such niceties, but she was forthright and good-natured. Elizabeth liked her, the lady was entirely authentic, though she did wonder if all American girls were so forward.

"You are unlikely to find too much excitement in our company, Miss Dutton, at least

not in the observance of pugilism,” said Jane serenely.

“Pugilism?” asked Miss Dutton.

“Boxing,” Elizabeth supplied as Mr Fletcher opened the door of the library for Jane, and then in a show of unchivalrous behaviour, turned and went in behind her, apparently not thinking of holding the door for the other ladies.

“That one courts like a bull in a china shop,” observed Miss Dutton as Lord Chesley skirted around them to open the door. “Hope she won’t marry him .” They all smiled prettily and thanked Lord Chesley as he went in pursuit of Jane and Mr Fletcher, followed by Mr Pemberton and Mr Mercer.

Elizabeth made her way to the counter, followed by Mr Brentwood, as she often was. It made sense that he courted her, he seemed to be the sort who would appreciate a bookish wife. But Mr Brentwood reminded her a bit of her father. The entire reason he was still unmarried was because he preferred his bookroom to society. Elizabeth loved both, and did not wish to spend her life like her mother, accepting invitations to attend events with her daughters, while her husband stayed at home.

Elizabeth had often wondered how their parents' marriage would be different if her mother had the intelligence that her father seemed to prize in others; if Fanny Bennet had Elizabeth’s intellect for example. Would it have made much of a difference? Mr Bennet never showed himself to require much from his wife since Lydia was born, and no further children came forth. Elizabeth had no desire to marry a man like him, and learn that her husband had no use for her at all once the children came.

Mr Brentwood’s company was not unpleasant, and so Elizabeth enjoyed his conversation, which was interesting and varied. But Elizabeth had known him for less than two days before she knew she did not wish to marry him. She knew that Jane felt the same as she. Somehow, both of them just knew instinctively that the men paying

them attention were not the ones they wished for a connection with, which was why neither of them had encouraged anyone yet.

Jane had rejected all of the men following her in her late night conversations with her sisters, and was slowly attempting to discourage them all from wasting their time on her, in the hopes that the other men in the group might be suitable, if she had the chance to speak with them. But her current group of admirers had yet to take the hint and move onto the other ladies.

Mary was enjoying the notice of Captain Lytton, Colonel Gordon, and Mr Elwood, though each of those men were also getting to know other ladies as well, which was understandable.

“The first two to three weeks of the house party are always rife with uncertainty,” Mrs Darlington assured them all at breakfast this morning. “I hope you did not all expect to come and be instantly struck by true love. It has been known to happen here, but rarely. Keep doing as I advised. Spend your time enjoying the estate, and you will develop affinities with others who have similar interests.”

Elizabeth obtained her subscription to the library, then accompanied the others to the haberdashery, and to browse the wares of the other merchants in the village. She and her sisters combined their funds to purchase one fine quality gift for each of their family, instead of small, inexpensive items from each of them. Miss Dutton separated from them for a little while and visited her aunt at the inn. She returned with a mysterious parcel, refusing to tell them what was inside.

“It is a surprise. I’ll show you one night when the others have retired. Don’t think I can’t hear you carrying on,” she laughed at them. “One night, I will visit you late with a treat, and we’ll wake snakes? 1 .”

“I do hope there are not any snakes in her parcel,” said Mary worriedly. “I never

understand what Miss Dutton means.”

Elizabeth had heard Major Bartholomew ring the gong to warn the guests to prepare for dinner an hour before she met Jane and Mary in their shared parlour. “You look incredible, Jane, is the ice blue silk for someone special?” Elizabeth asked. She hoped there would be a man to shower her sister in jewels one day, for Jane would look even more stunning with an aquamarine pendant at her throat, Elizabeth thought.

“No, but for some reason, I had an uncommon urge to look my very best this evening,” answered Jane. “You look exceedingly well yourself, Sister.”

“Indeed, Lizzy, the salmon taffeta is perfect for your complexion. I wish I looked half so well as you tonight,” agreed Mary.

Elizabeth turned her younger sister to the mirror and rested her chin on her shoulder. “You look every bit as well as I tonight, Mary. Do not doubt yourself, you are a worthy young lady, and a very pretty one too. Your dark hair and eyes are the perfect compliment for this ivory gown, and the red ribbons make you look like Snow White from the fairy tales.”

“For tonight, I shall believe you, and pretend I am the belle of the ball!” Mary turned and hugged her sister. “Thank you Lizzy. You always know just how to make me feel better.”

The ladies made their way down stairs and entered the drawing room. They seemed to be the last present, for the rest of the party seemed to have already been introduced to Mrs Darlington’s private guests. Two gentlemen and three ladies, one very young, one perhaps Jane’s age, and one near fifty, rose as Mrs Darlington made the introductions.

“Godson, I present to you Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, and Miss Mary

Bennet,” their host said. “Ladies, may I introduce my godson, Mr Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire, his sister, Miss Georgiana Darcy, and her friend Miss Bates of Highbury. I also introduce my godson’s friend Mr Bingley, and his sister Miss Bingley, who will be the final member of our matchmaking group.”

Elizabeth observed Jane blush in a manner in which she had never seen her sister do before as Mr Bingley bowed low over her hand, stars in his eyes as he gazed at her as if she were the sun. Men often reacted this way to Jane. Why was Jane so affected by it this time? Finally Elizabeth realised that she was being rude, and turned back to the others and made her curtsy, smiling at the other ladies. Finally, she turned to smile a greeting at the other gentleman, and the very instant that she looked upon him she realised. Here was a man she could be prevailed upon to marry.

1 ? 19th century American slang for ‘to raise a ruckus.’

CHAPTER 24

The dark haired gentleman with piercing blue eyes turned away immediately after barely returning Elizabeth's greeting. Drat, thought Elizabeth to herself. Mrs Darlington told us that he is not for us. He may be handsome, but I must not discomfort him .

Elizabeth took a seat between Miss Dutton and Miss Crawford in the drawing room, hoping for a reprieve from the attentions of Mr Cartwright and Mr Brentwood, if only for a few moments. Mr Bingley was quick to offer Jane his arm, and conduct her to a sofa for two, and the pair fell immediately into conversation.

I wonder if Mrs Darlington informed Mr Bingley that he is not here to court the house guests . Elizabeth thought. Jane's male retinue were all disconcerted over Jane's instant reaction to the new man, and none was more irritable about it than Mr Samuel Fletcher. Mr Fletcher was an exceptionally good looking man; funnily enough, he was very similar to Mr Bingley in looks. Both men were blonde with a touch of strawberry, and lovely blue eyes.

But Mr Fletcher was all wrong for Jane, and would not take the hint. Jane was a quiet person, but she was not unpleasant. Mr Fletcher was not only unpleasant, he was dour, stern, and he pursued Jane with a great deal of imposing energy, even occasionally becoming rather rude to the other men. Jane had done her best to discourage him, but there was no shaking the man.

Mr Bingley, on the other hand, seemed positively ebullient. In no time at all, he had Jane conversing in a lively and animated manner, laughing aloud, her eyes sparkling.

The other men saw immediately that their time in Miss Bennet's pursuit was at an end, at least, all but Mr Fletcher.

Mrs Darlington missed nothing. Elizabeth saw her watching the pair with a great deal of interest, and when she and Elizabeth's eyes met, Elizabeth raised a brow, and Mrs Darlington winked in response.

Mr Darcy seemed to be rather irritated with his friend's conduct. In fact, Mr Darcy seemed to just be rather irritated in general. She recalled Mrs Darlington's explanation that her godson was exceedingly wealthy and eligible, and would not consider attending the house party if his godmother did not have need of him. If he had no need for such marital machinations, and Elizabeth was certain he did not, considering his looks and situation, then it was obvious to her that the man would chafe at the necessity of attending such a party.

On her left, Mary Crawford was laughing at the antics of Mr Mercer, who had not stopped talking since he arrived at Ever After End. Miss Crawford seemed to have a great appreciation for all the man had to say for himself, and gave him a great deal of encouragement.

Bingley was exceedingly quick to offer Jane his arm into dinner, and Miss Bingley smiled at her brother, and shook her head as she accepted Mr Talbot's arm. Mr Darcy escorted his godmother and sister, and as usual, Mr Cartwright was fast to secure Elizabeth's company. Mrs Darlington's seating was informal, so the usual mad dash for seats next to the guest of one's choice occurred, though Mrs Darlington did direct the seating close to her. Darcy sat on her right, and Georgiana on her left.

"Do sit here next to my niece and Miss Bates, Miss Elizabeth, I would very much like for you to become friends," Mrs Darlington directed. "And Mr Bingley, please take the seats next to Fitzwilliam for yourself and Miss Bennet, I would like to include Miss Bennet in our conversation as well."

Mr Darcy's face clouded at Mrs Darlington's instructions, though Elizabeth did not know why. Then, as his eyes darted back and forth between herself, Jane, and Miss Darcy, she understood. Mrs Darlington had told her that Miss Darcy was sheltered. Her guardian did not know Elizabeth or Jane.

Elizabeth had felt the same when the militia entered the neighbourhood in Meryton. Of course, the officers were men, and the danger was very different, but Elizabeth had still worried that they did not know enough about the people with whom her impressionable youngest sisters were forming acquaintances. Mr Darcy's concern was understandable, though still, he ought to trust his godmother, who was obviously taking steps to surround the younger sister of her godson, whom she was kind enough to call niece, with those she trusted.

Further down the table, Mr Fletcher, in a snit about having lost Jane's company to Mr Bingley, had snubbed Miss Winslow in favour of Miss Penfield, though the young man had avoided Miss Winslow since her snub of him at their first breakfast in the house. Mr Whittaker took up the task of seating Miss Winslow as the others took seats about the table. Miss Dutton was seated quite close to Miss Crawford and Mr Mercer, with whom Miss Dutton got along famously, and they often attempted to outdo one another in slang. Miss Dutton always triumphed. Her dinner companion was Mr Pemberton, who paid more attention to Miss Bertram, whose dinner companion was Captain Lytton, as he attempted to lure Miss Crawford's attention from Mr Mercer.

What a tangled web , Elizabeth thought as she eyed the table with interest. One or two pairings were starting to become evident. If Mr Audley and Miss Ashworth were not married by harvest time, Elizabeth would eat her bonnet. The two woke at dawn and rode every morning. They had invited Elizabeth to join them, offering everything from their company, to lessons if it would help her feel more comfortable, but Elizabeth rarely missed her morning walk. She and Miss Audley had, however, tentatively discussed a small and private lesson between ladies on an afternoon when

the gentlemen were off doing gentlemanly activities. Elizabeth thought that perhaps it was possible that another lady might understand her discomfort on such a large beast, and advise her better.

Lord Chesley often escorted Miss Abernathy, though Elizabeth sensed that it was to keep her away from guests like Mr Talbot and Mr Mercer, who Elizabeth regarded as just slightly shy of libertines. Colonel Gordon also accompanied Miss Abernathy as often as he did Elizabeth's sister Mary. It seemed he was drawn to the gentler girls.

Miss Abernathy was naive and entirely without guile, making Jane look worldly. She was nearly too young to be there at all in Elizabeth's opinion, it might have done her good to be out longer, at least in a country society, but if her fortune was only three thousand and a small house, Elizabeth understood her grandmother's wish to see her married without delay, considering that she was very nearly without family.

Mr Brentwood seemed to be left without a dinner partner, considering that Bingley had stolen Jane, and Miss Bates was between Elizabeth and Georgiana. He took it well, seating himself between Lord Chesley and Mrs Higglebottom. Chaperones were scattered about the table. Lady Millicent determinedly seated herself near Mr Mercer or Mr Talbot when possible in order to ensure their propriety, for they discussed all sorts of inappropriate things, such as betting on horse races, and boxing in clubs. She would surely spend the meal swatting Mr Talbot with her fan. Major Bartholomew enjoyed Mr Whittaker's conversation. Miss Larkspur had developed a romantic – in a literary sense – fascination for Jane, and was watching her interactions with Bingley from further down the table, occasionally taking notes.

When the first course had been served, and she was certain her guests further down the table were content, Mrs Darlington began conversation with those closest to her. "Miss Bennet, I have an appointment to discuss my estate matter with my godson tomorrow morning. If you have not yet made plans with any of the other guests, you may join us if you wish. "

“Why would your private matters interest Miss Bennet more than her purpose in attending your party?” asked Darcy rather abruptly,

“Miss Bennet is to inherit an estate in Hertfordshire,” explained Mrs Darlington. “I have invited her to join us in our discussion for the same reason that you invited your friend, because we have conferred about estate management since she arrived, and I believe she would benefit from observing.”

“I have no arrangements for tomorrow, other than an inclination to join my sisters in the music room with Miss Marmaduke, and possibly attend to my correspondence while they practise,” answered Jane. “Mrs Higglebottom has it from Barnaby that it is to rain, and I am told that he is never wrong, so I intended to spend the day indoors.”

“Who is Barnaby?” asked Bingley.

“The swan,” Jane informed him.

“The swan predicts the weather?” Bingley asked uncertainly.

“And he is never wrong, Mr Bingley,” laughed Mrs Darlington. “Miss Bennet, that is excellent news, for I am certain that Georgiana will wish to spend the day in the music room as well, and I know that she will very much enjoy the company of Miss Elizabeth and Miss Mary in my absence.”

“Do you play, Miss Elizabeth?” asked Miss Darcy from around Miss Bates.

“A little pianoforte, and very ill, I am afraid. I do not practise as I ought, preferring the outdoors.” Elizabeth laughed. “But I do enjoy the activity, so I perform with great enthusiasm. My sister Mary loves the pianoforte, though she has always struggled to obtain the skill she would like to display. She has lately begun to study the harp-lute as an alternative, and we have all enjoyed some fun with Miss Marmaduke in the last

few days. Most of the ladies in the house play one instrument or another, so the music room is lively all day. Do you play, Miss Bates?"

"I play the harp. Miss Darcy and I have been practising duets," answered Miss Bates. "I have a niece, Mrs Churchill, of Enscombe, in Yorkshire. She is a marvellous student of many instruments. She studied so devotedly in her youth. I have always been so very proud of her."

"It is a shame she is married, she sounds like she would be a lovely addition to some future house party," said Mrs Darlington. "Mr Bingley, I understand that you are looking for an estate. Have you had any luck?"

"I am not ready to purchase yet," answered Bingley. "Last year I leased an estate that needed a great deal of work in Highbury. I learned much, but it is possible that I may wait to take a bride before I decide on a place. It will either be in Derbyshire, near Darcy, or perhaps within a few hours of town, if I have my way. I do enjoy London. But I suspect my wife might appreciate her say in the matter." The pleasant young man darted a quick look at Jane, who blushed prettily.

"I spend little time in town, myself," replied Mrs Darlington. "But I do hope that you are favoured with good luck when you strike out upon the endeavour. Both marriage, and land ownership."

"Thank you, Mrs Darlington, you are very kind," answered Bingley good-naturedly, then returned to conversing intently with Jane, leaving Mrs Darlington to converse with Mr and Miss Darcy and Mrs Bates, while Elizabeth was left to the endless monotony that was speaking of steam engines with Mr Cartwright. Elizabeth could not help but notice that Mr Darcy watched her intently all through the meal, more so than he did with Jane. Elizabeth wondered at his keen observation, and sensed disapproval emanating from him. She turned away eventually, giving her attention fully to Mr Cartwright, as difficult as she found it.

CHAPTER 25

Later in the drawing room, the ladies had tea while the men spent a half hour in the dining room. Elizabeth found that this was Miss Winslow's and Miss Blackwood's worst moment of the day. The ladies never showed themselves to advantage during that quiet half hour when it was only the women, and the men were not near to hear the worst of their bile.

"Miss Abernathy, wherever did you order that charming gown?" asked Miss Winslow unkindly. "It is so lovely to see how you make the most of your limited means. Such an inspiration."

"Miss Penfield also shows such strength of character in her lack of embellishments," said Miss Blackwood, immediately getting into the spirit of the scene. "I would never have the courage to wear something so simple. Miss Penfield must be so confident! What do you think, Miss Bingley? You seem to be able to afford a proper amount of embellishment."

"Simple my attire may be, but at least I need not fear having my character overshadowed by my wardrobe," answered Miss Penfield in the stern, unruffled way that she always used when responding to Miss Winslow and that lady's only friend at Ever After End.

Miss Bingley looked around at the other ladies, and for once in her life, decided not to fall in with the set she might have once called her friends. She had made a very determined effort since her conversation with Mr Darcy not to be snobbish or to disdain others. Miss Darcy never behaved thus; he and Miss Darcy had positively fled

from Mrs Knightley's acquaintance in Highbury. Miss Bingley had come to the realisation that the only reason Mr Darcy consented to know her was a deep respect for her brother, thus she had been endeavouring to behave more generously, using Miss Darcy as her example. She had already seen a difference in her reception in town last winter.

"I believe some ladies are fortunate not to require such adornment for their merits to be recognised," she said. "The rest of us must gild the lily , and hope for the best."

"Well said, Miss Bingley. Your dress is all that is lovely, Miss Abernathy," assured Elizabeth. "And is it not convenient how plain attire is often surprisingly effective at repelling the company of those one would rather avoid?"

"One would think your younger sister was attempting to repel every man here, so simple are her gowns," smirked Miss Winslow. "Not a scrap of lace!"

"Some ladies seek to eschew vanity, Miss Winslow," bit out Elizabeth acidly. "How kind you are to remind us all that the worst of society value silk over substance."

"Yes, yes, we know, Miss Winslow, you think you beat the dutch? 1 ," interrupted Miss Dutton. "Must be hard to acknowledge the corn that with all your bells and whistles, Miss Mary Bennet still has more beaux than you. I would think a lady the men draw straws not to escort into dinner would know not to throw rocks in glass houses."

The women all turned on the pair of cats, once again Miss Dutton having put them in their place neatly, even though none of them had even understood half of what she said.

When they were joined by the men, the ladies took turns displaying at the instruments. The harp and other small instruments were moved into the drawing room

for just such purpose each evening. Miss Darcy's courage was unequal to displaying in front of the entire house, but there was enough talent to keep the company entertained. Mr Darcy, Miss Darcy, and Miss Bates retired after a little while, Mr Darcy glaring at Mr Bingley, who was blissfully ignorant of his friend's frustration. The carpets had been rolled back, and though tables were available for cards, the young people all enjoyed pairing up and dancing several sets before the company retired. Bingley was the last of the men to retire, not going to bed until he had seen Jane go up the staircase to the second floor, before turning down the hall to find the other staircase that led to the bachelors' wing on the third floor.

Barnaby had been correct, Elizabeth thought the following morning. It was certainly going to rain that day. Elizabeth enjoyed her walk on her own. It did not appear that Captain Lytton's interest in Mary had borne fruit, nor did it seem that Mr Cartwright's attention extended to rain. Elizabeth had no objection to either man's absence, and went out in the company of her footman, who came armed with an enormous umbrella in case the skies opened.

Elizabeth curtailed her walk rather more than she would wish, for though her footman John would keep her head dry, it was not right for her to force him into a drenching in order to cater to her whims. She walked only a half hour before she turned back, taking a different route home. She wondered if Miss Ashford and Mr Audley had gone out on horseback. They were the only enthusiasts as mad as she about their exercise.

Suddenly at the entrance to another path, a large black horse emerged, and nearly trampled her. She just about managed not to scream, for she understood that the last thing that would help the situation would be for her to frighten the horse further. She was still terribly shaken, and took a seat gratefully when Mr Darcy dismounted and led her to a large boulder.

"Miss Elizabeth, you have my apologies! I should have been going slower, but I

thought that with the impending weather, there would be few guests about, particularly so early in the morning,” Mr Darcy said as he assisted her to sit.

“There are a few of us in favour of early morning exercise, though I may be the only one besides yourself mad enough to go out when it is certain to rain.” Elizabeth smiled at him.

“I was familiarising myself with the locations of the boundary problems my aunt has with her tenants,” Darcy explained.

“Ah, so you have a good reason and perhaps you are not so mad as I am, simply a good godson to Mrs Darlington,” Elizabeth observed. She then stood. “I am sorry to have frightened your horse, sir. I am well enough to return to the house.”

“Indeed you should before the skies open, Miss Elizabeth. May I escort you?” he asked. “It is the least I can do after I nearly trampled you.”

“Certainly,” Elizabeth agreed, taking his arm and they walked as his horse followed them. After some minutes, during which Mr Darcy seemed to wish to speak, but knew not how, she opened a conversation. “Mr Darcy, perhaps this might be forward of me, but I wanted you to know I saw your concern when your aunt suggested that your sister spend the day with me and my younger sister. I only thought that I would give you my assurance that I have four sisters, sir, and I know very well what it is to worry. My youngest sisters might be full young, but they are good girls with much growing up to do. My other two sisters who are here with me, we have spent our lives in observance of propriety, so our actions never negatively affect the others. We will not lead her into trouble and want nothing from her but friendship, which is probably your greatest concern.”

“I beg your pardon, but how could you know that?” asked Darcy, looking at her intently.

“Your aunt told me your sister is shy and very sheltered,” Elizabeth pointed out. “You are her guardian, so it has obviously been you who sheltered her. You are also very wealthy; your sister’s dowry must be generous, and she is full young. People must approach you with mercenary intent constantly, and it goes without saying that you must be careful who she associates with. I only seek to assure you that your aunt likely suggested the company of Mary and myself because we are accustomed to the company of younger girls. My youngest sister is Miss Darcy’s age, and we are none of us unkind, nor mercenary.”

“I cannot say that you are wrong, Miss Bennet, so I will only thank you for your acuity,” said Darcy. “I do worry for my sister.”

“Of course you do,” said Elizabeth, as they stepped around a small rut in the path. “My sisters and I cannot compare to your family’s wealth, but Jane and I experienced a change in fortune last year, and it caused everyone we know to treat us differently, or expect something from us, whether it was money or marriage. It did not take me long to learn what it is to worry that my sisters might be used by unscrupulous individuals in order to target my fortune, and my fortune is small indeed compared to many others. You must have a lifetime of such experience.”

