



Fitzwilliam Darcy, Hero

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Category: Historical

Description: Fitzwilliam Darcy, Hero is a duology comprised of two previously published novella length variations of Jane Austens Pride and Prejudice.

Mr Darcys Abducted Bride by Julie Cooper

ON THE DAY AFTER MR BINGLEYS BALL at Netherfield Park, Fitzwilliam Darcy is determined to leave Hertfordshire and put the delightfully beguiling Elizabeth Bennet out of his mind. As he is preparing to leave, however, he hears some horrifying news. Mr Collins, it seems, intends to make Elizabeth an offer of marriage. Mrs Bennet—panicked by Mr Bennet's illness—will stop at nothing to ensure that her obstinate, headstrong girl accepts it and becomes Mrs Collins as soon as is possible.

RUSHING TO LONGBOURN, Darcy finds that Mrs Bennet has contrived to make Elizabeth out of her wits while she and Mr Collins plan for an immediate wedding. Recognising that Elizabeth will find herself bound to a ridiculous man for life, Darcy acts a hero, rescuing her and removing her from harm, intending to keep her away from the dastardly duo until she has regained her wits.

DAZED AND CONFUSED BY THE STRANGE GOINGS-ON at Longbourn, Elizabeth finds herself thrust into a terrifying journey alone with Mr Darcy. Mr Collins and her mother will stop at nothing to see their plans carried to fruition, and Mr Darcy is her only chance of salvation. Can she learn to trust him quickly enough to discern which of the choices before her will lead to happiness?

A Case of Some Urgency by Mary Smythe

When Lydia Bennet elopes with George Wickham it seems certain that the fledging second chance at love between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy has been destroyed. Dashing home from her visit to Pemberley, Elizabeth Bennet re-reads Darcy's letter and regrets what surely can never be, not now.

Desperate times often call for desperate measures, as Mr Bennet is soon to discover under the most painful of circumstances. His search for Lydia and Wickham is proving unfruitful and still worse—he has discovered signs of a secret romance between his most sensible second daughter and none other than Mr Darcy.

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One

Mrs Bennet despised her houseguest. To be sure, there was not much to like about him, unless one took seriously his compliments to her fine table, which she accepted as her due. Even in these, however, he had an air of rehearsed puffery; he would doubtless just as enthusiastically apply his accolades to Lady Lucas's table, which was mean in comparison.

Fleetingly, she felt a trace of guilt for her resolve that Elizabeth must marry him, regardless.

Quickly, however, she quashed it. Had she loved Thomas Bennet, ten years older than herself and not nearly so handsome as the least of her suitors? No, she had not. Sensibly, her own mother had, by means neither gentle nor affectionate, drawn her seventeen-year-old daughter's attention to the advantages of the match, the size of the home she would inevitably rule, and the degree to which her future children would be elevated. It was for those unknown, unborn offspring that she had sacrificed her girlhood fancies; now was the opportunity for one of them to keep the dream alive, to preserve the Longbourn estate unto her grandchildren.

To this end, she had overcome her inclination to put Mr William Collins in the third-storey spare room usually occupied by draughts and damp; as well, she stifled her hopes that he might not too heartily anticipate his future occupation of her home. Instead, she had begrudgingly prepared for him her nicest guest chambers—a suite of rooms across from Mr Bennet's. Elizabeth was unlikely to be a comfortable bride; it was important that he not be overeager to look elsewhere.

Surely she will not look this gift horse in the mouth , Mrs Bennet reassured herself. Instead of a bleak, impoverished life as a spinster, she would gain a lovely residence in Kent in the present and become mistress of her girlhood home in the future.

Still, a conversation overheard the previous evening had unnerved her.

Mr Bennet had been unable to attend her sister Philips's dinner party due to his latest health complaint—which was nothing unusual, for he hated dinner parties as much as he loved his illnesses. Elizabeth, in relating to him of the evening's events afterwards, had used the time to complain of that awful Mr Darcy's past treatment of Mr Wickham. Had there been something of passion, perhaps, in her long and detailed recital of Wickham's injuries? Could she be developing a *tendre* for the handsome lieutenant? There was no future in it!

Naturally, Mrs Bennet found nothing wrong with a bit of flirtation . At the age of one-and-forty, a longing for the youth and beauty of her past almost tempted her to flirt with the fine-looking man herself. But passion was tantalising, and it would be even more difficult for Elizabeth to see the advantages of connexion to the odious Mr Collins with passion's cloying tentacles gripping her heart. Her daughter had recounted the lieutenant's pitiful tales until Mrs Bennet had been forced to interrupt with complaints of her own—which, predictably, caused Mr Bennet to begin whingeing again about his sufferings, effectively turning Lizzy's attention back to himself.

Naturally, the girl had been all solicitousness then, full of consideration towards her father's latest ailment; she always gave his grumblings far more consideration than her mother's. The complaint was not a serious one; Mr Bennet's infirmities never were, and Mrs Bennet half expected that he employed them in order to keep the attention of his family— especially Elizabeth—upon himself, and to exacerbate her own nerves with the ever-present reminder that he held only life tenancy in his own estate. Still, it was also true that he would not easily part with his favoured daughter,

much less to a man the two both enjoyed ridiculing.