“I appreciate your assurances, Miss Elizabeth, your instincts do you credit,” answered Mr Darcy.

They returned to the house just in time to escape the rain, and Elizabeth dashed inside as Darcy went to the stables to tend his horse. Later at breakfast, Mrs Darlington announced that the first rainy day of the season at Ever After End was always spent playing Hide and Seek.

“There are some rules,” the lady informed them. “Ladies and gentlemen must hide and seek in pairs of two, so that no one finds themselves alone with a member of the opposite sex. Only the public rooms on the ground and first floors may be hidden in

or searched, and the doors of all of those rooms must remain open for the entire day. The chaperones will be all about the house. It is always a wonderful way to expend some energy on a day of poor weather, and my guests have always agreed it helps break any remaining ice between the guests admirably. Major Bartholomew is in charge of the house for the day. I shall be in my study with my godson attending to estate matters. The music room is off limits for the game, but Miss Marmaduke will be there with my niece if any ladies would rather practise than play. The game begins a half hour after breakfast.”

When breakfast was over, Jane accompanied Mrs Darlington and the two gentlemen to the study. It was amusing to Elizabeth to see all of the grown men and women running about giggling to play a game many of them had not played since childhood. Elizabeth and Mary played with their Gardiner cousins each year when they came for Christmas, so they did not feel left out when they entered the music room with Miss Darcy and Miss Bates.

Mary spent an hour with them, practising her harp-lute, then Elizabeth encouraged her to go and join the game. Mary had several admirers, and she ought to make the most of her opportunities here. Elizabeth spent the next hours playing, singing, and laughing a great deal with Miss Darcy, Miss Bates, and Miss Marmaduke. The ladies took turns playing duets, and experimenting with the numerous rare instruments Miss Marmaduke kept there that they had never played before. When the gong was rung in the afternoon, indicating it was time to dress for dinner, the ladies were by then fast friends, and on first name terms.

1 ? 19th century American slang for ‘better than others.’

CHAPTER 26

Mary wandered from the music room to find Miss Abernathy and Lady Millicent in the drawing room. “Oh, Miss Mary! Do say you will hide with me; Miss Penfield has tired of the game and gone to her rooms. I am the odd woman out!” Miss Abernathy rushed over and grasped Mary’s hand the moment she entered the room.

“Go along, the pair of you, and mind, do not find yourself alone with a man!” Lady Millicent sniffed. “Theodosia says these games break the ice, but I say they are a terrible snub to propriety.”

The young ladies rendered their solemn promise to stay together, and departed to the first floor, where they found what appeared to be an abandoned parlour. “We have split up; ladies versus the gentlemen,” Miss Abernathy whispered loudly. “The ladies are currently hiding, and the gentlemen are seeking them.”

The two ladies quickly found hiding places, Mary under a small table covered with a tablecloth, Miss Abernathy in a large cabinet. They waited for ten minutes, mostly in silence other than Miss Abernathy’s occasional nervous giggle. Less than a quarter hour passed before they heard the voices of two gentlemen approaching the parlour .

“This is terribly snug, I cannot imagine a pair of ladies passing by this delightful little room.” Mary heard Captain Lytton’s voice as he entered the parlour.

“Well spotted, Lytton, a search of this parlour is bound to find success.” Lord Chesley’s voice followed the first man into the room. He passed close by the little table beneath which Mary was hiding. Her heart pounded. It was no wonder hide and

seek was a popular activity with Mrs Darlington's guests. She felt slightly ridiculous, but at the same time, she had never felt so exhilarated.

"Do you suppose? No, it is impossible that anyone would consider this very obvious cabinet, it cannot be so easy," Captain Lytton said. Mary heard the cabinet door open, followed by a shrill scream of excitement from Miss Abernathy upon being discovered.

"Now where there is one of you, there are bound to be more," growled Lord Chesley good-naturedly as he prowled the room. "Where is your friend, Miss Abernathy? We have ways of making you talk."

"Oh no, my lord! I will never betray my companion, not if you boil me in oil!" Miss Abernathy giggled excitedly. "Oh, Miss Mary, your feet are showing under the tablecloth!"

"Caught!" Lord Chesley cried as he raised the other side of the cloth and handed Mary out. "I see that you joined us after all, Miss Mary."

The little group returned to the drawing room to find the other ladies and gentlemen waiting to start another round.

"Now 'tis the ladies turn to seek!" Miss Dutton chortled. "You gentlemen don't stand a chance!"

"Who is missing?" Mary asked, looking about. "It seems like there are fewer ladies than there ought to be."

"Only your sisters." Miss Dutton pointed at the clock. "You men have a ten minute head start, and then we gals will have you on the run." The men left while the young ladies waited and made conversation amongst each other.

Ten minutes later, Miss Dutton linked arms with Miss Ashworth and announced, “Now we’ll show ‘em who’s best at seeking! I’m surprised when a man finds anything! My Ma always said Pa would lose his head if it wasn’t stuck on by God himself.”

Mary and Miss Abernathy followed Miss Crawford and Miss Bertram into the library. From behind a curtain they could hear Mr Mercer talking to himself.

“I do believe this is an excellent hiding place. Quite ingenious, if I do say so myself. Though perhaps too obvious? No, no, the ladies will never suspect me here!”

“Shut up, Mercer! You’ll bring the whole lot of them down on us!” hissed Mr Whittaker from behind a bookcase.

Mary and Miss Abernathy left the library as Miss Crawford and Miss Bertram exposed their prey to a great deal of laughter, Mr Mercer declaring that the ladies were blessed with exceptional strategic genius. Next, they entered the ball room, which was mostly empty, aside from some furniture that was stored there when the room was not in use.

Miss Ashford and Miss Dutton entered behind them and began an energetic search of the stored furniture, behind curtains, and in cupboards. Miss Dutton grasped the lid of an impossibly small trunk.

“A man could not possibly hide in there!” Miss Abernathy trilled.

“I beg to differ!” Miss Dutton lifted the lid and all of the ladies burst into giggles to find Mr Fletcher cramped in an undignified position in the trunk.

Mr Fletcher struggled out of the trunk amid the peals of laughter from the ladies. “I said from this very morning that this stupid game is a ridiculous waste of time!”

“Who could possibly be hiding here!” exclaimed Miss Ashworth as she pulled open the door of a cupboard near a servants’ entrance, revealing Colonel Gordon, nearly doubled over in his attempt not to laugh.

“How is one possibly to engage in the serious business of finding a wife when one must demean oneself in such a fashion?” Mr Fletcher said in frustration as he quit the room in a fit of vexation.

“Come on, Fletcher! Do not be like that!” laughed Colonel Gordon. “It is only a bit of fun!”

Mary and Miss Abernathy moved on and returned to the ground floor. They wished to find Lord Chesley and Captain Lytton, and repay them for capturing them earlier. They ran into Mrs Higglebottom who was wandering in a hallway.

“Oh Prudence, you are a dear,” the older lady said to Miss Abernathy, mistaking her for Miss Larkspur. “I promised Theodosia to keep an eye on the hide and seek, but I have lost my spectacles again.”

“I am Miss Abernathy, but we will help you, Mrs Higglebottom,” promised Miss Abernathy, gesturing to the two servants down the hall. “Let us ask one of the footmen for assistance.”

“Oh thank heavens, Thomas always knows where to find them.” Mrs Higglebottom headed towards the footmen standing across from one another in the hall. “Thomas, do run above stairs and see if my spectacles are beside my bed.”

The footman’s lips curled slightly, and it looked as if he was attempting desperately not to laugh. Mary noticed that the buttons on his livery were done up wrong, and then made eye contact with Lord Chesley, who could hold in his hilarity no longer, and burst into hearty laughter. The footman across the hall turned out to be none other

than Captain Lytton, who was now holding desperately onto a side table as he indulged in his mirth.

“Whatever is so funny?” Mrs Higglebottom asked as the young ladies joined in the laughter. Once she looked properly and realized even without her spectacles that the footman was indeed a guest, she joined in their amusement. At length, the footman Thomas was located, who reminded Mrs Higglebottom that her spectacles were in her pocket, and they all parted eventually to return to their rooms.

That evening, Miss Winslow and Miss Blackwood refused to come down for dinner, taking trays in their rooms. They were offended by having missed lunch; they had been hiding since the very first round of hide and seek, and no one had bothered to find them or notice they were missing, even at the noon meal. Mrs Darlington thought it was unfortunate, but said nothing else about the two ladies that none of the men wished to court.

CHAPTER 27

Gracechurch Street,

London

12 June, 1812

Lizzy!

Uncle returned to us two days ago, tanned and in great spirits after his time by your host's river. My aunt says you spoil him, but I know that she is happy for him that he had time to enjoy some fishing while he was from town. He brought Kitty with him, having stopped for her in Meryton before returning to London, as planned. My aunt has all manner of outings arranged for us, though it is more exciting for Kitty than me. I have been in the city these three months, and have seen a great deal already, but Kitty has seen nothing. I am ever so much more sophisticated than she after my time here. Ha!

We are to go to the theatre tonight, and the gown my aunt had made for me as a gift at her modiste is divine. Kitty's is nothing to it, though she loves hers anyway, for it is not white. I will allow that she looks very well in it, do you not agree it is a good colour for her? I sent sketches of both of our gowns, and I coloured them with watercolours. You must write back with your agreement that my gown is finer.

My friend from school has invited me to stay with her family in London for the Christmas holidays. Aunt Gardiner is to call upon her home with me and Kitty next

week to determine if they are trustworthy, and they and Mama will decide if I am to go. Lizzy, please write to my aunt and tell her that I simply must be permitted to visit Miss Brockway. I shall die of embarrassment if I am not permitted to go.

Are you married yet?

Yours,

Lydia

A week later, Elizabeth felt no closer to meeting her future partner than before. Mr Brentwood had moved on after Elizabeth rebuffed him gently. He was now showing attention to Miss Abernathy and Miss Penfield. Miss Penfield was also receiving attention from Mr Fletcher, who seemed to be a good match for her, though it was quite obvious that she was his second choice to Jane, upon whom he had not given up. Elizabeth hoped Miss Abernathy would not accept Mr Brentwood, for a better recipe for a union like that of Elizabeth's parents she had never encountered.

Mr Cartwright was still following her about assiduously. Elizabeth wished she knew what it was about her that interested him. She attempted to make him understand that her interest in steam engines had long since waned, and that if she had her way, she would learn no more about them as long as she lived. The man was oblivious, and refused to take the hint.

Mr Whittaker had shown her some interest, once he had given up on Jane. Elizabeth liked him well enough, and she found his conversation engaging, but she did not believe that a match was in the making. Men, it seemed, took far longer to be dissuaded from their enthusiastic first impressions, so he followed her about in an effort to impress her with descriptions of his library and the park around his home .

Elizabeth smiled at her younger sister as they were handed into her carriage by Mr

Elwood, who had taken an interest in Mary after she expressed an interest in his charitable efforts. Mary, ever pious, had shown great enthusiasm for his work with London's parish schools, as well as his endeavours with wounded officers returning from war, and orphanages. Mary also continued to receive notice from Colonel Gordon, though Captain Lytton had abandoned her to pay court to both Miss Crawford and Miss Bingley, who Elizabeth could tell preferred the attentions of Lord Chesley.

The company was on their way to Glastonbury Abbey, for a tour guided by Mr Wifflethorpe, whose expertise lay in the legends of the place. The Darcys and Mr Bingley were to accompany them; Mr Bingley unable to spend an afternoon away from Jane, and Miss Darcy wishing to see the ruins with her friend. With the carriages of the men added to the conveyances, the journey was exceedingly comfortable.

When they arrived, Elizabeth took the arm of Mr Whittaker and smiled as Mr Bingley handed Jane out of his carriage and tucked her hand in his arm with a brilliant smile. Jane blushed with pleasure, and Elizabeth prayed that her sister might finally have met her match, even if he had not been intended for the guests.

Elizabeth observed Mr Darcy scowl at her elder sister and his friend as he assisted his godmother, sister, and his sister's friend from his carriage. Mr Darcy had joined her on her walks two more times since he had arrived at Ever After End, though Elizabeth had not yet determined what his objection was to his friend and her sister forming an attachment.

Each time they encountered one another, he was quick to dismount and offer her his arm, though his conversation was awkward and halting. She determined that the man was not above his company, but only excessively shy. Once she endeavoured to find a subject that he was comfortable with – such as his home, his tenants, and books, their conversations were engaging and enjoyable. He still watched his sister and her

interactions with the other ladies closely, though he avoided conversation with his godmother's guests assiduously when he was in the house. She saw him observing her often, and wondered what he meant by it, although she lacked the courage to ask him.

Elizabeth was rather mortified about it, for she and all the others had been warned away from the man by Mrs Darlington, but she was well on her way to admiring him in earnest. Elizabeth was a slight, petite woman, and had never been attracted to such a tall man before, but his looks and his form were very much to her taste, and his devotion to his sister and godmother was endearing. She learned that he had lost his parents and took responsibility for all his concerns at a young age. It was easy to understand his resulting reserve and seriousness, though she was determined to overcome her admiration. He was not for her.

“Welcome, my friends, to a place where history hums beneath your feet, and legends whisper through the very air you breathe. This is Glastonbury Abbey – no mere collection of ruins – but a sanctuary where myth and truth entwine, echoing across centuries!” Mr Ignatius Wifflethorpe exclaimed loudly as he led the group to the ruins.

“This is the highlight of Mr Wifflethorpe's year, my dear,” Mrs Darlington said to Miss Darcy as that lady meandered behind on the arm of her godson. Georgiana and Miss Bates nodded and followed their guide attentively.

“Here, beneath these weathered arches, stood one of the greatest monasteries in all of England!” Mr Wifflethorpe continued. “Imagine the solemn footsteps of monks tracing paths each day through these cloisters, their chants rising like mist over Somerset. Picture pilgrims arriving in droves, seeking solace, healing, and perhaps... a glimpse of something greater!”

Mr Darcy watched quietly as Miss Elizabeth Bennet listened attentively to their

guide, who proceeded to edify his audience. “But Glastonbury is more than stone and mortar. It’s a living, breathing story,” Mr Wifflethorpe went on. “They say Joseph of Arimathea, bearer of the Holy Grail, planted his staff upon Wearyall Hill – and there it blossomed into the sacred Glastonbury Thorn. Can you feel the weight of that legend pressing down upon this land?

“And of course, the great King Arthur himself is said to rest here. In 1191, monks uncovered what they believed to be the tomb of Arthur and Guinevere, nestled in this very ground. Was it truly the Once and Future King, or was it the Abbey’s bid to draw the gaze of the world? No matter. The power of the tale lingers, as if Arthur’s spirit refuses to fade, waiting – always waiting – for a time when he is needed once more.”

There were murmurs of appreciation as the members of their party broke up to tour the ruins in smaller groups. Mr Bingley and Jane were in the company of Mary and Mr Elwood. Mr Whittaker escorted Elizabeth, though she longed to be in the company of her sisters or perhaps Miss Crawford and Miss Bertram, who were a great deal of fun, even if one must listen to more of Mr Mercer than one liked when accompanying them.

“The atmospheric conditions are most agreeable this morning, Miss Elizabeth,” The reserved man attempted haltingly. “Though one cannot put too much belief in the predictions of that ridiculous swan, I believe we can indeed set faith in the likelihood of continued fair skies.”

Elizabeth smiled politely. “Indeed, one could hardly ask for finer weather.”

Mr Whittaker seemed to struggle for another topic, and tried again. “I recently undertook a study of Dr Johnson’s Dictionary, Miss Elizabeth. His definitions are most enlightening, particularly his entry on the word: lexicographer. Are you fond of lexicons?”

“I have used the dictionary my share of times, but I cannot claim that I sit down to study it,” Elizabeth confessed. “Although I have seen my father read the dictionary for pleasure.”

“I knew your father must be a scholar, Miss Elizabeth, for only a scholar could have nurtured such a quick mind as yours.” Elizabeth had impressed Mr Whittaker some nights before during a game of wordplay, and he had been testing her education and knowledge ever since. Elizabeth found it tiresome. She too, wished for an intelligent mate, but one must avoid outright quizzing the knowledge of one’s suitors.

Happily, Mr Brentwood chose just that moment to pass by with Miss Penfield, and Elizabeth said loudly, “Mr Brentwood was just discussing Dr Johnson yesterday, I believe. Mr Brentwood, are you fond of lexicons?”

“Of course,” answered Mr Brentwood seriously. “There is much satisfaction to be found in the precision of words. One might argue that the crafting of a sentence mirrors the artistry of embroidery, though naturally with less immediate application to household management.”

“Have I told you that I possess in my library a copy of the original Latin-English Word Book by Sir Thomas Elyot?” said Mr Whittaker in a superior manner.

“Have you?” exclaimed Mr Brentwood in excitement. “I once had the good fortune to hold the later version by Richard Mulcaster!”

“I owe you for that.” Miss Penfield smiled at Elizabeth as they left the two men debating the merits of two word books published in the sixteenth century. “Everyone thinks that because I was a governess, that I must be a bluestocking.”

“I take it that a scholar is not to your taste, then.” Elizabeth returned the woman’s smile as they walked. “What sort of man are you looking for?”

“A serious one, if I can manage it.” Miss Penfield rolled her eyes. “A scholar will bore you to death about the same few topics forever; whatever subjects interest him . I should rather eat mud than listen to a man’s views on the downfall of the Roman empire until I die.”

“I always thought a scholar might suit me, and then when I arrived, I learned how similar they all seem to be to my father, who is only serious about matters that interest him,” Elizabeth acknowledged.

“Precisely!” Miss Penfield insisted. “They are serious about their books. I wish for a husband who is serious about his duty.”

“I cannot argue with you,” Elizabeth agreed. “Although, I also hope that my husband, whoever he is, will be intelligent, and enjoy his books to an acceptable degree once his duties are fulfilled.”

“I could not care less what the man’s interests are. He can collect butterflies, or study botany for all I care, as long as the man understands his duty and puts it above all else!” Miss Penfield continued. “I wish for a genteel husband, but I have had enough with lackadaisical masters and their frivolous sons. I even lost a position, because one family was so bad about neglecting their duties, they could not afford me anymore. The gentleman ignored his estate and his wife in favour of his books for too long. These scholars can often be as dangerous to their families’ fortunes as gamblers. What does it matter if you are clever if you will not apply it to your duty?”

“I think you are right,” Elizabeth said. “My father could have added to our dowries if he would only have applied himself more to the estate. He could have set something by for our mother, or built her a dower house. Instead he sat and read books, my whole life. What he did not lose on cards, he spent on books.”

“Well I have no idea if I will be mistress of an estate or not once I am married, but

landed or not, I wish for a man serious enough to take his duty to heart,” Miss Penfield said decidedly. The ladies parted, and Miss Penfield hurried towards Mr Fletcher, who was standing alone watching them.

I do hope Mr Fletcher is serious enough for her , Elizabeth thought as she pressed on, listening to the murmurs of the groups examining the ruins around her. I find him far too serious for my taste.

She had seated herself some distance from the abbey and was creating a memory of it in her mind when Mr Darcy approached her. “Do you enjoy the view, Miss Elizabeth?”

“I find it charming.” she smiled at him sincerely. “As I always do when I travel, I am wishing that I drew, for then I could sketch a picture to take home with me as a keepsake. Sadly, though I did persevere for some years in my youth, I have not the talent. ”

“Your sisters do not draw?” he asked in surprise.

“My youngest sister draws, but she is in London visiting my aunt and uncle.” Elizabeth made room on the stone bench she was occupying. “Do make yourself comfortable, sir.”

“Just one moment, Miss Elizabeth.” Mr Darcy turned and made his way to his sister who was sketching with Miss Bates. He bent down and whispered in her ear, and she smiled widely and nodded. He straightened and patted his sibling affectionately on the head and returned to Elizabeth.

“Your sister is delightfully accomplished,” she said to him as he seated himself next to her. “I have never seen a young lady with such a thorough knowledge of music, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages. You must be very proud of her.”

“I am, though those are not the only accomplishments I hope she will learn, those are just the ones that she was fortunate enough to be blessed with. They are not accomplishments I consider necessary,” answered Darcy. “To all this, she must add something of grace and elegance to her air and manner of walking. She must be a gentle and kind mistress to those who depend upon her. And she must improve her mind by extensive reading. So far, she does very well. But she is young, and she is naturally kind and gentle. The rest will come naturally as she matures.”

“You perceive a great deal in the word accomplished!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I have never seen such a woman. She would certainly be a fearsome thing to behold.”

“Not so fearsome, I think,” replied Mr Darcy. “Radiant, I think, would be a better way to describe her.”

Elizabeth smiled uncertainly. Mr Darcy never sent her the same signals. One time they would meet, and he would seem attentive and interested, in a very intense manner. Then they would meet again, and he would be intensely distant. He seemed to be trying to tell her something now, but he could not mean to compliment her. She was certainly no accomplished woman, not by anyone’s measurement.

They looked over and saw his sister waving for his attention, and he took his leave of her. She observed him look at his sister’s sketchbook and compliment her, as Elizabeth rose and made her way to join her sisters and their group. She followed them for the rest of the day, and just before she was handed up into her carriage, Miss Darcy rushed up to her and thrust a drawing of the abbey at her.

“Elizabeth, a keepsake of your visit here,” she said breathlessly.

“Oh, what a darling you are, Georgiana!” Elizabeth exclaimed as she admired the drawing. “Thank you so much for your kindness.”

“You are very welcome, Miss Elizabeth.” Miss Darcy curtsied and turned away.

“Georgie!” Elizabeth called after her. “Please, thank your brother for his kindness as well.”

Miss Darcy gave her an incandescent smile, and returned to her carriage with Miss Bates.

CHAPTER 28

The party often paired off to dance a few reels each evening, but once a week, Mrs Darlington arranged a proper dance for her guests. There were no society rules attached to these dances. For example, a couple could dance as many times as they chose, more than three times even, and nothing would be said. A lady could decline to dance with a gentleman and still dance with others, and no one would judge her for it. Every other dance was the waltz.

Mrs Darlington certainly knew how to give her guests the opportunity to enjoy each other's company without expectations being raised by society, Elizabeth observed to herself as she made her way downstairs with her sisters. She saw no harm in the departure from such rules with proper chaperones present.

There were two others present. Mrs Darlington liked to invite her parson and his daughter on such evenings. They did not concern themselves with the number of times her guests danced with each other, and it gave Miss Irving the opportunity to socialise outside of her own neighbourhood. Mrs Darlington always hoped the spinster would meet someone at one of her parties and make a match. Miss Irving was twenty-seven, and with a dowry of only five hundred, never had a suitor .

“Look at the flowers, Lizzy, Mrs Higglebottom told me that they are made of silk, so that Mrs Darlington need not empty her gardens on our dances each week. The ladies spent an entire winter creating them.” Mary pointed out the decorations to Elizabeth, who was duly impressed. The Bennet ladies all chorused a compliment to their hostess as they entered the room.

“Enjoy yourself tonight, Mary dear.” Elizabeth pressed her sister’s hand as they parted. “It has brought me great joy to see you appreciated as you deserve here.”

“Who would believe that I of all the ladies would have two suitors ?” Mary giggled.

“I would believe it, and I cannot wait to learn who will win your heart.” Elizabeth waved her sister off as the music started, and Colonel Gordon approached to claim Mary’s hand.

Elizabeth danced the first with Mr Cartwright, but thereafter she was popular enough that her hand was sought by most of the gentlemen over the course of the evening. She was one who they felt comfortable dancing with in between paying attention to the ladies they truly wished to court. Elizabeth had no objection to making conversation with most of them, even though she had no romantic hopes. It is better than attending an assembly in Meryton, she thought. In Meryton, all of the men take the opportunity of a dance to persuade me to invest in something, and the women act as if I behave like a trollop each time I take to the floor .

She accepted Mr Elwood’s arm into supper, understanding that while Colonel Gordon was courting her sister, Mr Elwood would use the opportunity to learn more about Mary from Elizabeth.

“Mr Elwood, I understand that you are very passionate about your charities. I have accompanied my aunt for her charitable outings in London many times. What endeavours do you favour with your time?”

“I enjoy my work with the wounded officers most, Miss Elizabeth.” The man looked surreptitiously over at Mary as he spoke. “Although, I also volunteer at several schools, to teach special skills, and I am on the board of two orphanages. ”

Elizabeth listened to the man speak of his interests throughout the meal, and

answered his questions about her sister, noticing that Mary looked over to Mr Elwood nearly as often as he looked at her.

“May I have this dance, Miss Elizabeth?” Mr Darcy bowed in front of her as she re-entered the ballroom after supper.

“You may,” answered Elizabeth in surprise as she took his arm. Why should Mr Darcy wish to dance with her? A waltz started, and her cheeks flamed. Oh heavens, was her countenance to betray her admiration for the man against her will? She blushed wildly as she fought to keep her reaction to him under control.

He had so far only danced with his sister, Miss Bates, and the parson’s daughter, presumably as a kindness to his aunt. Elizabeth darted a glance at Mrs Darlington and saw her host watching them with interest, and blushed further as she noticed his sister and his friends doing the same.

If Elizabeth thought drawing the man out on a walk in the early morning was difficult, it was nothing to making him speak on a dance floor in front of a room full of people.

“This is a very pleasant waltz,” Elizabeth tried.

“Oh yes, most invigorating.” Mr Darcy avoided her eye.

After a moment, Elizabeth tried again. “It is your turn to say something, Mr Darcy. I spoke of the dance, now you ought to make a remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.”

“Whatever you wish to hear, Miss Elizabeth, consider it said.” Mr Darcy smiled at her cheek.

“Very well then. That will do for the present. Perhaps by and by, I might observe that these private dances are much pleasanter than public ones. But for now, we may remain silent.” She did her best not to think about the muscles of his arm moving under her fingers as they spun about the floor. She was beginning to feel dizzy. Traitorous was her countenance tonight!

At length the dance ended, and Elizabeth escaped onto the terrace. “Lizzy, are you all right?” Jane followed her outside swiftly. “You looked almost unwell while you were dancing with Mr Darcy.”

“I am so mortified, Jane!” Elizabeth cried. “Mrs Darlington told us not to chase her godson, and I cannot help it. I admire him, and tonight, I could not hide it.”

“Is that what is wrong?” said Jane. “Lizzy, I could not fathom what was amiss with you, but you did not appear to be in love with the man. You looked quite ill.”

“How wonderful, instead of betraying my feelings, I only managed to look sick and deranged,” Elizabeth giggled strangely.

“Lizzy, this is not like you.” Jane put her hand over Elizabeth’s on the railing. “What have I missed?”

“He is very nearly perfect, Jane.” Elizabeth averted her gaze. “He is the man who, in intellect and temperament, would most suit me.”

“Nearly perfect?” Jane’s eyebrows raised. “Lizzy, It is unlike you to be so interested in someone so distinctly unpleasant. I hope you do not believe that his wealth would make you happy, when he is such a disagreeable person. He has scarcely spoken to anyone since he arrived.”

“It is him being unpleasant and unkind that I refuse to believe,” Elizabeth objected.

“And his wealth is likely the cause of his behaviour rather than the cause of my feelings. Consider how rich he is, Jane. Can you truly believe that his standoffish behaviour does not stem from a desire to protect himself from those like Aurelia Winslow? Think of all Mr Bingley told you of him. His parents died when he was young. He has had the burden of an enormous estate since he was a young man. Looking after the servants, and the well being of so many tenants, not to mention he has raised his sister alone since she was a tender age, and look at what a delightful girl she is. How could he not be serious? Life is a serious business for a man like him. Look at how Miss Winslow throws herself at him. I bet a man like him, everyone wants something from him; marriage, money, connections. I am certain nearly every person he has met since he left university has tried to manipulate or use him in some way. How could he not be guarded and reserved? Look at what you and I have endured since our fortunes changed, and tell me that if they were multiplied ten times over, that it would not make you a very guarded person.”

“It is not often a lady wishes a gentleman was not wealthy. Lizzy, you are not making sense,” Jane tried to reason with her.

“He is too eligible , Jane! Too far above me,” Elizabeth said. “That is why our host warned us away from him. Ten thousand a year and very likely more! I might as well fall in love with one of the crown princes, for all the good it might do me. Two or three thousand a year would be perfection indeed. Oh I am kidding myself, for a man such as he, I would learn to cook and scrub floors; instead, I must remind myself not to fall in love each time I see him, because the matter is hopeless.”

“Without his wealth, he would hardly be the same person,” Jane pointed out sensibly.

“Perhaps it is true that he may have found fewer opportunities for education and knowledge, perhaps his experience of the world might be less extensive, but I believe we all possess particular qualities that remain the same no matter our background. Perhaps he would be more open, protecting himself less from society. But his

inquisitive nature, his character, which I sense to be honourable and good, would be the same. Do you believe that if we had great wealth, that you or I would be drastically altered? Our education might have given us more refinement, but I believe we would be the same in essentials.”

“Lizzy, I have never seen you like this before. It is so out of character for you to create such an imprudent attachment.”

“It is certainly not an attachment, Jane, nor will it ever resemble one. It is only admiration. And it is no matter,” Elizabeth insisted, “He is not for me, and I am not formed for melancholy. I will mope for a time, but I'm sure I shall rally. But I will always remember him as the most intelligent – no – the most interesting man of my acquaintance. I will pray for him. I will pray that the detestable Miss Winslows of the world never catch him. That when he does choose a wife, that she is someone happy and kind. Someone who can help him with his burdens, and make him smile.”

On the other side of the door, Darcy leaned his head against the faded wallpaper. He had intended to follow Miss Elizabeth outside, for Miss Bennet was correct, she had looked ill, but then her sister had reached her first. Rather than suffering from illness, Elizabeth was instead struggling with her feelings. Feelings for him .

He turned and saw his godmother behind him, clearly having overheard the same conversation. “I have heard of many wishes that ladies have entertained in your quarter, Godson, but never have I heard of one wishing you less wealthy so that you might be more attainable as a person .”

Not knowing how to respond, Darcy turned away and made to leave his godmother when she spoke again, causing him to pause. “I believe, Fitzwilliam, that you have met the lady who, in intellect and temperament, would most suit you. Your mother would be overjoyed.”

CHAPTER 29

Two weeks after arriving in Glastonbury, leaving aside his confusing ruminations about Elizabeth Bennet, Darcy was in a foul mood for other reasons. He had expected his aunt's tenants to lay down immediately once a powerful man turned up to end their shenanigans. Some of them had given her trouble before, shortly after her husband died ten years ago. His father sent him to manage the problem, and though he was not yet out of university, the farmers immediately ceased their nonsense once they learned that Mrs Darlington was not without protection.

This time, the farmers held their ground. Over the years, Mrs Darlington had taken on a number of new tenants, so these were not the same men who had been loyal to Mr Darlington. Some of them were the sons of those men, others were new families entirely, but what mattered was that the rents were overdue, and the men knew that their landlady needed the funds, hence them attempting to get their way before they paid her anything. Darcy had warned them that they were in danger of losing their leases and in breach of their contracts. He reminded them they had families to feed and attempting to squeeze the landowner that owned their land was a dangerous gamble .

The men were willing to risk it, uncaring that there were six of them creating trouble over boundaries and the best fields, and that there was simply no way to please them all. They seemed to believe that just because their landowner was a woman, they could demand the best fields or refuse to pay. Fences were ripped down, crops had been damaged by loose cattle, and fights had broken out between families over the damages. Mrs Darlington acted as her own steward for years, but unfortunately, these men refused to be cowed by a woman and were disrespectful in the extreme,

expecting that if they held out long enough on the rents, that she would be weak and desperate to negotiate with them.

One of the tenants was actually attempting to take over land that Mrs Darlington did not even own. The field in question was over the border, belonging to Folly Farm. The magistrate had never forgiven Mrs Darlington for changing the name of her estate to something so silly and whimsical, and so the man was no help. Darcy sent for a group of land surveyors to confirm what they already knew, and if the men had not paid their rents by the time the surveyor report was ready, they would be evicted for breach of their leases. When they were removed from their houses, the bailiffs would be present, for the men had not paid last quarter's rents either, and if they did not pay what they owed before leaving, the men would be taken in for debt. Then labourers would have to be brought in from local villages to harvest the crops that were left behind.

It seemed extreme and cruel, but in truth, Darcy felt no sympathy for the farmers. He had no doubt they could all afford to pay. There had been no hardship on the estate that was not caused by the farmers themselves. The greedy men all wanted more than their share of the fields, and because there was no man in the house and no steward, they felt empowered to manipulate an older woman that they believed was unprotected. They would pay what was owed to avoid being arrested, and they would have to move on with their families. It was unfortunate for the innocent wives and children, but sadly unavoidable. Darcy had sent for a great number of men from his estate. Mrs. Reynolds sent footmen who could be spared, grooms, even the strapping sons of some tenant farmers, to help keep matters from getting out of hand. He was going to have to speak to his godmother about finally hiring a steward. It was an expense, but far easier than finding new tenants, which Darcy was already in the process of doing.

Bingley tended to ride out with him each morning to ensure that the tenants were not causing any further damage, but the rest of his time was spent in pursuit of Miss

Bennet. Darcy had made his sentiments known on the subject several times. The lady was quiet, although she seemed pleased by Bingley's company. In the evenings after dinner when the men were sharing port and cigars, Darcy learned from the other gentlemen that Miss Bennet had been polite to the others before Bingley came, but that she had not singled any man out with such pleasure at their society. Darcy could not but presume that her attraction to his friend might be sincere. Darcy wished he could paint her as a fortune hunter, but the lady stood to inherit an estate herself, even if it was only two thousand a year, it was a generous portion for a woman.

"I have no particular objection to the lady, Bingley, but it is not why we came here," said Darcy to his friend. "You came to learn about estate disputes, and she is here to find a husband."

"Darcy, I know you do not think I am serious, but Miss Bennet is an angel," insisted Bingley. "I have never met anyone like her before."

"Bingley, you have met an angel every season in town, sometimes two, and on every visit to every village that we have made since we met." Darcy rolled his eyes as their horses picked their way down the lane. "Each time, you swear it is different."

"Your aunt does not seem to mind." Bingley grinned at him.

"My aunt is too generous," said Darcy. "You are throwing off her numbers. Now there are too many gentlemen and not enough ladies. You are stealing a potential wife from a man who paid to come here to meet one."

"Well they do not all leave married, your aunt said so," reasoned Bingley. "Even if I had never come, it does not stand to reason that Miss Bennet would have chosen one of these men. She may have still gone home unmarried. Do you think I should pay your aunt her fee if I am to court one of her guests? I do not wish to be unfair to her."

“No, I do not think you should lower yourself to pay an exorbitant fee to court a woman. And Miss Bennet is going home unmarried anyway, Bingley,” sighed Darcy.

“Why is that?” asked Bingley, pulling up his horse.

Darcy reined in his horse and stopped next to his friend on the lane, and continued. “Because I have never seen you actually serious about any lady. You meet an angel, you follow her assiduously, you create expectations, and then you lose interest and abandon her. I have watched you do it countless times. This time it is different. Miss Bennet has no desire to continue her unwed state, and has paid a great sum of money to meet men who are equally as serious in their desire to wed. You will lose interest in her, as you do all the others, and she will have wasted her money and her time here. It will be a cruelty, whether you realise what you are doing or not.”

“Darcy!” exclaimed his friend, surprised at his sudden disapproval.

“I have never spoken like this to you before, Bingley, but this is my godmother’s home, and whatever disdain I may feel for ladies who pay to line themselves up to be inspected like cattle, Miss Bennet does not deserve your usual behaviour, and it might reflect poorly on my aunt’s parties, as well,” Darcy said firmly.

Bingley, riled beyond his usual composure, wheeled his horse around and rode away in the other direction.

Darcy watched his friend gallop away in a huff, then after a moment turned his horse back towards the path, his heart leaping into his throat in surprise to find Miss Elizabeth Bennet standing in front of his mount, her hands on her hips, and her gaze stern. She looked radiant with anger. Darcy found it strangely attractive.

“Whatever disdain you may feel for ladies who pay to line themselves up to be inspected like cattle, Mr Darcy, I will know what you meant about Mr Bingley’s

usual behaviour, whether your words were meant for me or not. Have you brought a rake amongst a group of respectable gentlewomen who only wish to be married?" she demanded.

"Miss Elizabeth, you startled me," said Darcy in reply, wondering where she had come from and grateful he had not run her down with his horse. "You must have come from the woods, and only heard my last words." The lady only crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. Darcy sighed and dismounted his horse.

"Miss Elizabeth, I apologize for my unkind words, that was uncharitable of me," he began.

"I have no need for charity, Mr Darcy, I only wish to know what you meant about that man who is chasing my sister so assiduously."

Darcy sighed again. "I will be entirely truthful with you, Miss Elizabeth. You have been nothing but kind to my sister, and you are fiercely loyal to your own. I respect that. You deserve to know all." He offered her his arm, and turned her back to the path, his horse following behind them. Miss Elizabeth barely laid her fingers upon his arm as she turned with him, and he could feel her rage simmering within her. The woman was nearly vibrating with it.

"Mr Bingley has been my friend since my third year of university. He was in his first year. I am a reserved sort of person, and I do not mix well in company. Like my father, I tend to seek out the company of lively, pleasant people who ease my way in society." Mr Darcy paused, wondering how to proceed.

"We have been friends for more than eight years, and I have always valued his friendship. He is a good man. He does not drink to excess or carouse. He does not gamble any more than what is polite at a party, and he is exceedingly loyal and trustworthy. His only flaw is that he falls quickly for statuesque blonde angels, and

just as quickly moves on when his attention to them has been disrupted.”

“Does he harm them?” Elizabeth demanded.

“I do not understand your question, Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy said in surprise. “I would never spend my time with a man who hurt women.”

“But has he harmed them, Mr Darcy, and a man with a young sister knows precisely what I mean.” Elizabeth stopped and turned to face him. “Does he create expectations, make them fall in love with him and then leave them to the mercies of their local gossips? Does he leave them heartbroken? Or, God forbid, does he leave them ruined ?” she asked meaningfully.

“Miss Elizabeth, it is not for me to know a lady’s heart,” Darcy answered honestly. “I can truthfully say that there have been times when my friend has created expectations, and then moved on. Whether the feelings of the ladies in question were hurt, I could not say, although I will maintain to my grave that the major portion of them have been shameless fortune hunters. I know your sister is not one of those,” He turned back to the path and continued to walk again. “I can safely say that he has never left a woman ruined . He is not a cad, nor a rake. Just a lighthearted young man who is easily turned by a pretty face. I would never have him in the company of my own sister if this were not true.”

“I thank you for speaking candidly with me, Mr Darcy,” she said as they approached the house. “I will leave you to your morning, I must attend to my toilette , so that I may line up with the other ladies for inspection at breakfast.”

Darcy’s heart sank. “Miss Bennet,” he said plaintively. When she turned back to him in anger, he said sincerely, “I am truly very sorry that I said that. I did not mean it.”

“Mr Darcy, why would you expect me to believe that you said it but did not mean it?

You do not look to me like a man that says things he does not mean.”

“I will amend my claim to say that I did not realise that I did not mean it until I heard myself say it,” Darcy tried again. “Have you never said anything in your life that you regretted the moment that it passed your lips?”

Miss Elizabeth stood and continued to glare at him for a moment, then gathered her skirts and rushed towards the house.

CHAPTER 30

Elizabeth was furious as she entered the apartment that she shared with Jane and Mary. “Jane!” she called as she entered the bedroom her sisters shared. Jane was at the dressing table, putting the finishing touches on her appearance before she went downstairs. Mary had already gone down in the company of Miss Darcy and Miss Bates.

Elizabeth sank down on her sisters’ bed, and the story of what she had overheard, and all that Mr Darcy had confessed to her came tumbling out. “I could cheerfully murder him!” she spat. “Imagine, bringing a rake or a libertine, or whatever he is, to a party of ladies hoping to wed! It is indecent ! I have half a mind to complain to Mrs Darlington.”

“Mr Bingley is not a rake, nor a libertine.” Jane reached across the end of the bed and clasped her sister’s hand. “I knew of this already, Lizzy.”

“You knew? But how?” Elizabeth gasped.

“Mr Bingley told me. Not long after he arrived.” Jane smiled at Elizabeth.

“Then why would you allow him to court you, knowing he is capricious?” demanded Elizabeth. “We paid for you to come here to meet men who want to wed!”

“He is not capricious, Lizzy! Only a man who wishes to marry, as we do, and has met with too many fortune hunters and insincere women in town,” Jane objected. “It is not his fault that he has been as unlucky in love as I have been.”

“I cannot believe what I am hearing.” Elizabeth rose from the foot of the bed and began to pace. “Not only has the cad used his history to gain your sympathy, it has worked !”

“Lizzy, he is not a cad!” Jane said insistently. “I love you dearly, Sister, but you are too fast to judge others.”

“And you lack the guile to see through others, and judge when you ought!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “Oh, I wish we had not come here. It has been evident to me that there is no one present that I wish to marry, and you are only wasting your time on Mr Bingley. Mr Darcy said so. Perhaps we should go back to our uncle, before you get into trouble.”

“Elizabeth Sarah Bennet, how could you say such a thing! As if I, of all of our sisters, would get into trouble! I know that you are frustrated that you placed your hopes on this endeavour, but have met no one you consider to be an eligible match. But we cannot just leave. Now that we are here, we have a duty to Mary to allow her to learn if she can come to an understanding with one of the gentlemen courting her. Mary deserves her chance, Lizzy!”

Elizabeth stormed out of Jane’s room, wondering when her sister had become so unbending. Standing up to their father about the estate and his duties had hardened Jane’s spine. What could she be thinking, to prefer a man so admittedly beset by caprice?

Elizabeth returned to her own room, and fell onto her bed. The Bennet sisters’ shared maid came to her, but Elizabeth sent her away. She was not in the mood for breakfast, and if there was not a single man she wished to marry here, there was little point going downstairs. Recalling Mr Darcy’s cruel words to his friend about ladies who paid to line themselves up for inspection, she wept in mortification and self-loathing until she exhausted herself, then fell asleep.

Elizabeth woke as a shadow passed over her, and found the maid who had travelled with the Bennet sisters leaving her correspondence by the bed. “Mrs Darlington fears you’re unwell, miss. Should she call for the apothecary?”

“No thank you, Joan, I only have a headache.” Elizabeth took the letter off of the table as she sat up. “What time is it?”

“It is past one o’clock, miss. I’m to bring you tea and a meal as soon as you wake, Mrs Darlington insisted,” Joan informed her. “The guests are all down by the lake, playing lawn bowls.”

“Thank you, Joan. Tea and some cold meat and bread would be lovely.” Elizabeth rose and went to a comfortable chair near the unlit fireplace. “Please close the drapes a little, my head still aches.”

When the maid had gone, Elizabeth looked at the letter. Her uncle had returned to London, and though Elizabeth had heard from Lydia once, she had heard nothing from Longbourn. The letter, however, was not from Longbourn, nor Cheapside. It was from Charlotte Collins.

Elizabeth was strongly tempted to return it unopened, though curiosity won out, and she broke the seal.

Hunsford Parsonage,

Kent, near Westerham

15 June, 1812

Dear Eliza,

I write to you in a state of some agitation, though I know not whether I seek solace in your friendship or merely a sympathetic ear. I pray you will forgive the coldness that has crept between us these past months; I am not proud of it. Resentment, I find, is a poor companion, and perhaps I allowed mine to linger longer than was sensible. Fortune smiles upon you in a way that it never has on me, and though I harbored ill thoughts, I cannot deny the justice of your good luck.