A marriage to Mr Collins is in her best interests , she thought with renewed resolution. Could her husband so blatantly ignore Lizzy's future? Surely, he wanted the best for his favourite.

Yet, a niggling discomfort reminded her of how easily he ignored so many things, herself most of all. The workings of his mind remained ever-baffling.

The arrival of Mrs Hill interrupted her muddled thoughts. "Mrs Bennet, Mr Jones has come to see the master. I took him up."

"Thank you, Hill," she mumbled, still distracted by her chaotic contemplations.

"You are so very welcome," the older lady answered cheerfully, quickly departing and leaving Mrs Bennet with raised brows. It was another mystery. Hill had been in an exceedingly jolly mood of late, with a spring in her step and a jaunty disposition unnatural to her. It was disconcerting, and Mrs Bennet had worries enough.

Sighing, she took herself to her husband's chambers to learn the latest diagnosis for such ailments as he pretended to possess.

"I have made him a special tonic. He is to have a dose twice daily, without exception. It will cleanse his corrupted intestine while strengthening his heart."

"Why not calomel?" Mrs Bennet asked. Whatever his verdict on the source and cause of any affliction, Mr Jones always prescribed calomel.

"This situation requires a more serious treatment."

Mr Bennet glanced at her, a definite note of triumph in his gaze. ' You see, my

complaint is serious ,’ his look said. ‘ I told you so .’

Fear filled her breast. She was accustomed to taking lightly his agitations, just as he took hers. That he should be truly unwell was terrifying! That her future should be so gravely at risk, was unbearable.

Mr Jones measured a dosage from a large bottle and administered it to his patient. Unlike the calomel—which did nothing much that she could tell except make the chamber-pot an immediate necessity—a beatific smile shortly thereafter emerged in place of Mr Bennet’s usual smirk.

“Darling,” he said to his wife, taking her hand and tugging her closer. “Come sit with me.”

She frowned.

“My work is done here,” Mr Jones announced. “My joints tell me that the rain on the horizon shall be our first true winter storm, and I wish to be home ’ere it arrives. Call for me if he worsens.”

It was two hours before Mrs Bennet could extract herself from her husband’s chambers. Whatever was in that medicine put her husband in an excessively friendly mood, and not at all as if he were lying at death’s door. Yet she could not ignore the apothecary’s words; it was more important than ever that the repulsive Mr Collins be chained to the welfare of her family by the bonds of matrimony.

As if she had summoned him, Collins’s oily voice rang out from the open door of his sitting room. After a very few moments of eavesdropping, she understood them to be a rehearsal of a marriage proposal! To have happened upon him, and it, at this particular moment was divine sanction, and she could not overlook it; nor, however, could she overlook his choice of wording, with its liberal stream of blunders. Lizzy

would not appreciate any of it, and Mr Bennet, in his current state of inebriety, would be of no help in forcing her to think past the inconvenience of a stupid husband and towards the rewards of a life of security and ease. In fact, forcing Lizzy to do much of anything was easier said than done.

There was no hope for it: she must delay this proposal until her husband was well, if she did nothing else.

“My dear Cousin Jane...no, no, no, Cousin Elizabeth . Elizabeth. Elizabeth,” Mr Collins mumbled, repeating her name a few more times before continuing. “Almost as soon as I entered my future home, I singled you out as the companion of my life. I am run away by my feelings?—”

Boldly she rapped on the door jamb.

When he saw his visitor, Mr Collins’s unctuous smile creased his face; he was not at all embarrassed, it seemed, at the possibility he had been overheard. His next words proved it.

“Ah, how opportune your visit! I was only gathering my thoughts in preparation for a forthcoming event we both, if I may so delicately deduce, anticipate. May I hope, Madam, for your approval when I solicit the honour of a private audience with your fair daughter, Jane—pardon, not Jane—with Elizabeth , this morning?”

This morning! So soon! Even knowing that the marriage was for the best possible motive, no female would appreciate so little an attempt at wooing. How stupid was he?

Incredibly so, it appeared. And Mr Bennet was in no condition to provide any sort of reinforcement—if he even would! Frantically, she searched her mind for any possible means of delaying.

Her mind, for once, complied.

“Oh dear! Yes—certainly. I am sure Lizzy will be very happy—I am sure she can have no objection. One little request, just a small thing, surely, but meaning a great deal to the bride. This one ambition has been the greatest desire of her heart since a child. She has always wished, nay, longed , to be married out of the common way. By a licence, that is.”

She saw the shocked look upon his face, and hurried to continue before he could voice his objections.

“Of course, her dreams are not only romantic. Just think—once a fellow and his lady have decided to wed, why wait three long weeks for the banns to be called, when he can make her his own the very next day?”

She saw the moment the idiot realised, by the lascivious expression crossing his face, that he would have a female in his bed at least three weeks sooner by this method; she gagged a little at the idea of it. Resolutely, however, she pressed her advantage.