Mr. Collins is – as you no doubt suspect, unchanged – every bit as stupid and insufferable as ever. He prattles endlessly about the favor he enjoys from Lady Catherine, yet that favor feels more like a chain about both our necks. Her ladyship's demands grow daily, and I am left to navigate the fragile line between deference and sanity. You cannot imagine the strain of entertaining such conceit, nor how exhausting it is to encourage Mr. Collins' devotion to her whims. I am certain he would sooner construct a monument in her name than attend to his actual duties. One would think he had been knighted each time an invitation to dinner arrives from her quarter.

I suppose, Eliza, that I deserve this fate. It is no secret that I made my choices with my eyes open, but that does not soften the edges of regret. Perhaps I thought I could manage him, but managing a fool proves a task beyond even my patience. I cannot help but wonder if Mary might have borne his absurdities better. She at least shares his zeal for sermons. If I have wronged her in securing this match, I acknowledge it now. I sought security, and in doing so, perhaps compromised more than I anticipated.

But enough of my lamentations. I have written partly to extend an olive branch. Your recent success in improving the circumstances of your family, though I begrudged it at first, speaks well of your perseverance. My mother tells me of Kitty's improvement each time she writes, and also of yours and your sisters' visit to Ever After End to find husbands. With Jane's expectations, and the absence of your mother, I am certain she will find success there.

I cannot pretend to understand how fortune favored you and your family so decidedly, but I am willing to lay aside my envy. If you can forgive my petty grievances, I would welcome you at Hunsford when you have finished your lark in Somerset. It would ease the burden of this house immeasurably to have you here, even if only for a short time. Lady Catherine finds little fault with visitors of proper connections, and I believe your presence would both entertain and distract her. Bring Mary as well, if you wish. Mr Collins speaks of you all often, and considering his regret that my actions have severed a connection between him and his family, it would please him to see you both, I am sure. Besides, there are few people I can truly speak to – and fewer still I trust with the truth of my situation. I would feel great relief in unburdening myself to you as we used to do.

I await your response with hope, though I would not blame you if it were tinged with skepticism.

Yours,

Charlotte Collins

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose further and further in disbelief as she read Charlotte's letter. Grief and anger washed over her as she recalled each exquisite emotion, every pang of pain and mortification that her closest friend had caused her since she had been struck with financial good luck. She wanted to cry out the injustice of Charlotte placing her in the position of finding the strength to forgive. The woman seemed to have an unlimited number of audacities to produce!

She wished for nothing more than to burn the note, and to return all that followed unopened. But for her cousin's sake, she would eventually accept the olive branch. Perhaps it might take time, a great deal of time, for her to forgive Charlotte with her whole heart, but Elizabeth remembered well her cousin's distress that the actions of his wife might tear him from his newly found relations forever.

Elizabeth and Jane vowed to Mr Collins before his wedding that there would always be goodwill between him and the Bennets. She would not break her promise, but an immediate reply was too much to ask. First, there was the fact that Charlotte had insulted Elizabeth and Mary all over again by assuming they would not find matches at Ever After End. Elizabeth knew Charlotte had the wit to know when she was offending, and though it was true that Elizabeth did not expect to leave the house party wed, it was rude and ungenerous of Charlotte to suppose she would not find success.

She supposed that if she did not marry anyone from the house party, that she might visit her cousin and his wife in the spring, and encourage Jane to begin the long business of improving relations between Longbourn and Lucas Lodge. For now, she would let Charlotte wait for a reply. She was in no mood to write a tolerable letter today. Tomorrow was not likely either.

Joan returned at length with Elizabeth's meal. Elizabeth ordered a tray for dinner, and requested not to be disturbed for the rest of the day. Her head still ached, there was no one at Ever After End that she wished to see; she would take the opportunity to rest by the open window with a book for the remainder of the afternoon and evening.

CHAPTER 31

It was a week before Elizabeth left the isolation of her room. Though she knew she distressed her host, she could not find the interest in joining the others, not even to watch over Jane, who could apparently well manage her own affairs, nor even to keep an eye on Mary, who visited with her in her bedroom each afternoon before dinner. Elizabeth had remained in their quarters since she had confronted Mr Darcy about Mr Bingley.

Unfortunately, when Elizabeth was extremely vexed or anxious, she suffered from migraines, and they disturbed her for much of the week. Jane was still miffed with her for her mistrust of Mr Bingley, and determined not to leave the party, nor to humour her sister's concerns. Then there was also Elizabeth's mortification by Mr Darcy.

If any other man had insulted her, she would have laughed. She would have moved on immediately, without caring what the man thought. Except that she quite obviously did care what Mr Darcy thought. She cared a great deal more than she wished to admit, and going downstairs to continue the farce of the house party in front of him, knowing that there was no other gentleman whom she wished to see there, was too much for Elizabeth, and the entire situation gave her a terrible headache. Her host visited her twice, and Elizabeth accepted some powders from the apothecary, but no other attention. She assured Mrs Darlington that the migraines would fade eventually, and was embarrassed by the worry she caused, for it was not in her nature to brood for so long.

There was, also to consider, the fact that when Elizabeth left Ever After End unmarried, she would eventually travel to Hunsford, which would substantiate

Charlotte's most recent insult, and she would be obliged to visit her cousin with her heart open to forgiving such a person. This weighed upon her more than her embarrassment with Mr Darcy, and she brooded upon her feelings regarding Charlotte excessively. She felt so much resentment and anger at her old friend, they were emotions she was unused to in such large doses, and she knew not how she would forgive her cousin's wife. Elizabeth wished that she were in Meryton so that she might seek the counsel of Mr Abbot, but she had no expectation of visiting Longbourn before Christmas.

Mary had continued to enjoy the attentions of Colonel Gordon, until he had suddenly discovered an interest in the parson's daughter, Miss Irving. It took two dances and an outing to Glastonbury Tor, all of which the Irvings attended, for Mrs Darlington to notice the man's newfound interest, after which, the Irvings were invited to dine every night, and Miss Irving was invited to all of their activities. Mrs Darlington said that she had married off the local apothecary and the village solicitor's daughter by similar means, and Mary told Elizabeth that her host had told Mr Irving, a widow, that he was next.

It was Mr Elwood who had helped spark Colonel Gordon's interest in Miss Irving. Mr Elwood had inspired Mary to ask what those of the house party might do for the parish, and she and Miss Irving made plans to visit a few villagers and squatters' families that needed attention. Mr Elwood and Colonel Gordon wasted no time in offering their escort, and during the outing, Colonel Gordon had taken a shine to Miss Irving's gentle and caring nature.

Jane and Elizabeth had mostly ignored each other after their words about Mr Bingley. Jane was rather cross with Elizabeth for not trusting her instincts, and for isolating herself upstairs, which drew unwanted attention to Jane and Mary while they were in company. Elizabeth was irritable with Jane because Elizabeth still believed that Mr Bingley was not to be trusted, and she had no wish to watch her elder sister be taken in by a rogue.

When Jane confided in Mr Bingley about Elizabeth's worries, he had proven himself by marching to Mrs Darlington's study, and writing her a bank draft for fifty pounds. Elizabeth told Jane that wasting fifty pounds was not a guarantee that a man was serious about anything but chasing skirts, which indeed, in a certain light, could be construed as seeking to pay for Jane's approbation, if not seeking to procure something more sinister. Jane was outraged by Elizabeth's opinion.

Finally Elizabeth, after sleeping and brooding until she thought she would go mad, then writing to her aunt, and pacing her room until she thought she would wear a hole in the carpet, acknowledged that she could not very well stay upstairs forever. A lady might occasionally be indisposed for an entire week, but anything longer would create a great deal of talk, and was unfair to her host and her sisters. She had only felt so out of sorts, fretting about Mr Darcy, Mr Bingley, Jane, and Charlotte Collins, that she could not bear to impose herself upon the rest of the party, lest she lose her temper and embarrass Jane and Mary even more.

She dined upstairs again tonight, but tomorrow, she would return downstairs and make her apologies to Mrs Darlington. She hoped perhaps that Mr Brentwood, Mr Cartwright, and Mr Whittaker would have found other ladies in her absence. She was perfectly happy spending the rest of the party lightly chaperoning Mary.

Hearing giggles in the shared parlour, she rose and donned her dressing gown and slippers. The first two nights that Elizabeth remained in her rooms, her sisters and the other ladies visited Miss Darcy's and Miss Bates's parlour, so that they would not disturb her, but when she did not return downstairs, their group began to frequent the Bennets' parlour again. Miss Darcy and Miss Bates visited often, as well as Miss Dutton, and less frequently, Miss Crawford and Miss Bertram joined them as well.

Elizabeth had suffered enough of her own company, and when she met Mary, Miss Dutton, Miss Darcy, and Miss Bates in the parlour, she asked, "May I join you?"

“Of course, Lizzy!” said Mary. “Come, sit here by the window with me. I know you prefer the fresh air.”

“How do you feel, Elizabeth?” asked Miss Darcy. “Are you certain you are well?”

“I am not ill, Georgiana, but thank you. These last few days, I have been out of sorts. I received some correspondence that upset me, and I brooded myself into a megrim. Several megrims, in fact,” Elizabeth confessed. “But I do not feel unwell tonight, and I must re-enter company some time.”

“What correspondence?” asked Jane abruptly, entering from her bedroom, where she had just changed into her nightclothes and braided her hair.

Elizabeth realized that she had just worried her sisters, and said, “It was from Charlotte.”

“That’s the one that turned on you when you won your money, you said. Charlotte Lucas,” piped up Miss Dutton.

“She is Charlotte Collins now, but yes. That is her,” Elizabeth agreed.

“Reckon she misses you something fierce all of a sudden. Or she wants something.” Miss Dutton nodded in satisfaction. “Suellen writes me a letter every month. Sometimes she misses me. Sometimes she wants me to write to my father’s old partner and get her husband a job. I used to throw ‘em out unread, but after she sent so many, I got curious. I wish I hadn’t every time I open one. Last one put me so far off my chump I got into the last of my uncle’s brandy that my aunt was saving for sickness and drank until I was disguised. I never reply, but she still sends them.”

“Well... I do not mean to fall into drunkenness.” Elizabeth smiled at Georgiana, who always regarded Miss Dutton with alarm in her expression. “But I will admit that her

audacity disturbed me. In any case, I cannot allow it to affect me any longer. I will join you all downstairs tomorrow.”

“I have just the treat to cheer you!” Miss Dutton jumped up and made her way excitedly to the door, “You all wait here!” She was only gone a few moments before she returned with a familiar package.

“Is that the parcel with the snakes?” asked Mary.

“Snakes?” said Miss Dutton in confusion.

“When you showed us that parcel in the village, you said something about snakes,” Mary said curiously.

Abigail Dutton laughed. “You sure say funny things, Mary Bennet. I think you’re my favourite Englishwoman! Come on all of you; we are going to the kitchens!”

The ladies followed Miss Dutton downstairs. “Are you certain that this is wise?” asked Jane worriedly.

“Don’t worry, Jane. I told Mrs Darlington about my surprise, and she gave permission. Said that we ain’t the only ones who stay up waking snakes; the gentlemen keep the cook’s assistant up all hours.” Miss Dutton led the way into the lower levels of the house, while the other ladies followed with their candles.

“That’s it! Waking snakes!” Mary cried. Miss Dutton stopped and turned as Mary continued. “When you had that parcel in the village, you said something about waking snakes.”

“That only means to cause a ruckus. Don’t you worry, Mary Bennet, this treat is far nicer than snakes!” Miss Dutton giggled.

The ladies stood back while Miss Dutton explained to the kitchen maid what she required. “Mrs Darlington said to expect you, and let you do as you pleased. Here’s the big pot and the lard, right here, miss.” The maid handed what was needed over.

“Does this big pot have a cover?” asked Miss Dutton. “And we’ll need a pair of mitts. Not just a towel. Proper mitts.”

“Yes, miss, the cook has a good pair right here.” The maid reached up and pulled a pair of enormous mittens that were used to handle heavy pots that were hot. Then she bent down and retrieved the cover for the large pan and handed it over .

Miss Dutton took a large spoonful of lard and dumped it in the pot. Then she took off her dressing gown and handed it to Miss Bates, and said “Don’t want this to catch over the fire.” She then stood in her sleeveless nightgown, and opened the package to reveal two dried ears of corn. “I had to write ahead to the general store here, and ask them to find these for me. Can’t believe you English don’t have dried corn everywhere.”

She dumped the ears of corn into the pot, placed the cover on top, and carried it to the stove. “Pull my nightgown back from the stove, Elizabeth. I have to stand close and shake the pan, or it’ll burn.”

“What on earth is she doing?” the kitchen maid asked Jane. Jane only shook her head and watched in bewilderment.

Miss Dutton placed the pot on the stove and turned up the flame. For several long minutes, nothing happened. Then... suddenly... POP! Then again, and again, BANG! POP!

Mary put her hands over her ears, as Miss Darcy whimpered a bit. This was loud . The English ladies, who were unused to the kitchens or loud noise, cringed and

covered their ears, crying out in alarm as suddenly a multitude of loud bangs emanated from within the pot. The kitchen maid, who was used to the noise and bustle of the kitchens, proved unequal to her fear of the unfamiliar noise, and fled.

“Help! Please Lord, save us! Miss Dutton is murdering the young ladies in the kitchen with the devil's pistol!” Elizabeth heard the young maid shrieking as she escaped through the lower halls.

Abigail Dutton was unperturbed, standing calmly over the stove as Elizabeth bravely held her nightgown back from the fire. She shook the pan back and forth evenly, and Elizabeth could not begin to imagine what was happening inside. Thousands, millions perhaps of loud bangs and pops continued inside the pan, as they heard shouts of alarm approaching from down the halls.

Mr Darcy was reading in his dressing gown and slippers, trying to ignore the group of young men across the hall playing cards and shouting. They did this every night, and occasionally imbibed so much brandy that Darcy was amazed they had the ability to wake up and court women in the morning. He joined them a few times a week, just to be sociable. Bingley had joined them lately more often than not, for he was still piqued with Darcy for suggesting that he was inconstant.

Suddenly he heard shouts in the hall, and there was a pounding on his door. “Mr Darcy!” cried his footman, James, when Darcy opened the door. “The kitchen maid says that Miss Dutton is murdering the young ladies downstairs in the kitchen with the devil’s pistol, and there’s a terrible noise, sir! Never heard anything like it! Sounds like thousands of pistols, all at once, sir!”

Darcy ran with all haste, following the footman down the stairs, into the lower floors of the house. As he approached the kitchens, his godmother, Major Bartholomew, and two other chaperones close behind, he heard the noise that was frightening the servants, but it did not sound like any guns Darcy had ever heard. He charged into the

kitchen to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet behind Miss Dutton, who stood calmly in front of the stove, shaking a large covered pot, from which all the noise was emanating. The other ladies were covering their ears and cowering in a corner, though they were all obviously quite safe.

“Miss Dutton, Miss Elizabeth, would you explain this ungodly noise!” he shouted in frustration.

Miss Elizabeth raised her eyebrows as Miss Dutton turned down the fire and removed the pot from the flame. “We’re only making a treat. Don’t get your feathers ruffled.” She looked at Mrs Darlington and said, “Sorry, ma’am. I should have warned you that we’d be a bit loud, though I believe your maid created most of the commotion. Your pot ain’t hurt though.” She removed the cover to show them the small puffs of fluffy white corn inside.

“What on earth is that?” Darcy asked in amazement as Bingley and some of the other men entered the kitchen from the other entrance and burst into drunken giggles upon finding the ladies in their nightwear.

“It’s popped corn,” answered Miss Dutton. “Try it.” She popped a puff into her own mouth and made a face, turning and taking a small handful of salt from the salt cellar behind her, then sprinkled it over the corn. “Needs salt. Now try it.”

“Popped corn ? You are cooking Indian food in the middle of the night ?” Darcy laughed at the absurdity of it as Miss Elizabeth crept close and sneaked one of the kernels into her mouth. Not to be outdone, he took a few and tried them himself. He grinned at Elizabeth and in unison, they said, “It is delicious!”

At length, Mrs Darlington accepted Miss Dutton’s apology, the popped corn was distributed to a number of large bowls, and the ladies returned upstairs with their treat, sending bowls with Mr Darcy and the chaperones as well. Mr Bingley and some

of the other young men were quite obviously inebriated and found the scene and the sight of the ladies' in their dressing gowns quite a bit more amusing than the situation called for. Elizabeth was unimpressed and raised her eyebrows at Jane, who refused to meet her eye.

The ladies traipsed back to the Bennets' parlour, past the other ladies staring open-mouthed out their doors in shock at their boldness. Miss Bertram and Miss Crawford lost no time following them into their parlour, and deciding that they could wake snakes quite as well as the gentlemen, the ladies sent for a bottle of wine and giggled and squealed late into the night.

CHAPTER 32

Elizabeth avoided Mr Darcy for another week. She changed her direction each morning when she walked, and remained in the company of the ladies, far from him in the drawing room. He still watched her constantly, and looked troubled when she caught him doing it. His godmother watched them both constantly, and so did all who had come in his party, and Elizabeth was becoming quite sick of it. It was almost enough to make her wish to retreat back to her rooms, especially after the first morning.

The morning after the ladies' escapade with the popped corn, Mr Cartwright approached her after breakfast in the morning room and asked, "Miss Elizabeth, may I beg the privilege of a private audience?"

Before Elizabeth could think of a polite excuse to decline, the room suddenly emptied. Mrs Darlington, three ladies, and two gentlemen all disappeared before Elizabeth could object, and she found herself alone in a room with Mr Cartwright, the door slightly ajar.

"Miss Elizabeth," Mr Cartwright began as he sank to one knee before her.

"Oh dear." Elizabeth jumped up from her seat, "Mr Cartwright, I wish that you would not- "

"Miss Elizabeth, from the moment I met you here at Ever After End, I singled you out as the companion of my future life." Mr Cartwright rose and followed her to the window, where she looked outside and refused to meet his eye. "But first, allow me

to explain my reasons for marriage.”

He continued, “I have wished to marry for some time, Miss Elizabeth, but I waited many years, for I wished to attain the success I would require to support my wife in comfort and gentility. I have recently achieved that success.”

He turned and began to pace as he went on. “Upon accomplishing my pecuniary goals, I realised that it is now time for me to start a family with a genteel woman who will be an asset to me in all situations. I am charmed by your dowry and your little house in town, but I assure you, you will hardly need it, and may use it for your family’s care, should you wish to, and you may have all of the additional funds you require for that endeavour. You will be my sole heiress, even once our children are born. I will build a mansion with every comfort in the most fashionable area of town, and set up accounts for you at every merchant in London.”

“You assume too much sir, you must recall that I have given you no answer, nor have you asked a proper question.” Elizabeth finally fixed him with her gaze.

“What other answer can there be, but yes?” the man said arrogantly. “I think that I know you and your uncle well enough to know that you would not be embarrassed to marry a tradesman. You came here because you wanted to wed, I hardly think you will receive a better offer.”

“I truly hesitate to say something so hurtful, but you seem to have overlooked the fact that just because I came here with a wish to marry, does not mean that I will marry anyone who asks me, and it does not follow that I wish to marry you . I find you rather too sure of yourself.” Elizabeth tried to sound gentle. She had no desire to hurt the man. He was rather too certain of her acceptance, but she had no desire to mortify him.

Mr Cartwright’s face fell, “You are truly saying no? ”

“I am, but with all the goodwill in the world, sir.” Elizabeth smiled. “It is not too late for you to select another lady. What made you chuse me? Perhaps I can help you decide on someone equally as worthy.”

“No, it is no use.” Mr Cartwright turned away. “I liked you for your lively wit and happy nature. And your industriousness. You will make some man a superior wife someday. Your sisters are happy and industrious women, but not like you. Besides, Miss Bennet will probably marry that Bingley fellow, and Miss Mary is far too quiet and pious for me. I knew immediately that I did not wish to marry any of the other ladies as soon as I met them. I believe I will depart today. I do not feel equal to enjoying the rest of the party.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I felt that way within a few days of arriving. I have high hopes for my sisters, but I do not have any expectation of leaving here engaged,” Elizabeth replied. “If you will not remain, then you ought to lease the estate called Netherfield in my home village. You say you wish to marry and purchase an estate near town. Meryton is only four hours from London, and filled with genteel ladies of the unwed variety. The last family to lease the place, The Lockharts, met here at Ever After End, and have recently left for their new estate in Derbyshire.”

“Perhaps I will, Miss Elizabeth. That sounds like just what I should do! Filled with unwed genteel ladies, you say?” he asked.

“Unwed ladies are hanging from the rafters in Meryton, sir,” Elizabeth assured him. “Please tell them I sent you, and ask them to think kindly of me in the future.”

The morning after the popped corn battle of 1812, Darcy had broken his fast early, then spent the morning in his godmother’s study, reviewing the correspondence that he had received the day before. A number of younger sons who still lived with their families and worked as labourers on his estate were interested in taking on tenancies and starting families. They only lacked the funds for down-payments on their leases .

His godmother would not take a loan, but he had arranged for four young men from Pemberley to do so. He would loan them twenty-five pounds each, which they would use to pay their deposit for their new tenancies. They would pay him back half from their first harvest, and the rest from their second, with an option to extend the loans if there was hardship or loss of crops.

There were two other farmers who had left tenancies in other areas of the kingdom, who had excellent references and, according to those references, fine families. These men knew how to work the land, and could pay their own deposits. Darcy had offered them places at Ever After End.

The land surveyors were out working on the estate each day, and once their report was received, the six tenants creating trouble would be immediately evicted. Darcy had visited the magistrate and put all the pressure of his connections on the man, who had finally agreed to come out and do his job. The bailiffs were standing by, and once the farms were cleared of the former tenants, expresses would be sent to the new tenants, instructing them to come with haste.