“Now, a smart man would go to town and procure the licence before he says anything at all to his bride.”

His brow furrowed. “He would? Why?”

Yes, Fanny, why? Think! “Because...because what woman could resist an offer revealing that her suitor has paid such attention to her desires as to have already procured it! What affections for that man shall be stirred within her breast at his consideration!”

“Hmm. Perhaps so. However, might she also, and rightly, despise the extravagance of this gesture, and feel instead that a husband who avoids such spendthrift ways is a

superior choice of mate? Besides, surely Cousin Jane—er, rather, Elizabeth—would be flattered at receiving so good an offer, as to make such deeds unnecessary?”

Unsurprisingly, he was a tight-fisted miser who believed the gift of his ample person to be ample reward for any female lucky enough to earn his attention. It was a temptation to knock him over the head, bury his body in a shallow grave, and hope that the next in line to inherit was someone even slightly worthier. God would surely understand. But she forced herself to think past the impulse, speaking instead to his parsimonious soul.

“Oh, but of course I would never expect you to finance this romantic scheme. Your sacrifice of time and effort in order to fulfil Lizzy’s dreams is sufficient contribution. I will naturally provide you with adequate funds to compensate you for the expenses of the trip... Shall we say, twenty pounds?”

She did not suppose he could accomplish the whole thing in one day. If she were truly fortunate, Mr Jones’s predicted storms would delay him further— if she could just send him on his way before the bad weather arrived. But even counting fare to London and back, a night or two at an inn, and a bond to secure the licence, twenty pounds was far more than was necessary. As she had guessed, his small eyes alit with greed; his obstinacy gave way before his avarice.

“I suppose it is the right thing to do, indulging my bride in her dreams,” Mr Collins opined. “I am a generous man always, I hope, and she should not be made to wonder whether her husband will do all that is necessary to increase her happiness. Still, perhaps I ought to speak to her first, so that she might experience the pleasures of anticipation.”

“No!” Mrs Bennet’s protest was far louder than she had meant, and he reared back in alarm. She moderated her tone. “It is just that the surprise is everything to her. It will ruin all if you reveal the gift before she is allowed to open the package, so to speak.”

Reluctantly, and after a few more arguments, he agreed. She sent Hattie to help him pack for his journey, and then set about the tedious task of writing a letter of permission for the underage Elizabeth's marriage, and then the even more tedious task of having Mr Bennet sign it without enquiry as to what it was for. Fortunately, his medication precluded all sensible thought, but it required considerable amorous effort instead and so, while thus engaged, she wheedled the twenty pounds from him, which saved her the further exertion of searching his book-room. All told, it was a successful, albeit exhausting, morning. She had gained herself at least a day and maybe three for her husband's recovery; certainly, he would force Elizabeth's agreement—and possibly by then, Mr Collins might even have memorised her name.

All five of the Bennet sisters displayed varying degrees of surprise when Mr Collins announced his departure for London in the early afternoon.

“Oh, but do you intend to miss the ball?” Lydia exclaimed.

“Perhaps our cousin does not find such amusements proper, and has no intention of accepting Mr Bingley's invitation,” Elizabeth offered smilingly.

At this, Mr Collins turned to her. “I am by no means of such an opinion. I assure you that I am so far from objecting to dancing myself, that I shall take this opportunity of soliciting your hand, Cousin Elizabeth, for the two first dances especially—a preference which I trust my cousin Jane will attribute to the right cause, and not to any disrespect for her.”

Mrs Bennet watched with chagrin as Elizabeth's face fell at this open sign of his preference for her, and the distaste with which she accepted. It was disheartening to see, and all her earlier relief at achieving a brief delay plummeted. How was she to ensure the girl accepted his crucial offer of marriage?

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Two

Five days later

Mrs Bennet slumped against the wall just beyond Mr Collins's door. After returning from the ball at Netherfield far too late, and attending to Mr Bennet's all-too-frequent requests for companionship far too early, she departed his bedchamber only to hear, once again, the sonorous tones of Mr Collins's marriage proposal rehearsal coming from his sitting room.

Yes, Mr Collins had returned from London, but no—she had made absolutely no inroads into bettering Lizzy's opinion of him. It had been all she could do to convince him to wait until after the ball to propose.

Nor had his lovemaking undergone any substantial improvement in his absence. He now seemed to remember to whom he proposed, but that was the best she could say for it. The rest was a long, tedious recitation of his reasons for marrying and the bride's good fortune that he was willing to marry her . There was nothing at all in it of his good fortune in gaining a wife so much prettier and more intelligent than himself.

Mr Jones had declared that he did not see enough improvement in Mr Bennet's health, and the medication continued—despite Mrs Bennet's opinion of her husband's vigour. The odds of Lizzy accepting the vicar's proposal without her father's help in forcing the issue were slim.

Cursing Collins silently for waking so early after so late a night, when sensible folks

ought to remain in their beds until noon, she could think of nothing more useful than locking the odious vicar into his room and pretending the door was stuck, when a momentous idea occurred to her.

Its sudden appearance in her fatigued brain must surely signal more divine approval: Mr Bennet's tonic .

Its medicinal properties resulted in, um, congenial effects towards those of another sex. It might not work upon females as it did for males; neither had she any idea whether it would work as well upon a fellow whom one despised. She had not observed Mr Bennet's attentions straying to the maids, so it did not render one mindless—Lizzy might still recognise Mr Collins and all of her former opinions of his desirability. Unless of course...she increased, perhaps even doubled or tripled the dosage? But how could she arrange for Lizzy to ingest it?

Another heavenly sanction—in the form of a remembered favourite—imbued her with an idea: Hill's candied ginger syrup. Its strength was enough to disguise any unusual flavour, and she always kept some on hand, as it was useful in elevating simple desserts into works of art in the case of unexpected company. Elizabeth was excessively fond of it, and if it was sugared well, and served with the currant pudding Cook had prepared as a masterpiece for tonight's table, and if Mrs Bennet ensured that Lizzy consumed every bite...well, it would have to do. Afterwards, she would arrange for an audience with Mr Collins; Lizzy would, in her newly amenable state, agree to the marriage, and Mrs Bennet would hurry the couple to Mr Palmer with the precious licence in hand, and see them wed before noon today!

“Hill!” she screeched, hurrying towards the kitchen to bully Cook into surrendering her pudding. “Hill! I need you at once!”

The ball had been an utter failure. If not for Jane's triumph—two sets with Mr Bingley, one of which was the supper dance with his escort and full attention

thereafter—it would have been a complete waste of a new dress. But Elizabeth laughed to herself at the drama in these sentiments, for a new dress was never wasted, and had it not been for her fury at the callous Mr Darcy's pride in his hideous treatment of Mr Wickham, the lieutenant's absence from all festivities, and the ruin of her shoe roses in that first set with the clumsy Mr Collins, she would have said the evening had been highly entertaining. She had danced nearly every set, and though her partners—with the notable exception of Mr Darcy—were unremarkable, the food, decorations, music, and company had been excellent. Whatever one wished to say about Miss Bingley's character, she hosted an excellent party.

Avoiding Mr Collins thereafter had been problematic, and overhearing his bold addresses to Mr Darcy—giving that gentleman yet another reason to look down upon the first family of Longbourn village—excruciating. Why did her cousin single her out for his attention? If he thought to woo her in the future—and she sincerely hoped it was not so—she would have to ensure she was away visiting the Gardiners upon his next visit. At least she had not had to bear with his irksome company for the four days preceding the ball. Though he had made much of the mystery behind his reasons for leaving, she believed he had meant to be gone only a day or so. The succession of rain which had inundated the valley from the advent of his departure until the morning of the ball had, evidently, delayed his journey both going and coming, with the result of his return arrival at Longbourn barely in time to dress for the event. His conversation during their dance consisted of a long litany of complaints of mud—horses who could not walk in it, coachmen who could not navigate it, and clothing ruined by it. Had she not been certain of her innocence in all matters pertaining to his absence, she would have been convinced that he blamed her for the whole of his troubles! She would have to relate the tale to Papa for his enjoyment.

Poor Papa! His illness had begun to unnerve her. While his appearance and appetite seemed as usual, he could seldom finish a conversation without dozing off, and stranger still, for the most part he wished only for Mama's company. Papa had been in no state to attend a ball, and she could only hope that he soon would recover, as he

had so often in the past. After breakfast, she would insist upon spending the morning at his bedside, whether or not he slept, and hope she could notice some improvement to his condition.

A glance in the mirror told her that she was well enough in appearance, although she had not bothered with putting her hair up and her dress was a simple, ancient one that she could don herself. They would have no visitors this morning, and Elizabeth would be surprised if her younger sisters—who had spent far too much time at the punch bowl last evening—would arise before afternoon tea. She had taken two steps towards the door, when it opened, revealing her mother with a tray.

“I did not understand, I swear I did not understand her intent, not until too late!” Mrs Hill muttered anxiously to herself. Mrs Bennet, of course, had never meant her to understand anything at all; however, the mistress was much too accustomed to gabbling aloud most every thought in her head, had much too little experience with devious plotting, and most often forgot her servants had functioning ears.

Guilt ate at her; Miss Elizabeth was the sweetest, smartest girl imaginable, and her mother was drugging her—drugging her so that she would accept that foolish Mr Collins as her husband.

Yet...what right do I have to interfere? There is no question but what an excellent match it would be for her—possibly her only opportunity for any marriage, any future at all .

Such was Hill’s agony of indecision, that she almost missed the sight of the man standing in the shadows just beyond the hermitage—she, who prided herself on missing nothing! How long had he been there? Why was he here in broad daylight?

It did not matter; the important thing was that she had not missed him. Mr Harwood was here. Such a wise and sensible person as himself would surely help her think of a

means of preventing the catastrophe on the horizon. Glancing around to ensure she was not being observed by anyone, she slipped from the house.