When he finished his work for the morning, he left the study, hoping to find Miss Elizabeth in the garden, or perhaps preparing for an outing and shopping expedition in Shepton Mallet with the others. Perhaps he could persuade her to join him and his sister in their carriage.

He entered the hall downstairs and found a group outside his godmother's morning room, that included his godmother. "What is happening?" he asked pleasantly.

"Cartwright is getting the mitten? 1," Miss Dutton answered, perking her ear towards the open door.

"Getting the what?" Darcy asked. It almost seemed like Miss Dutton was speaking a completely different language that used all the same words as English, but the words

had entirely different meanings when she used them.

“Miss Elizabeth is in receipt of our first proposal of the summer, I think,” Aunt Theodosia said excitedly.

“She doesn’t like him,” said Miss Dutton. “Elizabeth won’t accept a proposal from a man she don’t like.”

Darcy, unable to be present when the couple exited the room, fled the scene in the hopes that, if congratulations were in order, he could offer them later, when he was master of himself.

Darcy hoped each morning to run into Miss Elizabeth, but it seemed that no matter which of her favourite paths he checked, he never found her on any of them in the mornings, though he was certain that she still walked out. It had been a week since the night of the popped corn, of which he had been obliged to order a quantity for Pemberley by his sister.

He had decided the day that he felt he nearly lost her, when she could have been taken by Cartwright, that he wished to know her better. But he could never find her in the morning, and in the drawing rooms in the evening, she surrounded herself with the bevy of ladies that Darcy would rather face fire than brave. In the afternoons, she often chaperoned her sister, who eschewed many of the planned activities in favour of joining one of the gentlemen in a charitable endeavour at an orphanage an hour away in Bath.

Finally, after a whole week, favour smiled upon him. Having come across her finally on his morning ride, he was quick to dismount and approach her.

“Miss Elizabeth!” he exclaimed. “How fortunate I am to meet you here.”

“You are? Why?” Elizabeth asked in confusion, and looked at him with some hesitancy.

Darcy felt a pang of guilt at how badly he must have hurt her feelings with his unkind words the morning she had overheard him with Bingley. “Will you forgive me?” he asked.

“Forgive you?” she echoed in bewilderment. “For what? ”

“I cannot help but regret my cruel and untrue words the last time we met outdoors, Miss Elizabeth. The entire week that you remained in your rooms was torment to me. I would do anything to take back what I said,” Darcy answered sincerely.

Elizabeth stared at him for a moment before laughter bubbled up inside her, and she said, “Oh, you silly man! Did you believe I hid in my room for a week only because of your terrible blunder?”

“Did you not?” Darcy asked.

Elizabeth glared at him. “I will not lie and say that your words did not hurt me, Mr Darcy, but not everything has to do with you!”

“I-I beg your pardon,” said Darcy, cheeks flaming.

“In addition to your cruelty, I received some correspondence later that day which distressed me,” said Elizabeth.

“What was it?” asked Darcy, unthinking.

“I beg your pardon?” Elizabeth responded in amazement.

“I am sorry. I did not come here expecting this to happen, and I have reacted to it rather poorly.” Darcy scratched his head.

“Mr Darcy, you are not making any sense,” Elizabeth said in confusion. “What did you not expect to happen?”

Darcy hesitated, and then blurted out, “I did not expect that when I came to my godmother’s house party, that I would meet the most beautiful woman, with the finest eyes I have ever seen. I did not think I would meet someone that I would want to know, and I did not expect to find someone I might spend my life with. It was a shocking experience, and again, I reacted poorly to the revelation. My surprise caused me to insult you, which is the last thing in the world that I meant. Will you forgive me?”

“Oh,” Elizabeth said in shock. Whatever he might say, she had not expected him to say that . “I suppose it would be churlish of me to refuse.”

“Churlish is the word for my behaviour, and I regret it most profoundly. I now wish to acknowledge that I am interested in you, Miss Elizabeth, and whatever other shenanigans are in the air at Ever After End, I would like to court you properly.”

“Your behaviour is improving by leaps and bounds,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “I agree that it would be nice to get to know you better.”

“You are a careful woman. An intelligent and prudent one in addition to being beautiful and kind. I admire that about you.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said as she finally took his arm and he joined her on the path.

“So will you tell me?” he asked as they walked with his stallion following behind.

“Tell you what?” she asked, her mind rather unfocused from the surprise of his apology and subsequent request.

“Will you tell me about the correspondence that upset you.” He smiled down at her.

“Oh,” Elizabeth said, wishing that she could forget about it. But they had agreed to get to know each other, and so the story tumbled out, about the lottery, and Charlotte’s defection, and John Lucas asking her to marry him after her being right under his nose her whole life, and his father, Sir William of all people, asking for money to educate Henry Lucas, and how Charlotte and all of her old friends had turned against her, and told terrible lies about her, and how her oldest friend had compromised Elizabeth’s poor cousin before the entail was ended, and that now she wished for Elizabeth to forgive her and visit Kent when her lark in Somerset was over.

“She does not ask for much, does she?” Darcy said in amazement. “What will you do?”

“I suppose that when I return unwed, I will eventually visit my cousin in Hunsford, and begin the journey of healing with my old friend. My cousin was so distressed at the thought that his wife might estrange him from his family.”

“You are too good. I hope your family and friends give you credit for it.” Darcy thought intently for a moment. “Did you say Hunsford? Is your cousin’s patroness Lady Catherine de Bourgh?”

“The very same.” Elizabeth laughed. “Do you know her?”

“Know her?” Darcy tightened his hand on hers and said, “Do not run away, but if our courtship reaches its natural conclusion, she will be your aunt one day. ”

“Oh! However will I pass muster with such a woman?” Elizabeth said in dismay.

“I have no idea, no one has ever accomplished it,” Darcy said in laughter. “She will be displeased if I marry anyone but her daughter, and I have no intention of doing that, so pleasing her is impossible anyway, I assure you.”

“That does not comfort me very much,” Elizabeth observed.

“No, but this might,” Darcy said wickedly. “If, as I stated before, our courtship meets with success, when you visit Hunsford, you will not be obliged to accept Mrs Collins’s hospitality. You will be staying at Rosings.”

“My cousin will perish from the excitement,” Elizabeth giggled, getting into the spirit of their light flirtation.

“Was that all?” Darcy asked.

“Was what all?” Elizabeth repeated.

“Is that all that upset you?”

“Was it not enough?” she asked.

“Of course it was, but if there was anything else that I could ease your mind about...” Darcy insisted.

Elizabeth glared up at him for a moment. “I was still angry about your friend, I am still upset about Mr Bingley. Jane, for the first time ever, would not hear me. She said she already knew; that he had confessed his inconsistency to her! I could not bear to watch her accept his suit, knowing that in a few week’s time, she will likely be pining for him.”

“I confess that I was at first displeased with Bingley for pursuing your sister, particularly here at my aunt’s home, but he has taken umbrage at my belief in his fickleness. He has gone a long way since that morning to convince me that his interest in Miss Bennet is sincere.” Darcy thought for a moment as they walked before continuing, “Miss Elizabeth, it is perhaps possible that I was unjust to Bingley when we first arrived here and I accused him of wasting your sister’s time. He has matured greatly in the last year. He handled himself well at his leased estate, both in the management, and in some difficult interactions with the locals. He has also admitted to me several times in recent months that he is ready to settle down, and tired of the endless debutantes of London. I believe his interest in Miss Bennet is sincere.”

“And what will happen if it is not?” Elizabeth asked.

“For as much expectation as he has already created, if he raises your sister’s hopes and disappoints her, I shall call him out myself,” Darcy promised.

“Good,” Elizabeth giggled.

“I had no idea you were so bloodthirsty,” he said.

“I am when it comes to my sisters.” She paused as they walked. “He was drunk that night with the popped corn, does he always do that?”

“I was actually surprised to see him in such a state, because he does not usually imbibe so much,” Darcy informed her. “Then again, I deprived him of his favourite companion, myself, because I have been annoyed with him for throwing off my aunt’s numbers. He understandably spent more time with the other men, but I do not think he has been in the habit of drinking so much since we arrived. He is not a habitual drunkard, if that worries you. Many men slightly overindulge with their friends infrequently, without it becoming a habit or a problem. Bingley does not

abandon his sobriety often, I assure you.”

Elizabeth was quiet at this, thinking intently as they returned to the manor, and hoping Mr Darcy was correct about the man pursuing her sister, even if Jane was unconcerned herself.

A half hour after the two of them returned to the house, Darcy found his Aunt Theodosia and presented her with a bank draft for fifty pounds. Theodosia descended into hilarity when she realised what her godson had just handed to her.

“Not a single word, Aunt Theodosia!” he barked as he left the room.

“What on earth was that about?” asked Georgiana in indignation for her brother’s address .

“A private joke, darling,” Mrs Darlington assured her as she wiped the tears of laughter from her eyes and tore the bank draft into pieces.

She handed them back to Darcy some hours later when she encountered him in the hall. “You have a family discount? 2 , darling,” she laughed.

1 ? 19th century American slang for a rejected proposal.

2 ? Discount has been in use as “deduction in price” since 1630.

CHAPTER 33

6 July, 1812

A few days later, Elizabeth and Darcy were on one of their early morning walks. Darcy had made a full apology to Mr Bingley for his belief in his inconstancy, and solicited his friend and Jane to accompany them on their morning walks for chaperonage. Bingley saw the sense in having time alone together to discuss important private matters pertinent to his future with Jane. Jane had not received an apology from Elizabeth, who was still suspicious of Mr Bingley, but was at length persuaded to agree.

Elizabeth's exercise was curtailed slightly, for Jane had not her stamina, nor her enthusiasm for such early hours. They left a half hour later each morning than Elizabeth was accustomed to, and returned slightly earlier. Jane and Bingley would occupy a bench in the garden while Darcy and Elizabeth strolled another half hour among the verdure.

This morning, it was apparent that the house party would enjoy perfect weather later for archery on the green. The temperature was warm but not excessively so. The sun was shining, and there was not a single cloud in the perfect sky. Mrs Higglebottom waved to them from the edge of the lake as they passed, with a warning that Barnaby had predicted rain for the morrow.

Elizabeth and Darcy had already canvassed many topics since Darcy had asked to court her, but this morning, they were again speaking of Charlotte and Elizabeth's Cousin Collins.

“I was thinking about your experience with your friend, and while your circumstances are very different, they remind me of troubles I have had with one of my childhood friends.” Darcy navigated Elizabeth around a stone sticking out of the path that he would remind himself to have someone remove later.

“How so?” Elizabeth inquired.

“I grew up with another young man at Pemberley. His father was a good man; an intelligent and loyal man, and he made himself so indispensable to my father as his steward that my father sought to be of service to his son. George was named after my father, who stood godparent to him, and paid for his education, first at Eton, then later, Cambridge.”

Darcy paused, looking for the words to continue. “By the time we left Eton, any friendship I had with George had withered and died. He resented me for my position as the master’s son and for my expectations. He often made trouble on the estate and blamed me. When we started Cambridge, he created debts in my name which I covered, not wishing to grieve my father.”

He continued, “My father was like me. His responsibilities weighed upon him, and he valued his friendships with lively, charming people who brought levity to his life. George is many things, but primarily, he is charming and exuberant. My father took great comfort in his company, particularly after my mother died. When George’s father died, he was invited to live at Pemberley as family.”

“It sounds like he was given a marvellous opportunity,” Elizabeth murmured.

“He was, but he saw the opportunity as a burden,” Darcy replied. “George had no wish to work, not once he found a taste for living in splendor at Pemberley and running with a fast and well-connected crowd at university. Eventually, once he was at Cambridge, he began to show worse inclinations. His debts soon became far more

than I could pay on my allowance, and there was no hiding the girls he ruined and left with child, but by this point, my father could not believe that George could do wrong. He made every excuse for him, insisting that the servant girls and tenant daughters accused George because he was a steward's son, but with expectations. George even persuaded my father that he received poor marks in school due to the prejudice of his teachers because his father had been a steward. Even I was once blamed for his misdeeds, though my indignation and fury at his lack of trust in me quickly showed my father his mistake.

“My father never accepted George's guilt, and when he died, recommended him for the church. He requested that I confer upon him a valuable family living, should he chuse to take orders. George made it immediately clear that he had no intention of entering the church. He wished to study the law and suggested pecuniary reimbursement in compensation for the living. I agreed without delay; I knew George ought not be a clergyman. He signed away all rights to the living, should it become available, and with three thousand pounds, in addition to another thousand left to him by my father, he left us.”

“Four thousand pounds! I do hope he made his fortune with such a sum!” Elizabeth looked up at Darcy in surprise. “Paired with even a position as a lowly clerk, the interest on four thousand ought to keep a man from penury. And if he chose to use it to pursue the law, he should do even better.”

“One would think so,” Darcy said as they continued down the path. “But when the incumbent of the living in question passed three years later, George returned. The study of the law had been, he assured me, very unprofitable; he asked me to fulfil my father's wish and distinguish him with the living. I cannot lie, the idea of entrusting him with the souls of the good people of Kympton, and exposing the young girls of the parish to him made me bilious. I refused him in no uncertain terms, and after abusing me terribly to my face, he left Pemberley. How he lived since then, I know not. Last summer, he attempted to impose himself on my poor sister at Ramsgate.

Everywhere he goes, he tells his tale of woe to gain sympathy amongst good people, attempting to sow doubt about my honour. None of them ever think to ask themselves why a perfect stranger would tell such a tale, but he never hesitates to degrade my good name all over England.”

Elizabeth paused for a moment on the path. Something about his tale seemed oddly familiar. She could not put her finger on it. Darcy... Kympton... Pemberley... Godfather... George... Where have I heard all of this before?

“Are you well, Miss Elizabeth? I had no wish to upset you. I only wanted to tell you that I, too, have had friends that betrayed my trust.” Darcy looked down at her in concern as Elizabeth stared into space, attempting to order her thoughts.

Ramsgate... A man of honour could not have doubted the intent... Elizabeth thought. “I feel like I have heard all of this before. George... George... Wait! Is the man in the militia?”

“George Wickham? In the militia? I am sorry, but George Wickham is not synonymous with work,” Darcy laughed.

“That is him! Lieutenant George Wickham from Derbyshire!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “I met him in Meryton late last summer. He had just joined his friends in the regiment. He told me that story, but yes, he did make you sound like a villain. He named you as well, but I did not like him for speaking ill of your sister when she or her guardians were not present to defend her, and so I put the entire conversation from my mind.”

“What did he say? What did he say about Georgiana?” Darcy turned and grasped her hand in distress.

“Only that she was arrogant like her brother, and very, very proud. He claimed you

had ruined her with spoiling, I think. It was nothing terribly bad, and quite obviously all falsehoods, but having four sisters of my own, I thought it ungentlemanly to discuss a young girl in the absence of her family. He left a number of debts with the merchants when the militia left the county. Poor Mr Wolcott, the tailor, nearly went bankrupt from the expense of Lieutenant Wickham's uniform and other requirements."

"He must have been desperate after the last time we saw him, to join the militia," Darcy mused to himself. "My cousin is away at the front, but I believe I know a friend of his that can check in on Wickham for me, and ensure that he is not bankrupting the merchants of whatever village the regiment has moved onto. I will look into reimbursing the tradesmen in Meryton as well. I suppose I must do something about him. I own enough of his debts, and soon, I am certain I will own even more."

"How strange. You are connected to the friend that harmed me through your aunt, and I am acquainted with the friend who harmed you. What an odd coincidence," Elizabeth marveled.

"It does strain credulity," Darcy agreed. "It is a smaller world than we think."

Miss Caroline Bingley was in the garden when Elizabeth and Jane parted from her brother and his friend. Charles went inside a moment after the ladies, while Mr Darcy wandered about the roses a little longer, apparently deep in thought.

"What do you like about her?" Caroline asked out loud as he passed by her deep in his musings without even realising that she was there.

"Miss Bingley!" Darcy jumped nearly out of his skin at this. He looked around wildly to see if they were alone.

“Oh please. I thought we established last summer that I will not be compromising you, Mr Darcy.” Caroline smirked. “You said you hoped we might one day become friends, and I agree. So, in the spirit of friendship, I was wondering why you like her.”

Darcy considered carefully for a moment. “She is everything a gentlewoman ought to be,” he answered. At Caroline’s raised brow, he continued. “Miss Elizabeth has the kindness and ability to see the struggles of others and put them at ease with grace and compassion. She is good humoured and lively. Like your brother, she brings me out of my awkwardness. With a single arch of her brow and a well considered word she puts the impertinent in their place, or gives courage to those who need it. She is intelligent and improves her mind by extensive reading, both for edification and for pleasure. She is also fiercely loyal to those she cares for. So far, I have not found any reason not to consider her utterly delightful.”

Caroline nodded in awe, her mouth an ‘o’ of surprise as he bowed, took his leave of her, and returned to the house.

CHAPTER 34

Elizabeth was not looking forward to the afternoon activity, which was an archery tournament. She never participated in such competitions at home because she was terrible at the sport. Jane, of course, was a competent archer, and looked like perfection doing it. Mary could, at least, distinguish herself, but Elizabeth's skill was abysmal.

The household traipsed down to the lakeside, where many of the outdoor activities were held. The canopies were close enough to catch the breeze from the water, but far enough for the guests to steer clear of the intensely territorial Barnaby. The guests relaxed under the lovely white canopies to watch the play of the others, and enjoyed the afternoon meal. There was a practice course set up as well as the official archery course, complete with drawings of Napoleon to be used as targets. A copy of Wordsworth was to be the prize of the ladies. A fine pocket knife was to be the prize for the men.

Darcy took Elizabeth to the practice course, for she had confessed to him her dread of the afternoon. Elizabeth was looking forward to some competent instruction, for Mr Bennet's approach had been to let his daughters figure the sport out for themselves, and she always felt extremely awkward. Darcy mistakenly decided to use the opportunity to be romantic, before the others came over to join them.

When Elizabeth demonstrated her technique, Darcy came forward and said, "You are too shaky, you must be confident." As he stopped close behind her, he raised his hands and directed first one of her arms, then another, embracing her as he did so. Then bent his mouth down by her ear to whisper into it, and just as he began to

instruct her, she panicked.

This was not helping her confidence at all! Elizabeth suddenly felt as if she could not breathe and spun away, releasing the arrow in the wrong direction, burying it in a tree thirty feet from her intended target. Though the others had missed what led to Elizabeth's abysmal shot, all of their attention was on them now.

"I apologise. That was poorly timed, and not well thought out by me." Darcy stepped back from Elizabeth, putting his hands up. "Will you forgive me?"

"I seem to be doing a great deal of forgiving so far, Mr Darcy." Elizabeth somehow managed to look down her nose at him even though he was nearly thirteen inches taller than her. "I do hope it will not become a habit."

"Oh dear. Poor Lizzy does not enjoy archery. I wish the other ladies and gentlemen had not goaded her into agreeing to compete last night," Jane fretted under the canopy by Miss Crawford and Miss Bertram.

"I believe she has been distracted by my friend," Mr Bingley observed. "Darcy underestimates his effect on the ladies."

"Well, that is no way to learn to shoot, and Mr Darcy ought not advise if he is not going to take the matter seriously," announced Miss Bingley as she moved in the couple's direction. "We take our very lives in our hands, allowing Mr Darcy to instruct such dangerous activities."

"Mr Darcy, whatever have you done to poor Miss Eliza?" Miss Bingley said as she approached them. "Away with you, before you get someone killed." Then, when Darcy protested, she insisted. "I was first in archery every year at Lady Tomlinson's Academy for Young Ladies. Off you go, now."

She turned back to Elizabeth as Darcy returned to the others, and said, “I certainly hope that you like him, for I never thought he would select a lady to marry. He is too exacting. They take bets in London on when he will wed, for no one is ever good enough for him.”

“I am not certain. I thought I did; then he said something that changed my mind. Now I am attempting to decide,” Elizabeth admitted.

“After being chased by every woman alive, including myself, he has chosen the only female who must be convinced. Someone should write a novel about it. I shall speak to that chaperone about it tonight, what is her name?”

“Miss Larkspur,” Elizabeth offered.

“Well, even if I leave here unwed, at least this will be amusing to watch.” Miss Bingley sighed wistfully in Mr Darcy's direction, then turned back to Elizabeth. “Miss Eliza, you have excellent posture, which can only assist you in becoming a superior archer. You are a woman, and I am told your greatest enjoyments are reading and walking, so your arms, like those of many women, are not as strong as your legs. You need additional assistance.”

“I prefer to be called Elizabeth.” Elizabeth could not help but inform the other lady.

“Very well, Miss Elizabeth. Come to the table,” Miss Bingley invited her.

Miss Bingley led her to a nearby table and fit a brace to Elizabeth's arm. “You need a brace to strengthen your arm, and one of these three fingered gloves for your hand. Does that fit well? It should be snug. It will protect you from discomfort.” She led the way back to the practice course, and began instructing Elizabeth on her posture, displaying how far apart she should place her feet, level her arms, and tilt her head.

When she finished explaining how Elizabeth should place her aim, she said, “Never, under any circumstances, point your bow or arrow at any person or animal you do not wish to harm. Do not spin off target when you are distracted or distressed. Someone could be killed if you lost your arrow in such a manner as you did earlier. Do you feel ready?”

“I feel ready,” Elizabeth answered in a steady voice. This had been the instruction she needed. She would forgive Mr Darcy his blunder – again – but she hoped he became less awkward in his courting habits.

“Prepare yourself, and release your arrow,” Miss Bingley instructed.

Elizabeth followed her instructions, and stood open-mouthed when her arrow flew and hit the target. She had not hit the centre of the bullseye. But she had scored.

“That was brilliant, Miss Bennet!” Miss Bingley praised her. “Practice a bit more, but not too much before we begin the tournament, or you will become tired.”