Fitzwilliam Darcy had made up his mind. When Bingley departed for town today, he would go as well; to that end, he informed his man, Harwood, of the change in plan. Harwood could ride in his carriage with his trunks while he rode with Bingley. He would spend the journey helping Bingley to understand that pursuit of a connexion to Jane Bennet was the worst possible idea. There was nothing wrong, *per se*, with the girl, except that her mother was pulling the strings of her life, and he could not abide her pulling Bingley's as well.

Well, perhaps one other thing was wrong. Her sister, Elizabeth Bennet.

He could not bear it, now that he understood Miss Elizabeth bore feelings for his enemy. Her defence of Wickham had been vehement and eager—there was no mistaking yet another young lady fallen beneath the rogue's spell. He had tried to warn her, but to no effect; the ladies never saw what was so plain to him, the thin and shallow nature of Wickham's veneer of respectability.

You did not see it either, for a much longer period, Darcy reminded himself. Not until it was far too late to undo the damage, and you knew him for years.

He shoved the reminders and the guilt from his mind. He must get out, now, before he threw away his own familial pride and bound himself to a bride from a family utterly lacking in propriety and affluence. While Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth were both respectable and decorous, their younger sisters were allowed to run wild—and did so. Their cousin Collins—his aunt's ridiculous parson, he had been somehow unsurprised to learn—was heir of their Longbourn estate—a fact the man had, in Mr Bennet's absence, flaunted amongst the populace.

Never mind that Elizabeth possessed a haunting sort of loveliness, a mixture of

sweetness and lively spirits, with her wide, dimpled smile that he yearned to kiss into; a lithe figure he was dying to hold close; and a mind full of wit, conversation, and sparkle that he could not help engaging at every possible opportunity. If she were near, he would never be unhappy again a day in his life.

Stop it, Darcy! It was precisely this sort of unrealistic thinking that kept him awake at night, a victim of her siren-song. He wanted her. He could not have her. Better to flee instead. But his thoughts whirled round and round, teasing him with memories.

Harwood entered at long last, with the news he had waited for.

“Mr Bingley is ready to leave, sir,” he said.

“Excellent. I shall join him directly.”

Harwood nodded but remained unmoving. Inwardly, Darcy groaned. Harwood was the ideal gentleman’s gentleman. He stayed informed—and made sure Darcy was, as well—with the state and intricacies of any household they inhabited; his taste was impeccable, he was never unprepared or forgetful, and he anticipated Darcy’s needs with a prescience that seemed almost uncanny. All this, he performed with a sort of understated elegance of manner, never aggressive, gossipy, or obtrusive. In the absence of orders otherwise, he usually slipped away immediately. When he did not, it meant there was news, and none that he was likely wishing to hear.

“If you would be so kind as to lend a moment of your time,” Harwood murmured, in that way he had, his manner somehow making any refusal impossibly coarse. “It has to do with events at Longbourn this morning,” he said.

“Why should I care for any of that?” Darcy snapped, appalled by his sudden desire to hear every possible detail regarding the situation, no matter how insignificant.

His man looked at him, just looked, and he realised what he ought to have predicted—Harwood knew. He understood, without Darcy ever mentioning a thing, that his employer was obsessed with the second eldest daughter of Mr Thomas Bennet.

“What has happened?” he asked, his tone surly. He turned away to rearrange the items upon the chest of drawers nearest him, since he could disguise neither eagerness nor resentment from Harwood’s all-seeing eyes.

“It appears that Miss Elizabeth Bennet will receive a proposal of marriage this morning, if she has not already.”

“Marriage? To whom?” He struggled to sound nonchalant.

“Mr William Collins, sir.”

His heartbeat, which had begun a frantic, pulsing rhythm, smoothed again. “What of it? She would never agree to yoke herself to such a fool.”

He could not say how he knew this; he simply did. Not for three estates the size of Netherfield would she give herself to such a nincompoop.

“Reportedly, and unbeknownst to her anticipated bridegroom, she has been drugged, sir. The concoction she has received is of a nature that, my source is convinced, creates a docile, even an, er, overly affectionate response in its object.”

Darcy spun to face Harwood, horrified. “Would not Collins realise that his wished-for bride is intoxicated? No, no, no, do not answer that question. But I cannot believe her father would condone such an act!”

“Her father is currently in no condition to understand what is happening in his

household, or to prevent it if he did.”

Darcy had known the man was ill, but he must be out of his head to be unaware of such an affair.

“My informant believes the young lady will be taken to the church this morning, and there be wed to Collins. There is already, evidently, a licence. I have observed the vicar, Mr Palmer. He is elderly, obtuse, and hard of hearing. I do not think Palmer would comprehend the situation, were the girl to topple over during the ceremony.”

He did not question the source of Harwood’s information. If his man believed it, it was undoubtedly reliable. Of course, none of it was legal, but what good would the law do when Elizabeth’s reputation and character were already ruined? Nor did he waste time attempting to think of someone else who might attempt a rescue. He knew of no one in this entire county who was able to act decisively. Probably, most folks would believe—even knowing the situation—that it was unfortunate, but all for the best in the long run. Sir William Lucas would doubtless gleefully disseminate the news as joyfully as if Elizabeth had been wed to a duke.