Elizabeth thanked her, and a few other ladies approached Miss Bingley for advice, which she readily shared with the others, gaining herself some new friends amongst the ladies. Miss Crawford was also a skilled archer, and she assisted the others in their practice as well.

“I forgot how much Caroline enjoyed archery,” Bingley said to Darcy as Jane joined the other ladies. “She is not wrong, she was not only first in her year, she was the first in every year. Her school would compete against other ladies’ schools for some accomplishments just before the end of term each summer. She won twice.”

“It is kind of her to help the others,” Darcy admitted.

“She has not told anyone what you said to her last summer, but she has admitted that

she no longer desires to be thought above her company, nor cruel, and that she now does her best to model her behaviour on Miss Darcy's kindness." Bingley smiled at the sight of his sister helping the other ladies.

"I take that as a compliment, not only that she considers my sister worthy of emulation, but also that she valued my opinion enough to reflect upon it and take action," Darcy said in surprise. "I will admit, Miss Bingley has greatly improved since last summer. I have not felt uncomfortable once in her company since we last joined you in Highbury. "

"I have high hopes for Caroline." Bingley turned and helped himself to a biscuit from a platter. "Perhaps she will marry for happiness and find all of her dreams met by her own merits. Not because I have married high enough to place her in good society; she deserves it."

The competition lasted all afternoon. Darcy spent it in Elizabeth's company, very careful not to distract her in any way while she was shooting. Miss Bingley was adamant that archery could be dangerous, and that heckling was not to be tolerated, and Mrs Darlington agreed with her.

It transpired that it was not only Miss Bingley and Miss Crawford who were skilled in archery, but also Miss Abernathy, who was the last person anyone expected to distinguish herself. Apparently archery was a common activity for genteel ladies in her village, and she practiced often with her neighbours.

Miss Abernathy won the ladies' tournament. Mr Pemberton, also a lover of the activity for its romantic nature and connection to poetry, won the pocket knife. Upon learning that the lady who won the copy of Wordsworth was not a reader of poetry, the gentleman arranged to spend the following morning with her, reading from her new volume, and discussing the contents.

Elizabeth placed seventh out of twelve ladies, three places behind Jane, but she was cheerful about it. “In Meryton, I would have placed last, so I can hardly complain. I believe that I shall practice more in the future, now that I understand the technique better.”

CHAPTER 35

One afternoon, the company was playing party games on a day of frightful rainstorms.

“The first game is Two Truths and a Lie . Since we have siblings here, and so many who knew each other before they arrived, we shall make a rule that you may not answer those of your friends and relations. Who shall go first?” asked Mrs Darlington.

“Allow me!” shouted Mr Talbot. “Well! First, I am the second son of a gentleman! Second, I cut my sister’s hair once. Third, I was left handed as a child.”

“Oh! I should not have liked it if you were my brother!” Miss Bertram exclaimed. “I say your second declaration is a lie.”

“I declare that you were never left-handed,” Mr Whittaker observed. “Your penmanship is too neat for you to have ever been forced to conform.”

The others announced their opinions, and at length Mr Talbot admitted that his nanny had caught him just before he committed his assault on his sister’s locks. “I chuse Miss Bertram to go next!”

Miss Bertram thought and then spoke. “First, I am not one-and-twenty. Second, I adore playing the glass armonica. Third, my favourite seaside resort is Ramsgate. ”

“Ramsgate! I would venture that you have never been as far as Eastbourne!” said

Captain Lytton, who, after the opinions of several others, was declared to be correct.

Mary Crawford was chosen next. "First, I had six dogs growing up. Second, I simply adore plum cake. Third, I am terrified of heights."

"Six dogs! I have seen you wrinkle your nose at Lady Millicent's pug," laughed Mr Mercer.

When Elizabeth's turn came, she announced, "First, I am very fond of walking. Second, I am a great composer of sonnets. Third, I once ate an entire pineapple in one sitting."

"I believe that you are no great admirer of sonnets," Darcy declared, eyes twinkling.

"I would wager that you have never composed so much as a limerick," Miss Blackwood replied to her rudely.

"I would wager that until her recent good fortune, Miss Elizabeth never had enough funds to purchase an entire pineapple." Miss Winslow exchanged a sly look with Miss Blackwood, who echoed her agreement.

"I will admit, the pineapple was purchased after my winnings were obtained, but I enjoyed every bite," Elizabeth said playfully. "Mr Darcy, will you oblige us by going next?"

"Certainly, Miss Elizabeth. Let me see. First, I took a first in history at Cambridge. Second, I drink two cups of coffee every morning. Third, I read gothic novels."

"The hell you do. I wager you have never read so much as the first page of a novel!" objected Mr Brentwood. A small squabble broke out between the others as they all disagreed on whether Darcy was likely to have read novels.

“I thought you said two days ago that it was Greek that you took a first in at Cambridge.” Elizabeth raised a brow archly. “You have a younger sister, and you shelter her. I wager you read everything that she reads, and that must include a great many novels.”

“You are precisely right, Miss Elizabeth!” Darcy smiled at her handsomely. “Now, you have already taken your turn, so I shall select Bingley to go next. ”

“Well I am not a very good liar...” Bingley mused. “Hmmm... Let me see... First, I hail from Scarborough. Second, I have two sisters. Three, I am related to the prime minister!” The expression on his face changed so much at the last that Elizabeth could attest that Mr Bingley was indeed a terrible liar. They all laughed over Bingley’s incredible fake connections, as the game passed to Jane.

“I do not believe I am a better liar than Mr Bingley but I shall try.” Jane’s cheeks pinked as she blushed prettily. “First, I am the eldest of my mother’s children. Second, I am very adept at figures and sums. Third, I am very fond of spiders.”

The party broke out into debate, for many disbelieved that Jane was a competent mathematician, but also doubted that she could actually like spiders. Elizabeth and Mary settled the discussion with the admission that not only was Jane the most adept either of them had ever met with numbers, but that she was indeed terrified of spiders.

“What is so amusing, is that one can tell whether it is a false widow spider or a giant house spider by how she screams when she encounters it,” Mary joked as the company laughed at Elizabeth’s mimicry of Jane’s two distinct spider screams.

“Lizzy!” Jane protested good-naturedly as the company laughed at her kindly.

A short while later, the party had moved onto a game called I Love my Love With an

A . Lord Chesley began. “I love my love with an A because she is admirable. I hate my love with an A because she is acerbic. I took her to Acton, to the sign of the acorn. I treated her with apples, and her name is Agnes.”

Mr Talbot went next. “I love my love with a B because she is beautiful. I hate my love with a B because she is blunt. I took her to Bakewell, to the sign of the badger. I treated her with bread, and her name is Bertram.”

The ladies squealed as Mr Pemberton jumped up next and shouted, “I love my love with a C because she is candescent. I hate my love with a C because she is cherubic. I took her to Canterbury, to the sign of the cannon. I treated her with cake, and her name is Charlotte.”

Another round of squeals went round the room as Miss Crawford, Miss Blackwood, Mr Fletcher, and Colonel Gordon took their turns.

Elizabeth noted that the butler entered the room and whispered into Mrs Darlington’s ear. She rose and left them, motioning for Darcy to join her. Elizabeth hoped that it was not more trouble with the tenants.

Perhaps five minutes later, Elizabeth looked up and saw Darcy near the door motioning for her and Georgiana to join him. When they joined him in the hall, he said, “My aunt has an unexpected arrival, and she hopes the two of you might help set her at ease. Will you join us in Aunt Theodosia’s study?”

They followed him, and when they reached the study, Mrs Darlington was there with a strange woman and a young girl who was ill kempt and miserable looking. Her frock fitted her poorly and had seen better days, and she had no stockings on at all. Her hair was bedraggled, and her face looked as if it had been streaked over and over with tears.

“Miss Elizabeth! Thank heavens you are here. You have three younger sisters. You , I am certain, will know what to do with a ten year old girl. I am quite beside myself. Oh, where is Major Bartholomew?” Mrs Darlington fretted.

A moment later, the major entered, having been fetched by the butler. When the door was closed, Mrs Darlington said, “Major, I am so glad you are all here to advise me. Just over ten years ago, my husband’s nephew died, leaving his wife a young widow, and his daughter Edith was born to him posthumously. I read in the papers two years ago that his wife married again, but though I issued many invitations over the years for them or even for Edith alone to visit, they never came. I have just learned that recently, Edith’s mother died, leaving the man guardian to her child. He has apparently left the neighbourhood and abandoned her there in Chawton, with instructions for her to be sent to the workhouse!”

“The parish couldn’t very well see putting the girl in there, not knowing she had family,” the strange woman interrupted. “Her mother’s maid recalled an aunt that visited when Mr Darlington died, and who still wrote each year. I had to take a journey to Bath to visit my sister. I offered to allow the girl to make the journey with me.”

“I beg everyone’s pardon, this is Mrs Quinn, who was kind enough to convey Edith here in her carriage,” said Mrs Darlington apologetically.

“I do hope that you are going to keep her.” Mrs Quinn looked stern. “I have no desire to take her with me to Bath and all the way back to Chawton.”

“I have no notion of what to do with a child at my age,” tutted Mrs Darlington. “Major Bartholomew, I have always relied on your good sense. What shall I do with this girl?”

Mrs Quinn looked on skeptically as the man in the mismatched regalia and boots

regarded the child in consternation. He bent over and looked her long and hard in the eye, straightened up, and declared, "If I were you, I would open the master's apartment directly!"

"Oh Major Bartholomew, thank you ! I knew that I could count on your excellent advice!" exclaimed Mrs Darlington.

"Beg pardon, but that made not a lick of sense," said Mrs Quinn.

"It most certainly did!" declared Elizabeth.

"Precisely, Miss Bennet! It most certainly did; Mrs Quinn, what do you know?" Mrs Darlington declared. "I thank you for bringing Edith to us. Will you require a room for the night?"

"As long as you keep the girl, you all can be as dicked in the nob as you like," Mrs Quinn replied, unruffled. "I'd like to press on for Bath, even in the rain. My sister may not last, unfortunately."

"You are kindness itself, bringing Edith to us under the circumstances, Mrs Quinn," said Darcy smoothly. "Your driver is in the kitchens, taking some refreshment. Allow us to show you to a room where you may refresh yourself and take some tea and a meal before you go. My aunt's stable is tending your horses, though our butler reports that our head groom says it appears that your team has already travelled too far today. I will send you with a driver and horses of my own to speed your journey. My driver will return my horses to me tomorrow, and your driver and horses can follow you later."

"That is very kind of you," Mrs Quinn said stiffly. "I am much obliged."

Darcy took her to the housekeeper's assistant. His aunt had already abandoned them

to set the housekeeper to open the master's rooms. When he returned, he asked Elizabeth and his sister, "Why, exactly, was opening the master's rooms such sensible advice?"

"Because the master's rooms are the only available rooms in the family wing," Elizabeth informed him. "Edith could hardly go on the third floor with the men!" At this she turned away and encouraged Edith and Georgiana to follow her to her rooms. Elizabeth, being the most petite of the guests, would be the one to loan Miss Darlington a gown and nightwear. She ordered a bath and a tray sent up to her room, and with Georgiana's assistance, set to putting Edith at ease.

CHAPTER 36

The next few days brought more rain, so much of it, in fact, that even Elizabeth avoided her morning exercise. These days also brought a number of announcements and progress amongst the guests. The house party guests remained indoors, in the drawing room and music room mostly, and there were party games and a great deal of shrieking and laughter.

Elizabeth and her sisters joined the group in the evenings, but they had been at Ever After End long enough to have become bored of spending all day every day in frivolity, gentlemen or no gentlemen. Jane set about putting their host's still room in order, with the assistance of Mr Bingley and a maid.

Mary spent her days closeted with Mr Elwood discussing a local orphanage. Mr Elwood had received a letter from a friend, asking him to visit an orphanage near Bath of which his friend was on the board. Mary and Mr Elwood toured the place only to find it in far worse shape than expected, and spent their afternoons either visiting the orphanage to speak with the woman in charge of the daily running, or in writing correspondence to Mr Elwood's friend about the matter.

Elizabeth spent her days either with Georgiana, Mrs Darlington, and Edith, or in the library with Darcy, reading aloud to one another or debating the merits of different books. They also spoke a great deal of their homes and families. Elizabeth learned a great deal about Pemberley, which lit up Mr Darcy's eyes when he spoke of it. Darcy learned about Longbourn, Meryton, and Elizabeth's family, who sounded as if most of them were progressing by leaps and bounds since the fortunes of the two eldest girls had improved.

Mrs Darlington was still a little shaken at the idea of inheriting the burden of a young girl to raise. She wanted children in her youth, but now she was uncertain that she was fit to raise a young lady. Elizabeth spent a great deal of time with the child, and found that though she was slightly behind in her lessons, her education had not been terribly neglected, and that she was pleasant, obliging, and appropriately learned in Bible studies for her age. Edith was also well spoken and respectful.

Elizabeth assured her host that all she needed to do was give the girl a home and see to her education, which ought not be too difficult, considering the number of learned persons living in the house. What the child needed most of all was kindness, support, and above all, love, if her aunt could muster it. Georgiana sent to Pemberley for some clothes that she had grown out of when she was Edith's age, and upon learning that the young lady had not yet received instruction on an instrument, Miss Marmaduke set about acquainting the girl with the pianoforte straight away.

One morning, Miss Bingley approached Miss Elizabeth outside the library. "Miss Elizabeth, if I may be so bold, would you assist me in selecting some reading material?"

"Certainly, Miss Bingley, what do you like to read?" Elizabeth asked her as they made their way into the book room.

"I fear I do not know." Miss Bingley laughed self-consciously. "I have never been a great reader, but I have recently decided that I wish to improve my mind; I will admit that I have no notion of where to begin. "

"In that case, we will get you started with a stack of volumes that contains a bit of everything." Elizabeth began to browse the shelves. "Have you any other interests? I know you are good at archery, so this book on form and execution might interest you. Here is another about the history of archery in the sixteenth century. Did you know that when lawn bowling was invented, that Henry VIII was so concerned that it

would replace archery as a form of entertainment that he banned anyone who was not nobility from playing the game? He feared that the common man might lose their skills in archery, which were needed for war. The nobility were only allowed to play lawn bowls on their own property, and one was obliged to pay a special tax to the king in order to maintain a bowling green.”

“I did not know that, but how on earth did you know it?” Miss Bingley laughed.

“I was excessively interested in Henry VIII and his wives when I was thirteen.” Elizabeth smiled at the other lady as she pulled down another volume. “I read everything in my father’s library about him.”

“You do improve your mind by extensive reading!” Caroline exclaimed, impressed. “Mr Darcy spoke of your intelligence, and I see that he is not wrong.”

“That was kind of him to say.” Elizabeth blushed. “Have you an interest in botany perhaps? Or butterflies? Or is there a historical figure that interests you?”

“Hmmm... Perhaps Charles II?” answered Caroline. “We did not study much history at the ladies seminary I attended.”

“ I find the histories of the kings and queens to be fascinating.” Elizabeth pulled down two more volumes. “Charles II is more interesting than most, I positively devoured the accounts of him and his brother James fighting the Great Fire of London side by side with his subjects. He was a terribly romantic figure. You need gothic romance and novels; do you like adventures? Here is Robinson Crusoe . Hmmm, what else... I do enjoy Mrs Radcliffe, and the anonymous one, A Lady . Let us see what is here, oh, Mrs Darlington has Sense and Sensibility , you will enjoy that one, I think, and just for fun, we should add some poetry. You cannot go amiss with Wordsworth, and perhaps some Byron.”

“I believe Lord Chesley claimed an affinity for Wordsworth,” Caroline mused as she opened the book and flipped through it.

“See what you enjoy from this pile of books, and should you like to discuss what you have read or select more, I shall be happy to oblige you.” Elizabeth pulled down the copy of “The Italian” she had been reading the day before, intending to do some reading of her own.

“Thank you, Miss Elizabeth,” said Miss Bingley happily. “You have been very kind.”

“You are welcome, Miss Bingley, and I thought I would mention, some of us gather in my sitting room in the evenings after the others have retired, and we make merry late into the night. I am told you are used to the society of your sister, so if you find yourself in need of feminine company, you have only to knock upon our door,” Elizabeth offered.

“Oh thank you!” Miss Bingley exclaimed. “It has been quiet at night, so I am certain I shall join you sometime. I heard all about the popped corn. That American seems like an interesting girl.”

Elizabeth had noticed that Lord Chesley had begun to pay a great deal of attention to Miss Bingley. They both enjoyed town, and spoke often about the merits of living in the city, with its society and entertainments. Miss Winslow took great exception to the loss of the only nobleman in the group to the daughter of a tradesman, and became positively intolerable in company.

With only three weeks left of the house party, one was finally beginning to see affinities take form between the guests; the gentlemen lined up in the garden each morning when the weather allowed for assistance from Major Bartholomew with bouquets. Miss Abernathy had discovered a newfound interest in poetry, and a passionate tutor in Mr Pemberton. Miss Bertram and Miss Crawford were as thick as

thieves with Mr Talbot and Captain Lytton .

Colonel Gordon seemed very taken with Miss Irving, who arrived in Mrs Darlington's carriage each morning, rain or shine, to spend the entire day. Her father dined with their party each evening, and she returned home in his company at night. Elizabeth was uncertain why, but Mrs Darlington was putting forth a great deal of effort to convince Mr Irving to attend as many of their activities as possible. Perhaps she thought that the constant presence of a vicar gave the party respectability.

Jane was the second to receive an unwanted proposal the day after young Edith arrived. Elizabeth had just returned from strolling the portrait gallery with Mr Darcy. Though it was filled with paintings of the people who owned the house before Mr Darlington inherited, and who were of no relation to their host, Elizabeth would take any opportunity for exercise, considering the terrible weather outdoors.

Elizabeth and Mr Darcy had broken their fast early that morning, so the rest of the company had just finished theirs and were crowded near the breakfast room when Elizabeth and Darcy appeared in the downstairs hall.

"Is someone else getting the mitten?" Darcy asked Miss Dutton, amused that he might know what was happening this time.

"Well ain't you the Philadelphia lawyer." Miss Dutton responded, returning Darcy to his usual state of perplexity when she spoke.

"A what ?" Elizabeth gasped in mirth, unable to control her giggles.

"A smart one." Miss Dutton craned her ear to the cracked door shamelessly.

"Ought we to be eavesdropping?" Darcy asked, his eyebrow raised in disapproval.

“Maybe not, but Miss Bennet doesn’t care for Mr Fletcher, she might need saving,” Miss Dutton said just as Bingley rounded the corner.

“What about Miss Bennet and Mr Fletcher?” he asked.

“Jane is currently in receipt of Mr Fletcher’s addresses?” Elizabeth gasped. Miss Dutton was correct. Jane did not like Mr Fletcher at all, his stern disposition too overbearing for her serene kindness. Elizabeth would have to thank Abigail Dutton later for considering this and paying attention.

The harbinger of propriety, Lady Millicent, crept over and pressed her ear up to the door next to Miss Dutton, as Miss Larkspur scribbled furiously in a corner with her pencil and pad of paper. Mr Bingley stood frozen, face entirely white, looking panicked.

“D-d-darcy...” he stammered. “Miss Bennet would not...”

“Come now, Bingley, you have no desire to be here when they come out. You need a glass of brandy, immediately.” Darcy went directly to his friend and clapped him upon the shoulder.

“But, Jane would never, I am certain of it,” Bingley insisted.

“I am certain you are right, but I went through this myself, just over a week ago. You are better off in the study when they come out. You will hear the news soon enough.” Darcy winked at Elizabeth, who blushed, not having realised that he had been distressed by her proposal from Mr Cartwright. The idea of him as shaken as Mr Bingley affected her profoundly. She had forgiven him in person for his cruel words the morning she had overheard him and Mr Bingley, but the last week in his company, and this new revelation had done much for securing that forgiveness in her heart and restoring her admiration of him in full measure.

No more than two minutes passed before Mr Fletcher emerged from the room, his face bright red and set in stone. It was patently clear he had no joyful tidings to share, but he said nothing and only stormed towards the hall that led to the gentlemen's staircase.

Mrs Darlington and Edith joined them in the hall just as he left them, and their host said, "I presume he must have offered for Miss Bennet?" When those present confirmed her query, she sighed. "I saw that coming a fortnight ago. He is my cousin's son; I warned him that he would not succeed, but he refused to listen."

"Do you think he will leave early, like Mr Cartwright?" Elizabeth asked curiously.

"I doubt it. My cousin has not much to start Samuel with in life, and his best course of action is to find a wife with a modest dowry here. I am certain he will select another and try again before the summer ends." Mrs Darlington shook her head and said to Edith, "Run along and see Miss Marmaduke for your lesson, dear, while I go upstairs to speak with my cousin."

"Someone ought to put poor Bingley out of his misery. That'll be me, then." Captain Lytton gave the ladies a smiling salute as he left them.

Miss Crawford, Miss Bertram, and Miss Abernathy all dispersed to the drawing room as Elizabeth entered the breakfast parlour to see if Jane was well. Her poor sister looked rather shaken. "Are you well, Jane?"

"Oh Lizzy, I am so mortified! Were they all outside the door the way they were with you and Mr Cartwright?" Jane covered her face.

"They were, but not in teasing, Jane. Everyone was rather worried for you, because Mr Fletcher is so stern, and they all know you prefer Mr Bingley." Elizabeth came around the table and took her sister's hand. "They have all gone away, now. Mrs

Darlington thinks Mr Fletcher will remain until August, and try again with a different lady, however, so you will have to see him again.”

“What will Mr Bingley think of me?” Jane said in misery.

“As a matter of fact, Jane, I think perhaps Mr Fletcher might have helped you along there.” Elizabeth patted her sister’s hand comfortingly. “And I must admit that you were correct about Mr Bingley and his intentions towards you. He appeared terrified when he learned that you were in receipt of another man’s addresses. I thought we would need the smelling salts, poor man. Mr Darcy took him away, and said that he went through this last week when Mr Cartwright approached me, and that it would be better for Bingley not to be present when you emerged.”

“Mr Bingley was distressed that I received a proposal from Mr Fletcher? And Mr Darcy’s feelings for you are that marked? Lizzy, how wonderful!” Jane wiped her eyes, for she had shed several tears since Mr Fletcher had stormed out of the room.

“Wonderful? So you do not find Mr Darcy unpleasant and disagreeable any longer?” Elizabeth laughed.

“Lizzy, I am sorry I said that.” Jane blushed. “Since he decided to court you, he has been distant with most of the party, but it is easy to see that with those whom he feels comfortable, like you and his godmother and his friends, that he can be very friendly when it suits him. I am sure I have no reason to think he is anything other than reserved in company.”

“And I have seen that Mr Bingley has recognised your merits, and has genuine interest in you, Jane,” Elizabeth returned. “I am sorry I called him a cad.”

“You were only trying to protect me, and I can hardly fault you for that ,” her sister said with all sincerity.

“Come, let us see if we encounter our gentlemen in the hall.” Elizabeth rose and pulled Jane up by the hand. “You are wearing a most becoming blush after your experience this morning. I think Mr Bingley would like to admire it.”

The ladies met Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy in the hall just as Elizabeth suggested they might, and the gentlemen followed them to the morning room, where Mr Bingley admired Jane’s embroidery and her blushes all morning, and Mr Darcy and Elizabeth read to one another from Walter Scott.

CHAPTER 37

That evening, the company enjoyed another of their weekly dances. The vicar and his daughter attended again, and Miss Irving was radiant under the attention of Colonel Gordon. She was a tall lady, whom Jane had taken under her wing and given the evening gown that Elizabeth had made for her in St Albans, and along with Joan, did a lovely job on the young lady's coiffure.

The evening was magical. Many of the guests had hopes for one guest or another, and those couples danced together all evening, laughing and talking amongst themselves. The ones who had not yet paired up with another guest either made merry with the others or brooded at the corners of the room. Mr Brentwood had quite given up after having been rebuffed by Elizabeth, Miss Penfield, and Miss Abernathy. He spent the evening in conversation with Mr Wifflethorpe, discussing the scholar's research and work on the Tor.

Abigail Dutton was whispering to Miss Larkspur who furiously scribbled into her notebook, and Miss Winslow and Miss Blackwood spent most of the evening in each other's company, when Mr Mercer did not occasionally claim Miss Blackwood for a dance. Mr Fletcher must not intend to mourn Jane for long, for he was now pursuing Miss Penfield assiduously .

Miss Darcy spent the night in the master's apartment with Edith, who was still rather frightened to be there, but Miss Bates joined the others downstairs, and had made fast friends amongst Mrs Darlington, the chaperones, and Mr Irving.

Mr Darcy and Elizabeth danced together for most of the night, laughing and bobbing

about for the faster ones, waltzing slowly and enjoying the romance of the slower dances. The only time they danced with others was when they paired off with Jane and Bingley or Mary and Mr Elwood, for Elizabeth was determined to know the suitors of her sisters better. They all sat together at supper, ignoring the glares of the brooders, such as Mr Fletcher and Miss Penfield, and the resentful, such as Miss Winslow and Miss Blackwood.

After dinner, the sexes separated for perhaps a half hour, and it was one of the worst half hours spent in Miss Winslow's company yet. "Miss Abernathy, you have been so energetic on the dance floor tonight," the lady said snidely. "You remind me so much of my little cousin learning to waltz when she was thirteen! So amusing."

Miss Abernathy paled, as Miss Dutton came to her rescue. "Aurelia, you are begging to be Chicagoed? 1," she said to the other lady in a rather menacing tone. "What I would not give to fix your flint."

"Miss Dutton, have you no other necklace? You wear that cross so often, one would think you owned no other jewellery," Lavinia Blackwood asked sweetly.

Miss Dutton's hand instantly reached up to touch the cross at her throat. "I own no other that I care to wear," she answered in a forbidding tone. "This one was a gift from my mother."

"And very pretty it is, too," Elizabeth complimented her. "I also prefer to wear the garnet cross my father gave me on my come out rather than any other adornment. Your citrine is quite lovely, I do admire the colour."

"How charming." Miss Winslow's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Did you sew that gown yourself, Miss Irving? It is so... quaint."

Elizabeth laughed outright at this while Miss Dutton steamed on Miss Irving's behalf.

Miss Winslow, getting annoyed, finally asked, “And what may I ask, is so amusing?”

“I am just imagining you being Chicagoed by Miss Dutton.” Elizabeth rose and moved to another group, followed by several other ladies who were as tired of Miss Winslow as she was.

Miss Winslow, having found no pleasure in the evening, made her excuses and retired early.

The rest of the dance was even more enjoyable in the absence of Miss Winslow. Even Miss Penfield seemed to enjoy herself now that Mr Fletcher had finally been permanently disabused of any hopes in Jane’s direction. Elizabeth could not think she would be so pleased at being a gentleman’s second choice, but Miss Penfield seemed to be practical in a way that Elizabeth was not when it came to marriage.

Later, Elizabeth was dancing with Mr Bingley when he said to her, “My sister tells me that you have assisted her in selecting some reading material, Miss Elizabeth. That was exceedingly kind of you.”

“Oh! It was nothing, I assure you.” Elizabeth smiled at her sister’s suitor. He was an exceedingly good humoured man. He was just right for Jane, though Elizabeth hoped that he would have more guile than her sister, or the two would be cheated so assiduously by their servants, and so generous with the rest, that they would surely exceed their income every quarter.

“It is not nothing, for Caroline has, in the last year, embarked on a journey of self improvement.” Their conversation paused as they were separated by the dance and then reunited again. “I should certainly not have done half as well at assisting her as you, and I doubt she would have approached Darcy. It is not easy for Caroline to ask others for help.”

“She seems all that is lovely.” Elizabeth looked down the line at Miss Bingley, whose eyes sparkled under the attention of Lord Chesley.

“A year ago, she made Miss Winslow seem as kind and gentle as Miss Bennet,” Mr Bingley assured her. “And it is impossible that she would have tolerated Darcy’s attention to you.”

“Well, whatever her reasons were for improving herself, let us be grateful, and I hope that I come to know her better very soon.” Elizabeth stepped back as the dance ended, and they met Darcy and Jane at the side of the dance floor.

She took Darcy’s arm as they strolled the room, waiting for the next dance to begin. After another breathtaking waltz, Darcy procured a glass of wine for Elizabeth, and they sat in a quiet corner to make conversation. Darcy surveyed Elizabeth for a quiet moment, and eventually she broke the silence.

“Penny for your thoughts, Mr Darcy,” she teased. “I simply cannot sit and wonder what you might be thinking, I demand that you oblige me.”

Darcy was pensive for a drawn out moment. “I was just considering the moments when the clamor of gatherings such as these fade, and one is left to consider only the company they truly desire.”

Elizabeth blushed. “And do you often find such moments, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy smiled handsomely at her. “Only when I am fortunate enough to be in your company, Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth blushed even more as he continued. “There are countless words penned within the volumes of my library, and yet none could adequately capture the tumult of my heart when you are near. It is though each romance written before this evening

is incomplete, waiting for the muse that might complete the story.”

“And have you discovered the ending, Mr Darcy?” Elizabeth gasped at his eloquence.

“Only this, Miss Elizabeth. That should fate be kind, I would spend a lifetime in pursuit of each chapter we might write together.”

Late that evening, Elizabeth and Jane, starry eyed from dancing with their gentlemen all evening, climbed the stairs for bed well after midnight. The ladies all bid one another good night as they separated at the top of the stairs in search of their rooms.

The three sisters joined one another in their parlour once they had changed into their night wear, and shared the crystal jar of biscuits left for them by the staff each night. Mary had news for them.

“Jane, Lizzy, I want to tell you that I am very close to an engagement with Mr Elwood,” she told her two elder sisters, her eyes shining.

“Oh Mary, how lovely!” Elizabeth cried.

“Are you happy, sister?” asked Jane. “Lizzy and I have tried to keep our eyes on you since we arrived, but we have all been so caught up in our own concerns.”

“I am happy, Jane,” Mary promised. “Mr Elwood and I have an understanding, I think, and I expect him to propose very soon.”

“We shall endeavour to stay close to you, so that we may help you find privacy if you need it,” Elizabeth vowed.

“Thank you, Lizzy.” Mary clasped her hand. “Thank you so much for bringing me with you. I like Mr Elwood very much.”

Suddenly they heard running in the hall, and a pounding at the end of the corridor. Elizabeth went to the door of their parlour, and the three looked down the hall to see a footman conferring quietly with Mrs Darlington at the door to the mistress's suite. Mrs Darlington followed the footman to the staircase at a great speed. "Please remain in your rooms, ladies!" she shouted as she went, followed by Mrs Higglebottom.

Darcy joined Bingley, Lord Chesley, and Mr Whittaker for a glass of brandy in Lord Chesley's parlour. Chesley had one of the only two suites on the third floor, most of the rooms being single bedrooms without dressing rooms or parlours attached. The other suite on the third floor was occupied by Major Bartholomew.

The men spoke of their correspondence mostly, matters at their estates, or of business. If they thought of and spoke of nothing but the ladies all day, every day, they would all go mad. They also talked about the estate matters here at Ever After End. The land surveyor's report was complete, and they were only waiting for the rains to subside to call the magistrate and the bailiffs to have the families evicted. It was to be done on a day that the rest of the party travelled to Bath for a shopping excursion. The tenant farms were too far to be seen or heard from the manor, but it was unlikely to be pleasant, and Darcy preferred to have his sister and the rest of the ladies and gentlemen away when the moment arrived.

After perhaps three quarters of an hour, the men thanked Chesley for his fine brandy and returned to their rooms. Before any of them actually reached their quarters, they heard a shout from Lord Chesley's rooms, followed by another, followed by a wail of feminine disappointment. A moment later, Chesley's door opened, Miss Winslow was ejected into the hall, and the door slammed firmly. Miss Winslow was dressed in a sheer nightgown that left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Major Bartholomew strode from the end of the hall as men started opening their doors to watch the show in the corridor. He threw his banyan over Miss Winslow, told Wifflethorpe to send a footman for Mrs Darlington, then followed by Darcy,

escorted Miss Winslow downstairs to the study.

Elizabeth and her sisters were not awake to witness Miss Winslow being marched back to her rooms by Mrs Darlington and Mrs Higglebottom, then left under the supervision of a stern housemaid, but they were informed of everything in the morning by Joan.

“She is already gone, Miss Lizzy. Mrs Darlington had her packed and in a carriage when it was barely dawn. Mr Darcy and some other gentlemen were with Lord Chesley in his parlour drinking brandy and discussing business for over a half hour before she was discovered in Lord Chesley’s bed. Mr Darcy attested to Lord Chesley’s surprise at finding Miss Winslow in his rooms.” Joan was full of the tale. Elizabeth did not approve of the gossiping, but at the same time, she appreciated being armed with the information before going downstairs, particularly since the other ladies would already have the story from their maids. She instructed Joan that she was to discuss the matter no more now that she had done so with her employer.

When Elizabeth and her sisters joined the others downstairs for breakfast, it was as if Miss Winslow had never existed, and the only evidence of her ever having visited Ever After End was Mrs Darlington’s uncharacteristic ill-humour, and the fact that Lord Chesley was rather jumpy around the ladies.

1 ? 19th century American slang for ‘getting a beating.’

CHAPTER 38

The household spent the day after the dance and the compromise playing hide and seek again. The rain had lessened, not enough to go outside, but there was enough improvement to give hope for the morrow.

Mrs Darlington instructed that the rules were to be the same. The music room, her study, and the second and third floor were off limits, and ladies must hide and seek in pairs to prevent compromises. The ground and first floors were theirs to explore and use for hiding, but all doors must remain open. Elizabeth spent the last time the house played hide and seek in the music room with Georgiana and Miss Bates. Today Georgiana and Miss Bates were joined by Miss Darlington, as Edith was now called amongst everyone in the house.

Mary claimed Jane as her hiding partner. Elizabeth claimed Miss Bingley, who looked pleased to have been asked. The gentlemen hid first, and the ladies searched for them in pairs.

Elizabeth and Miss Bingley giggled quietly as they made their way along a corridor on the ground floor. "I do not suppose there is any hope of Mr Darcy hiding behind curtains. He is far too dignified for such childish diversions," Elizabeth said to her companion.

"I would not be surprised to learn he pretended to go and hide, only to go straight to the library and sit down to read," Miss Bingley giggled.

"True, though I can easily imagine him tucked behind a bookshelf, attempting to

finish a chapter in peace while the rest of us scramble about.” Elizabeth peeked into a darkened alcove where a gentleman could be hiding.

“That does sound like him. Once upon a time I would have followed him there, and declared his reserve admirable, for I did not understand it then,” Miss Bingley confessed.

“Have you truly resigned to giving up on him?” Elizabeth asked curiously.

“Entirely,” Miss Bingley insisted, ducking her head behind a door. “When I finally came to understand him, I realised that we want completely different lives. We should be perfectly miserable together. I prefer to find someone who welcomes my smiles; someone who wants what I want.”

“I hope you find success here,” Elizabeth said sincerely.

“I wish you the same, Miss Elizabeth. You know? You may have a point about the library. Let us go and search there.”

The two ladies linked arms, and went to the first floor, where they found Mr Darcy, just as they suspected, sitting in the open and reading a book.

“You found me.” He smiled as he stood when they entered the room together.

“Mr Darcy, you are entirely too predictable,” Elizabeth laughed.

“Not always, Miss Elizabeth. I am only so predictable when I wish to be found.” He grinned at her.

Miss Bingley looked over from where she was snooping around the bookshelves, and said, “If the two of you have finished flirting, Mr Darcy, I will pay you a shilling to

tell me where Lord Chesley is hiding.”

“Miss Bingley, I would never stoop so low as to turn on my fellow man.” Mr Darcy’s eyebrows rose as he tilted his head at a nearby curtain.

Miss Bingley burst into giggles as she pulled the drapes back to reveal Lord Chesley. “You are brave to play such a game after your experience last night, my lord. One might think you would be hiding with a great deal more purpose.”

“I chose my companions with care. Darcy would never abandon me,” Chesley laughed.

Suddenly there was a sneeze from the far end of the room. “Aha!” Miss Bingley cried triumphantly as she rushed behind a bookcase. “Defeated by your susceptibility to dust, Brother!”

“I have no desire to be found by you, Caroline! Go away and ensure Miss Bennet finds me,” they heard Bingley’s voice from behind the stacks.

With a peal of laughter, Miss Bingley returned, and said to Elizabeth and the other two gentlemen, “What shall we do while we wait for the others?”

“I am certain we are meant to return to the drawing room and wait, but must we ?” whined Darcy. “We are such a merry party here.”

Miss Bingley looked at him with a strange expression, “I am certain that must be the nicest thing you have ever said to me, Mr Darcy.”

“I meant every word, Miss Bingley.” Then, to Elizabeth, “Perhaps if we close the door, it will take them longer to locate us.”

Just before anyone could comply, Mary and Jane entered the room followed by Mr Elwood. “We are trying to help Jane find Mr Bingley. Has anyone seen him?” asked Mary, pink-cheeked.

“Mary!” Jane objected in mortification.

“Oh no! You found me, Miss Bennet, what a shame the game has ended so quickly.” Bingley tumbled out from behind the stacks and bowed before Jane. “Quickly, someone lock that door, before anyone spoils our charming group.”

“We are not meant to close the doors,” Elizabeth worried.

“With a group as large as ours, and I am a participant, all should be well,” Darcy insisted, going to lock the door himself. “Now, how should we entertain ourselves?”

“We could read from a play,” suggested Lord Chesley. “Shakespeare?”

“Everyone always wants to read from boring old Shakespeare.” Caroline went to a shelf that Elizabeth had visited when she selected reading material. She pulled out a novel. “We should read from Mrs Radcliffe!”

Elizabeth doubled over in laughter. “Miss Bingley, I take it that you found something acceptable to read from the selections we chose?”

After a hilarious hour spent reading from “The Mysteries of Udolpho,” they heard screaming from far down the hall.

Darcy quickly jumped up from the settee and unlocked the door, then chased the screaming person down the hall and dragged her back.

“Help! Please! Help Miss Blackwood! Someone is murdering Miss Blackwood!”

Miss Abernathy cried in terror.

Try as they might, they could get nothing else from her until Elizabeth slapped the girl lightly. “Charlotte! Where is Miss Blackwood?” she demanded.

“I went to retrieve the Wordsworth from my room. Someone is in her bedroom with her. She was crying out, crying out for God. And there was a man’s voice. Someone is murdering her!”

Darcy’s eyes widened as he and the others jumped up and abandoned Miss Abernathy on the settee as they all raced to the staircase and up the stairs, followed by a maid who joined them halfway there.

Minutes later, they all stood, panting outside the door belonging to Miss Lavinia Blackwood. Emanating from the room was a very different kind of panting, and, as Miss Abernathy reported, a great deal of crying out, accompanied by obviously enthusiastic moans. It was clear that whoever was behind the doors was enjoying themselves immensely.

There was a great deal of disbelief on the faces of the men, and confusion on the faces of the ladies, none of whom quite understood what they were hearing, when Darcy spoke. “I really must insist that the ladies retire to the Bennets’ private parlour immediately. Miss Blackwood is not in the sort of danger you imagine.” He then turned to the maid and said, “Please find my godmother, another of the female chaperones, and Major Bartholomew, and send them here without delay.”

As they were bid, the ladies retreated to Elizabeth’s parlour and rang for tea, though they left the door open to hear what was happening in the hall. Ten minutes later, all four ladies poked their heads out of the door of the Bennets’ private parlour as Mrs Darlington strode purposefully down the hall, followed by Lady Millicent, and unlocked the door to Miss Blackwood’s room. She entered, followed by the

chaperone.

Seconds later, there were shrieks, and Mr Mercer was ejected in his drawers from Miss Blackwood's bedroom, as Lady Millicent followed and beat him about the head with the giant feathered fan that she carried everywhere.

"Fiend! You wicked! Wicked! Man!" Feathers flew about the hall as Lady Millicent emphasized each of her words with a swat from her enormous fan. Mrs Darlington shooed the ladies back into Elizabeth's parlour and closed the door.

Mr Mercer was dragged up to the third floor, beaten soundly, and deposited in his room by the men, who were grim regarding Mercer's shameless disrespect of Mrs Darlington's hospitality. That lady joined him there later, accompanied by Major Bartholomew and Mr Darcy, where she informed him that it was one thing for her not to allow compromises in her home, but he had not compromised a lady. He had openly and brazenly strolled up the stairs to the ladies sleeping quarters, and ravished a woman, however willing. Right in Mrs Darlington's family wing. It was impressed upon Mercer that he would be required to marry Miss Blackwood without delay, or face worse than being called out, for Darcy, Bingley, and Lord Chesley were furious, and there was no doubt the other men would be as well when they learned of it.

The following morning, Mrs Darlington announced the upcoming nuptials. "Over the years, some hasty couples have rushed into the village to purchase common licences from Mr Irving and marry before leaving the neighbourhood, but almost all of my guests have preferred to marry from their homes, or from London or Bath following the end of the house party. Due to the necessity posed by Miss Blackwood and Mr Mercer, the banns will be called this Sunday for their wedding. The house party, which was intended to end on the third of August, will now be extended to the fifth of August."

She waited for the murmurs of her guests to die down before she continued. "If

anyone else wishes to announce their engagements and call the banns this Sunday, for a wedding on August fourth, or if you become engaged in the next few weeks, you may purchase a common license and make it a group wedding, after which, a breakfast will be held here. I am certain I do not need to ask you all to keep your silence on this matter when you leave Ever After End. None of you, I am sure, would wish to have such a tale hanging over the place where you spent the summer, let alone the place where you met your future husband or wife.”

“You have all been robbed of a most romantic activity,” Miss Larkspur spoke up angrily. “Now that a goodly number of pairings have become apparent, I had planned with Mrs Darlington to have the gardens lit and chaperoned at night for moonlit strolls, to better advance your courtships. Sadly, due to the misbehaviour of some people, we have decided that we cannot risk any further mishaps.”

Two hours later, Mary caught Elizabeth and Jane in the morning parlour. The rain had finally ceased, and their young men were in the study, making arrangements for the evictions. Most of the other party guests had elected to spend the day in the gardens, even though they were still quite damp.

“Lizzy, Jane, I want to tell you before anyone else that Mr Elwood has offered for me, and I have accepted him.” Mary said happily .

“Oh Mary, how wonderful! Our mother will be so happy to hear of it!” Jane cried, throwing her arms around her sister. “Will Mr Elwood go to Longbourn?”

“No, I do not believe that necessary. Papa gave Uncle Gardiner a letter allowing me to wed. We will send my uncle an express today, and ask him to arrive early, and bring a marriage settlement with him. Mr Elwood will write to Papa, asking for his blessing.”

“Why would that be necessary?” Elizabeth asked, not having caught onto Mary’s

plan.

“We plan to join the wedding ceremony here, and avoid Mama’s fits,” confirmed Mary.

“Oh Mary, I had hoped that if we all accepted offers, that we might have a triple wedding in Meryton,” Jane objected.

“If you accept offers, we could all be married here.” Mary was firm. She had no desire to suffer her mother. She wished to marry, and begin her new life directly.

“Whatever you decide is best for you, Mary, we will stand by you,” Elizabeth vowed.

At dinner, the engagements of Mr Pemberton and Miss Abernathy, Mr Fletcher and Miss Penfield, and Mr Elwood and Mary were announced. All three couples declared an intention of marrying from Ever After End with Miss Blackwood and Mr Mercer. Mrs Higglebottom and Lady Millicent were beside themselves planning such a wedding and breakfast, and though Mary might have thought she had escaped, she was informed that she must appear in the morning parlour with the other brides each day to assist with wedding preparations. Mary still considered it an escape from the hysterics of Mrs Bennet.