Elizabeth ! No! Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth must not ever be sacrificed on the altar of self-interest and impure motive. Fortunately, he was already dressed for riding out.

“Inform Mr Bingley I will be unable to travel with him after all. Tell Frost to have Bingley’s best hunter saddled for me, and have my brougham brought round and ride with him to Longbourn. If you meet the Bennet coach along the way, have Frost contrive to block its passage. It would be best if she is never even put into the carriage, and we can halt this nonsense before there are more witnesses to its execution.”

Harwood nodded once, slipping from the room as quietly as he had first entered it—plainly satisfied with his interference.

Who works for whom? Darcy wondered.

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Three

“Mama.” Elizabeth was tilting alarmingly to one side on the settee, her eyes nearly crossed. “I want to find my bed now, I think.”

Mrs Bennet understood her daughter perfectly, despite the fact that she dropped approximately a third of her syllables. Mr Collins, too busy composing the next sentences to his foolish, drawn-out offer of marriage, failed utterly to comprehend.

“What was that? What did she say?”

It was the fifth time he had asked it. One would think he would pay more attention to the utterances of the recipient of his protracted proposal—but one would be as wrong as it was possible to be. She felt, again, a heavy measure of guilt for inflicting him upon Lizzy. But what else was there to do? Their prospects were a fathomless unknown, beholden to this very fool!

Without Mr Bennet to provide support for the marriage, she had about as much chance of convincing Elizabeth to marry the idiotic Collins as she did of persuading her husband to buy a house in Mayfair. Lizzy was her most intelligent daughter, yet the girl was frustrating in her inability to secure her own future!

“She says she cannot wait to be wed, she thinks,” Mrs Bennet interpreted.

Mr Collins’s brow furrowed as he seemed to notice, for the first time, that his hoped-for bride was listing to one side. “I say. She seems to be a bit off this morning, does she not?”

Her daughter went off into a fit of giggles. Mrs Bennet was required to hold her phial of salts beneath Lizzy's nose, to transform it to a fit of sneezing instead.

"It is not every day that a young lady receives a marriage proposal from a handsome, eligible gentleman," Mrs Bennet reminded him, once the sneezing was past. "It is unsurprising that she is nervous."

His brow smoothed. "Oh. Why yes, believe me, my dear Miss Elizabeth, that your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections."

Elizabeth's voice dropped several notches—and in unfortunately clear tones, began quoting one of Mr Bennet's favourites. "'But pain is perfect misery, the worst of evils, and excessive, overturns all patience.'"

"I have always loved Shakespeare," Mr Collins opined, smiling approvingly at Elizabeth. "Not long ago, a very notable lady—my esteemed patroness, you know—particularly advised and recommended that I commit Shakespeare's sonnets to memory whilst in the pursuit of a bride, and I cannot help but believe that your knowledge of his works, especially when tempered with the silence and respect that her rank will inevitably excite—will ensure her approval of my choice of bride. I compliment you."

Even Mrs Bennet knew—not through any interest of her own, of course, but from the endless ruminations of her husband—that it was Milton which Lizzy quoted, not Shakespeare. She wondered whether, within all these words Mr Collins had thus far uttered, she could presume an actual proposal of marriage had already taken place. If so, she could proceed with Lizzy's response.

Unfortunately, in the absence of any question, there seemed no space to provide an answer.

“My reasons for marrying are, first, I think it is a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstance...”

Heavens above, would he never bring himself to the point?

“Mama, the sound of his voice is making me sick,” Elizabeth mumbled.

Mr Collins stopped his monologue on the excellence of Lady Catherine de Bourgh and looked again to Mrs Bennet for interpretation.

“She says she has always wanted to marry a cleric.”

He smiled benignly, and began another soliloquy upon the subject of Elizabeth’s lack of fortune and his own generosity in ignoring it. “And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. I deem it appropriate to declaim using Shakespeare’s poetry such as young ladies are prone to admire, in demonstration of my regard.” He cleared his throat and began to recite:

Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all.

What hast thou then more than thou hadst before ? —

It was at this juncture that Mrs Bennet noticed Mary standing in the entrance to the parlour, very near her own chair, looking on in some amazement. Mr Collins continued with his performance, oblivious to anyone else’s presence—including his intended bride’s.

“What is he doing, Mama?” Mary whispered.

“Have you no sense of romance? Have you never before heard poetry recited?” Mrs

Bennet hissed.

“Really? But why would he choose Shakespeare’s verses about a friend’s betrayal with his own mistress?”

“Hush, noisy girl! Your father and sisters are abed. Out!”

Mary, fortunately, obediently departed, but if Jane waked, she would not be so easily put off. It was all too much, and Lizzy was in danger of collapsing.

“Mr Collins!” she called loudly, interrupting some lines which did, unfortunately, sound much as though he were scolding a disloyal friend and deceitful lover.

He peered at her in some irritation. “I have three more stanzas learnt.”

“But you have missed my dear Elizabeth’s bestowal of her hand and heart upon you. And now, in her excitement to be your bride, she wishes to be taken to the church immediately and have the thing done.”

“I did? She will? She does?” he asked, staring at his bride-to-be. Elizabeth had laid her head upon the arm of the settee and was laughing to herself, glassy-eyed.

“Can you not tell excitement for a wedding when you see it? We shall use the carriage. I have already ordered it brought round. Mr Palmer will have witnesses available. Do you have the licence?”

“Why yes. Yes, I do. Right here in my pocket.” He fumbled around with three different pockets before finally producing it. He glanced at Elizabeth again, and this time there was no mistaking the gleam of admiration in his eye as he realised he was to be a married man before noon.

Forcibly quelling her conscience once more, Mrs Bennet heaved her daughter to her feet. “Come, my poppet,” she said, keeping her arm about Lizzy’s waist. “It is time to be wed. Your future is secured.”

Darcy galloped up the long drive just as a party of three emerged from the house. One of them was obviously the hulking form of the cleric, Collins. His jaw could be seen flapping, a never-ending stream of discourse reaching Darcy as a tuneless whine. Mrs Bennet walked by his side, plainly and heavily supporting Elizabeth. Even from this distance he could see the poor girl would probably collapse onto the pavers, were someone not holding her up. He could hardly believe his eyes; the plan to ruin Elizabeth’s life depended upon a scheming mama, a witless groom, and a doddering vicar—and yet, it appeared to be proceeding apace.

He managed to manoeuvre his mount between the group and the carriage before they reached it, leaping from the horse to land practically upon their toes.

“Mr Darcy!” Collins beamed at him with his usual vapidty, bowing low. “You honour us with your presence. In fact, it was the only thing lacking on an otherwise perfect morning. I do not believe that I presume too much when I and my cousin invite you to join us on a brief journey to the village church, to thereby witness our nuptials. The distinction of having so fine a testator would be a compliment to myself and my bride, and I do not hesitate to add, nearly as great a commemoration as the presence of Lady Catherine de Bourgh herself.”

“I am certain it is an impertinence to ask,” Mrs Bennet snapped, appearing more impatient than guilty. “Pray forgive him for his insolence, sir. As you can see, we are just departing. We will be on our way, and trouble you no further, Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth giggled.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said in firm tones, ignoring the other two, “can you understand

that you are being taken to a church to be married to this man?"

At the sound of his voice, she looked at him and smiled her wide, lovely smile. "You are very pretty," she said in the too-careful tones of the inebriated. Reaching over, she touched his mouth. "It is such a shame you are vermin. Scoundrel. Rat. Ch-churl." She peered up above his head, as if searching for more invective in the sky, swaying a little. "Brute. Mig-headed piscreant. No, that was not right. Never mind." She shook her head, causing another sway that her mother only just prevented turning into a tumble.

Mrs Bennet was sweating now with the effort of keeping her daughter upright.

"Toad," Elizabeth pronounced carefully.

"Miss Elizabeth!" Collins screeched in horrified tones. "I assure you, Mr Darcy, she means none of it! Perhaps in her excitement for her wedding?—"

"Lizzy, come with me, now!" Mrs Bennet pulled her daughter to the side, attempting to get around him. "Mr Collins, forget this nonsense and help her into the carriage!"

"Miss Elizabeth is going nowhere with the two of you," he said, stepping in front of the pair of women, effectively blocking their path forwards. "Anyone can see she is not in her right mind."

"Simply because she does not care for you—and had the courage to say so to your face—does not render her irrational. I daresay women have been lying to you for a chance at your fortune for years," Mrs Bennet snapped, clearly furious.

Elizabeth was searching the sky again. Taking another step forwards, Darcy firmly tugged her away from Mrs Bennet's hold, placing his hands on either side of her face so that she was forced to look directly at him.

“Do you understand that your mother is attempting to force you into a marriage with your cousin, Mr William Collins?”

As she gazed into his eyes, her own beautiful dark ones filled with tears. “You were unkind,” she whispered, and though her speech was not pristine, and she tripped over some of the syllables, he understood well enough what she said next. “Why not...simply say...in no mood to dance?” A single tear spilled over, and he slid his thumb across it, his heart aching. How he wished he had never attended that stupid assembly! But she was not finished tearing his integrity to shreds. “I love to dance,” she sighed, still swaying to an invisible rhythm, still peering up at the clouds. “Dance with the...clumsy. The ugly. The awkward. No matter. To twirl, to whirl. Freedom, for an hour. But you...” Her eyes rested again directly upon him. “You ensured I knew I...no better than something scraped off your shoe. You, sir, are no mentalgem. Genmaltem.”

“Gentleman,” he said, helping her. He forgot their audience, and even his purpose in being there, only wishing he could feel the delicate skin of her cheeks through his gloves, longing to kiss away those tears. “I am sorry,” he said softly. “I have regretted those words many times. You are correct. I am a brute.”