CHAPTER 39

The following morning, Darcy went with Bingley, his godmother, the magistrate, and the bailiffs to evict the six tenants from their farms. There was a great deal of screaming and threats, begging upon the part of the wives, and crying from the children, as well as Mrs Darlington, who wept bitterly that it had come to this. In the end, Darcy was grateful that he had sent for nearly two dozen men from Pemberley to assist. Those men would be staying in the farmhouses and watching the fields at night to ensure that the previous tenants did not return and cause damage. Word was sent to the new tenants, informing them that their cottages were ready, and to arrive with all haste. Before they arrived and before his aunt could object, Darcy himself paid to improve the barns, chicken coops, and farmhouses, even giving each a coat of paint, and having each chimney swept before the new men and their wives arrived.

The following Monday, another garden party was held. After so many days of rain, and then remaining subdued on the Sabbath, the guests were thrilled to be outdoors. Miss Blackwood and Mr Mercer were allowed nowhere in the house or the property without the accompaniment of Lady Millicent or Mr Wifflethorpe. Mrs Darlington was still rather put out and in a curmudgeonly mood. She did not think well of Miss Blackwood or Mr Mercer for taking advantage while she was distracted with the matter of Edith becoming part of her household, and worried the matter would affect the reputation of future parties. She hired several young men from the estate to serve as footmen and guard the halls and staircases that led to the sleeping quarters, and would every year in the future, but bemoaned that it was necessary due to some guests behaving a great deal worse than children.

“I have a ward now, a child to look after and support, and Ever After End must be a

thriving concern so that she might inherit it one day,” she told Darcy and Elizabeth, who were happy for her that she now had family to live with her and love in addition to her other friends, and a new purpose to work towards.

Down on the green the guests played croquet. There was a great deal of squabbling over colored mallets, and the game began. Elizabeth turned out to be unexpectedly good at the sport, and she and Darcy competed awfully, striking each other’s balls, and sending them into the hedges or the woods. Mrs Darlington had learned many years past not to hold the croquet tournaments near the lake, she had lost too many balls that way.

There were so many competitors that they played in turns, and after their game, Elizabeth and Mr Darcy lounged under the canopies with Mrs Darlington and several others. Jane and Mr Bingley were strolling on a distant part of the green, and Mary and Mr Elwood were playing the game.

Elizabeth and Darcy stayed under the canopy and read to one another. They were having a drowsy, pleasant time, when Mrs Darlington sat up and said, “Where is Edith?”

“She was just here.” Elizabeth sat up blinking from the nest of pillows that she was lounging upon.

“She was here when we came and sat down,” Darcy amended. “I cannot think of the last time I looked at her, or recall when she might have left us.”

The rest of the party agreed, and they began to spread out and search for the girl, calling for her loudly. The search carried on for more than a quarter hour, and Mrs Darlington was becoming quite understandably hysterical. Servants were sent to learn if she had returned to the manor, and the garden was to be searched again.

Elizabeth thought back to that morning, when Edith had accompanied Georgiana and Miss Bates for a walk around the lake. She had returned speaking of the rowboats, begging Mrs Darlington to have someone take her out on the water. Her chest filled with foreboding, Elizabeth turned and marched down to the lake with all haste.

It was rather a long walk, though still just in sight of the house and the others, or at least she was in sight of the others until she made her way around a curve of the lake that followed the woods, skirting widely around Barnaby, who was always nearer to the house than the other swans. The swan was flapping about and making a great deal of noise. This was the direction of the dock, and as she approached it, she looked out onto the water, the part of the lake that could not be seen from the house and garden, and her heart caught in her throat as she saw Edith some twenty feet out on the water in a row boat.

“Edith!” she cried. “You must row back, immediately. Do you even know how to swim?”

“Miss Elizabeth, look at me!” the girl cried, standing up in the rowboat.

“Edith, please sit down slowly, and row the boat back to the dock,” Elizabeth begged. “You must not row out onto the lake alone.” Suddenly, the girl flailed, and shrieked; the rowboat turned over, hiding Edith underneath.

Elizabeth knew even though she could swim, having been raised into the country, that it was unlikely that she could swim that far and save the child in her gown. There was nothing else to be done. If she ran back for help, Edith would drown. Elizabeth could not tell if the girl was holding on under the rowboat or if she had slipped beneath the waters, but she had no other choice other than to try and help her .

If she could get her gown and corset off, she would have more hope, but there was not a prayer of getting them off without help. Elizabeth spotted a Kisbee ring? 1

hanging from the dock and she took it and jumped into the water.

The water was freezing, but this was England. Even in the summers, the temperatures were rarely very hot, and most bodies of water remained cold all year. Elizabeth held the ring as she swam out to the overturned rowboat, feeling her heavy skirts dragging her down. She clung to the ring for her life as she approached the boat and lifted one side.

Paralysed in fear, the moment the edge of the boat turned up, Edith began screaming and thrashing, grasping Elizabeth with both hands, and trying to climb up her body. Elizabeth fought against being pushed under, as the girl screamed and flailed. I am not strong enough. She is going to drown us both, Elizabeth thought as she slipped under again. Edith's panic was strong enough to drown them both, even with something to cling to. Elizabeth could not retain hold of the boat, nor the ring as Edith hysterically grasped her and attempted to push herself up and out of the water.

Darcy was attempting to calm his godmother and organise a proper search when he heard the swan making a great deal of noise down by the lake.

“Barnaby, whatever are you on about?” Mrs Higglebottom shouted from nearby. “We are too busy looking for Edith, I cannot possibly visit you now!”

Miss Bates spoke up. “Remember how interested Edith was in the rowboats this morning, Georgie?”

Georgiana gasped. “You do not think she went down there alone, do you?”

Darcy and the others turned and looked towards the lake properly just in time to see Elizabeth approaching the water, and disappearing around the bend of the trees, hundreds of feet away. Suddenly Darcy was running like he had never run before. If the child was in the water, Elizabeth would not hesitate to endanger herself, there was

no doubt about it. Terror squeezed his heart, and his lungs refused to draw air as he ran as he had never done before in his life.

Darcy heard Bingley and the other men following behind, and the shouts of the ladies behind them. The swan rose up from the water, flapping his wings and honking madly as Darcy passed him. As he rounded the curve of the woods, he saw them. Elizabeth was in the water, lifting the overturned rowboat, a life preserver under her other arm. Suddenly the child was out from under the boat, grasping onto Elizabeth in panic and terror, screaming, and unable to see sense or be helped by anyone not a great deal stronger than herself. He saw Edith push Elizabeth under, once, then twice. Elizabeth had not come up a third time when he dove into the water, Bingley and Captain Lytton close behind him.

Edith quickly abandoned Elizabeth and attempted to use Darcy as a Kisbee ring the moment he came within reach. Bingley and Lytton came up quickly behind him in the water and took control of the girl as Darcy dove under the surface, searching for Elizabeth, who was sinking from the weight of her gown.

The rose silk of her gown was bright under the water, helping Darcy find her quickly and bring her to the surface. She gasped for air, allowing herself to go limp in Darcy's arms as he pulled her back to the shore, unwilling to be a hindrance to his efforts as Edith had done to her. Her limbs were cramped from the freezing water, and she was so cold she could barely move anyway.

When they were firmly back on the grass, he embraced her in shock and gratitude that she had been spared any harm, then sank to the ground with her on his lap. Thankfully she had not lost consciousness or taken much water. Suddenly he dropped his arms and regarded her sternly.

“How could you do such a thing, Elizabeth! She could have killed you!” Darcy chastised her severely .

“What else was I to have done? By the time I had gone for help she might have drowned,” Elizabeth protested.

“You drowning with her is hardly better!” he snapped. “When we have children, I vow before God, they shall all learn to swim by age five!”

“Are we having children?” Elizabeth giggled. “You sound so certain.”

“Elizabeth Bennet, I am more certain at this moment than I have ever been about anything in my life, that my children will be yours, or my line will end with me,” he vowed.

Elizabeth sobered for a moment at the weight and heat of his words. “You have yet to ask me a question.” What was it with men who just began speaking of one’s lives together without ever having asked a proper question?

Darcy transferred her from his lap to the ground and knelt before her. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet, I love you most ardently. You have bewitched me, body and soul, and I cannot face the rest of my life without you by my side. Will you have me?”

Elizabeth entwined her fingers with his, and said, “With my whole heart.”

Darcy dipped his head and kissed her lightly, then came down again for a more passionate interlude, which did not last long before the hoots and catcalls of the others brought them back to their senses.

“Oh Lizzy!” Jane cried as she rushed to her sister. “I am engaged as well. Mr Bingley asked me in the garden just before Edith went missing! We all found love, Lizzy. All three of us!”

“And now, we may fulfil Mary’s hopes and avoid Mama by marrying together here

with the others on August fourth.” Elizabeth held out a hand to Darcy who helped her up as she laughed at her sister.

Mrs Darlington rushed over and swept Elizabeth into her arms, crying and thanking her for saving dear Edith, and exclaiming over how very happy she would be to call Elizabeth niece. She then moved onto her godson, patting his cheek and crowing that his mother would be overjoyed for him .

“Oh, Barnaby, dear! You are a hero!” cried Mrs Higglebottom from the edge of the water as the swan rose up from the water, honking and beating his wings magnificently.

At length, Elizabeth and Edith were bundled into the house and hot baths. Exhausted, they both took trays in their rooms that night, and went to bed quite early after all of their great excitement.

1 ? A life preserver invented by Thomas Kisbee in 1792.

CHAPTER 40

The next morning at breakfast, the engagements of Colonel Gordon and Miss Irving, Darcy and Elizabeth, Bingley and Jane, Mr Talbot and Miss Bertram, and Captain Lytton and Miss Crawford were announced. Miss Crawford and Miss Bertram were returning to Miss Bertram's home, Mansfield Park, for their double wedding, But the Bennet ladies and Miss Irving would wed with the group on August fourth.

Messers Whittaker and Brentwood declared that their season at Ever After End had not been successful, but they were not bitter about it, and even suggested that they might try again next year. Darcy and Bingley generously offered to pay their fees, considering that they had shown up unexpectedly and taken two of the ladies from consideration.

Miss Dutton had not met a single gentleman at the house party that suited her, but she was unsurprised. "My mother made me promise I'd marry a gentleman, but all the gentlemen in New York want old money, and all the gentlemen here could pass for girls. Maybe I'll travel the continent next summer if the war ends, as everyone says it must. Find me a gentleman that can handle himself, if you take my meaning. "

Elizabeth was not certain that she did take Miss Dutton's meaning, but she invited the American girl to stand up with her, and possibly visit her at Pemberley. Mr Bingley said that perhaps Miss Dutton might travel with him and Jane to the north when they visited his family.

"A Yorkshire gentleman is just what the lady requires," Bingley insisted.

“I think she would do better with a highlander. Her name is Scottish, and a great number of Scots represent the immigrants who have settled in Tennessee, or so I am told. A highlander might do better at handling her and would not mind her slang,” Darcy differed. “I shall sound out my uncle on who we might invite when she visits. Matlock spends more time at his Scottish seat than I do mine.”

Elizabeth and her sisters had perfectly lovely gowns worn only once or twice that would serve as their wedding gowns, and Jane gave a lovely ball gown to Miss Irving for the wedding. Darcy and Bingley insisted upon paying for the entire wedding breakfast, and though his aunt objected, Darcy spoke with the local merchants, Lady Millicent, and Mrs Higglebottom, and saw to it that the bills were sent to him.

“You throw these parties to earn funds, Aunt, I could hardly allow you to spend your income on my wedding breakfast,” he insisted.

Expresses had been sent with all haste to Mr Gardiner and the solicitors of the men, and also an express with letters from all three gentlemen to Mr Bennet. Mr and Mrs Gardiner, with every intention of attending their nieces’ wedding, stopped on their journey in Meryton to learn that Mr Bennet had never even opened the packet, nor the two missives that Mr Gardiner had sent since. Mr Bennet was entirely disinterested in his daughters’ affairs, and only hoped that Jane’s marriage would take her away from Meryton, so that she might cease disturbing him about improvements on the estate.

He would not get his wish, for Mr Bingley announced that he had gone ahead of Mr Cartwright, and leased Netherfield, with an intention to purchase. “Jane will be close by so that she might oversee whatever she must attend to at Longbourn, and I will be there to assist her if she needs me.” It was suggested that perhaps Mr Bingley might invite Mr Cartwright for a visit to meet the beauties of Meryton, and this idea was met with a great deal of enthusiasm for a small celebratory house party at Netherfield.

Lydia and Kitty accompanied their aunt and uncle to Somerset for the wedding. Mrs

Bennet was beside herself that Jane would marry a wealthy man so far from home where her mother could not enjoy the proceedings, for Mrs Bennet never traveled comfortably. Jane felt guilty, but Elizabeth and Mary quickly pointed out that she was about to marry for love without being compelled to wait for months by her mother, who would make such a spectacle of the arrangements that the entire debacle would be mortifying from start to finish. Mrs Bennet had, like her two youngest, improved in many ways, but some things would never change.

Mr Gardiner corresponded with Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley before departing London. His requirements for his nieces' settlements were accommodated and more in their marriage articles. Elizabeth's fortune was placed into trust. She had no need of it, and so she insisted on dividing it between Mary, Kitty, and Lydia's dowries, though like their mother's dowry, those funds would not be released until after that lady's death, for she would see her mother cared for first. Mr Elwood had a modest but comfortable fortune, but Elizabeth wished for Mary to have additional protection in case she should be widowed, for her widow's portion would be smaller than those of her two older sisters. Darcy's settlement endowed Elizabeth with a fortune of fifty thousand pounds upon his death, and the right to remain at Pemberley, its dower house, or Darcy House in town for her lifetime. Her house in town continued to be let to save more funds for Mrs Bennet's future support, to assist her after her husband's death, and would likely one day be inherited by a younger son of Elizabeth's.

Within a fortnight, Mr Audley and Miss Ashcroft announced their engagement. They would remain to see the others wed, but then return to Miss Audley's home for her nuptials. Lord Chesley also proposed to Miss Bingley, who was incandescent with happiness. The couple would marry at his estate before winter, then would open Chesley House in Grosvenor Square for the season.

It is said that rain on one's wedding day is supposed to be good luck, but Elizabeth was grateful that she need not arrive at the church with her petticoats six inches deep in mud. The sun was nearly blinding, and the deep blue sky boasted a number of

cheerful clouds as Elizabeth rode to the church in her carriage with her uncle and sisters.

They received a surprise the day before the wedding. Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared, having been away on the front for more than a year. He called at Darcy House as soon as he arrived in London, then set out for Somerset immediately upon learning that he would soon miss his cousin's wedding if he did not hurry. Darcy and Georgiana were overjoyed by his arrival, and Elizabeth was happy to meet and welcome anyone who brought her new family such happiness.

Colonel Fitzwilliam stood up with Darcy, and as Elizabeth peered at him over Darcy's shoulder, she spied him grinning at her attendant. Elizabeth turned slightly and spied Miss Dutton grinning right back, and making eyes at the man who would momentarily be Elizabeth's cousin.

Elizabeth and Darcy were the fourth couple to be wed, and they stood back when their vows were finished, and watched Mary and Mr Elwood speak theirs. Elizabeth hugged her younger sister tightly when her ceremony was complete, and later, when the register had been signed and they were all outside, she laughed and embraced her relations with joy, holding her husband's hand tightly all the while.

"I do not think Miss Dutton will require a journey to Yorkshire or Scotland," Elizabeth whispered as she squeezed Jane tightly to her again.

"I shall invite them both to Netherfield with Mr Cartwright next month," Jane promised.

That is a good idea , Elizabeth thought as her new husband handed her up into his carriage and threw coins for the village children. Elizabeth and Darcy were to go to his family's seaside cottage in Brighton for one month. Mary and Mr Elwood were to visit Ramsgate for one month, and Jane and Bingley were to Bath for two weeks

before they went to Netherfield to open the house and prepare for their sisters, new brothers, and friends to arrive a fortnight later.

Georgiana would travel to Matlock House in London with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Miss Bates before joining the Darcys in Meryton. Lord Chesley, Miss Dutton, Mr Cartwright, and Mr Whittaker would join their party at Netherfield in a month as well, but at the enormous wedding breakfast that was held for the couples and the few relations who had travelled to see them wed, they all learned that Miss Bates would soon be leaving the Darcy family when Mr Irving announced during the breakfast that he had proposed to Miss Bates, and that she had accepted him. His daughter, now Mrs Gordon, was overjoyed for them. The wedding would be in Highbury in the second week of October, and the Darcys and Bingleys were quick to agree to attend.

At the wedding breakfast, Mrs Darlington stood and made a toast. "I cannot deny that this year's house party at Ever After End has been the most eventful of any I have ever hosted in all of my time in Somerset. This is partially because a few of you were scandalously naughty !" She narrowed her eyes at Mr and Mrs Mercer, whose antics she had not yet forgiven. "But the shenanigans of my guests aside, this summer I have faced hardship on my estate, and received help from those for whom I am most grateful. Of all the unexpected guests, unexpected family, and unexpected joy I received this summer, I am most grateful for the unexpected blessing of seeing my beloved godson find his happiness here at Ever After End, and know that my dearest friend, his mother, is smiling on him today, just as the lost loved ones of all my guests are smiling on them. I congratulate you all, and will be very happy for you to name all of your daughters Theodosia."

"We shall, Aunt, and when they are ready to marry, we shall avoid the London season, and send them here for summers at Ever After End." Darcy raised his glass and smiled at his beautiful new wife.

"Is this the part where we live happily ever after?" Elizabeth asked her husband.

“It is my darling. We shall all live happily ever after.” Darcy promised.

~ The End ~

EPILOGUE

Friday, 12 June, 1822

Ever After End,

Somerset

Elizabeth lounged upon a pile of pillows under a white canopy by the lake at Ever After End. She looked over at the water as twenty-year-old Edith Darlington was rowed past by the third son of an impoverished viscount, Mr Geoffrey Putnam. Giving thanks that her young friend was not in need of rescue from the lake, Elizabeth looked about sleepily for her family.

Eight year old Bennet Darcy was fishing at the edge of the water with his father and four year old brother Fitzwilliam. Six year old Anne Theodosia was on a pony led by a groom and her nurse close by.

Nearby, Mrs Theodosia Darlington sat surrounded by the couples that had married after meeting at her house parties over the years. This summer, Ever After End would host a very different kind of house party. Edith was to be married on the first of August to a man she had met in Derbyshire while visiting Pemberley, and she had envisioned a very different sort of celebration this summer .

A few feet away sat Mrs Irving, Miss Bates as was. After seven happy years of marriage, Mr Irving had sadly died of a stomach complaint. Mrs Darlington invited the parson's wife, who had become her close friend over the years, to join the

chaperones at Ever After End, for Mrs Higglebottom died the year that Barnaby did not return with the swans from his migration, and they were missing a chaperone. Mrs Irving visited cherished friends and relations in Highbury, Yorkshire, and Derbyshire often, and enjoyed watching over the guests at Ever After End each summer.

Edith had enjoyed a long engagement, and spent nearly a year planning and writing letters all over the country, even some to America and Canada. This summer, Ever After End was filled with the couples who had met there each year and their families, and so many had accepted that Darcy had leased an enormous manor that was empty three miles away to hold all of the families that Ever After End could not accommodate.

Each day, the green was covered in guests and children, pilgrimages were made to Glastonbury Abbey, Glastonbury Tor, Bath, and the other places that guests had visited during their courtships. Considering the sheer number of guests this year, the majority of the couples and their families would leave on the 22nd of July, and only those closest to Mrs Darlington and Edith would remain for the wedding. The estate had been more than profitable for four years now, but the matchmaking parties had become a tradition at Ever After End. Mr and Mrs Putnam would return to live there after their wedding trip, and the parties would resume the following summer; the profits would be set aside for dowries and futures for their children.

Theodosia Darlington had never before considered how much of a difference she had made in the world until the night before, when Edith read aloud at dinner some letters sent to her in praise and love by couples who had emigrated to America, Canada, across the continent, or in one case, India. Sketches of children were included, and small tokens of gratitude accompanied the missives. Whenever Mrs Darlington considered it, and looked around at all of the lovely families that existed because of her estate, she became quite overwhelmed.

Elizabeth noted Jane and Charles Bingley playing shuttlecock with their five

daughters, Dorothy, Theodosia, Louisa, Caroline, and Elizabeth; Mary and Mr Elwood were on the water in a rowboat with their son, Theodore. She rose and looked about for the bonnet that she had cast aside before resting, and settled her hand on the small bulge in her stomach. She expected the next little Darcy to arrive sometime in November.

She eventually gave up on finding her bonnet, and, shading her eyes from the sun with her hand, set off for the lakeside and her family.

“Mama!” Anne Theodosia cried when she saw her mother. Elizabeth’s daughter scrambled down from the pony and ran to her mother, who waved the nurse away for a well earned rest of her own.

“Mama, may I go inside and write a fairy tale with Miss Larkspur?” Anne begged. Miss Larkspur was a favourite of Anne’s.

“Miss Larkspur is sitting there under the tent, darling.” Elizabeth pointed out her daughter’s prey, and watched as she ran to her favourite person in Somerset. Caroline Bingley had indeed caught Miss Larkspur’s ear before their long ago departure from Ever After End. Miss Larkspur’s next romance after their house party in 1812 about the gentleman who eschewed all the ladies who pursued him until he found one that must be convinced was now on its fourth edition, and had been adapted for the stage.

“Do you think the characters in her fairy tale will live happily ever after?” Darcy asked, coming up behind her and wrapping an arm about her side.

“Of course, darling,” Elizabeth laid her head on his shoulder. “There is no other conclusion at Ever After End.”