“Mr Darcy,” came a somewhat frantic cry from Collins. “I apologise if my cousin, in a moment of forgetfulness, neglected to demonstrate all the respect due your consequence. I beg your forgiveness and can assure you that, as her husband, I will ensure such insolence never occurs again.” He cleared his throat and drew his bulky form up even taller. “Miss Elizabeth, I order you to proceed at once to the carriage. You may regard my instruction as a command.”

Darcy gave him a sour look, but the interruption did remind him of his purpose. “Miss Elizabeth is plainly out of her senses. Taking her to a church in this condition, with intent to wed, is not simply illegal, it is immoral. It is depraved.”

“There is nothing the matter with her that a wedding, with its accompanying joy, would not resolve. This is none of your affair, Mr Darcy,” Mrs Bennet retorted.

“Now, now,” Collins reproached, “we none of us wish to cause offence in so illustrious and honourable a person as the nephew of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. He simply misunderstands the situation. Mr Darcy, Miss Elizabeth has given me her assurances that she wishes for the marriage to take place. I have a licence! A licence!”

To Darcy’s amazement, he extracted a piece of paper from his pocket and fluttered it before them both like a banner, continuing his chatter.

“Possibly you mistake my bride’s liveliness and high spirits for conduct instigated by less flattering motives. However, I can reassure you that nothing such as you imagine is the source of her behaviour. Once she is my wife, I shall assist in refining her comportment to match that exhibited in the higher circles which I have the good fortune to inhabit regularly, and which, naturally, she shall wish to emulate.”

“I do not criticise her, you dolt,” Darcy snapped. “How can you not see that she is out of her head? Miss Elizabeth,” he said, more sternly this time, desperate to direct her attention to the offence in progress. “Do you understand that your mother is trying to wed you to this buffoon, right now, at this very moment?”

Instead of answering, Elizabeth laid her head on his shoulder. “I am very sleepy.”

Both Collins and Mrs Bennet made their moves—Mrs Bennet attempting to pull her daughter back, Collins trying to shove her away from Mr Darcy and gasping at her effrontery in touching the ‘great man’—but Darcy blocked them both. At that moment, his carriage thankfully turned up the drive. It was plain to him that the only recourse was to carry Elizabeth away from these reprobates until she was in her right mind. If he had to drive all the way to London and back to gain time enough for her

to regain her sensibilities, that was what he ought to do.

“Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy asked, “shall I take you for a drive in my carriage?”

She smiled at him. It was answer enough.

“Come,” he said, and lifting her in his arms, strode to meet his oncoming brougham, which stopped beside them several yards away; one of Bingley’s stablemen sprang out to put down the step. As he helped her into the carriage, Darcy glanced back. Collins’s mouth was an ‘o’ of surprise, while Mrs Bennet, her fists clenched and very red in the face, called for him to bring her back this instant. Ignoring them both, he climbed in after Elizabeth, leaving the stableman to return Bingley’s hunter. Settling himself, he knocked on the roof. Moments later, they were off, Elizabeth curled up beside him, a contented smile upon her face.

The situation was, of course, absurd, ridiculous, even offensive.

How was it, then, that it struck him as so oddly right, so impossibly perfect that she be exactly where she was?

“I do not understand,” Mr Collins said, still gaping like a fish. “What has happened?”

Mrs Bennet looked at him with some contempt. During the entire interlude, he had done naught but accuse Lizzy of misbehaviour. Obviously, he worshipped at the altar of the aristocracy and made excuses for every insult. How Mr Darcy had learnt of the morning’s scheme, she could not guess; perhaps it was coincidence. Probably it was. He was departing Netherfield, or so it appeared, and likely come to pay his respects—only to have that fool Mr Collins announce his immediate marriage to Lizzy who acted, to anyone with eyes to see, completely soused. Mr Darcy was arrogant, but hardly stupid.

On the other hand, Mr Collins was the most credulous fellow she had ever had the misfortune to meet. Nevertheless, he had influence, of a sort—with Mr Darcy's aunt, no less. Perhaps something could be salvaged of the situation. She may have failed to gain the heir of Longbourn estate for Lizzy, but perhaps a marriage was still possible. Mr Darcy might be no worthier, but he was certainly wealthier, more intelligent, and better looking than Mr Collins. She turned to face him.

“What has happened, my dear Mr Collins, is this: Mr Darcy has eloped with your bride.”

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:02 am

Four

Elizabeth wakened gradually, feeling as if she was drifting within a pleasant fog. The first hint she received of something strange afoot was the sound of horses' hooves blended with the vibrations of carriage wheels rolling upon cobblestone pavers. She must be dreaming, she concluded, a very vivid dream. Perhaps she travelled to Wales; she had always wanted to see it. She had no sooner reached this conclusion when she realised that, rather than the comfort of a seat cushion beneath the weight of her body, she felt something much different. It took her several moments to realise what it was, however; in her foggy state, deducing that she was being held within strong arms, that firm muscles and expensive wool surrounded her, seemed as fantastic as any dream. Opening her eyes required an effort, and at first, everything appeared fuzzily out of focus. Gradually, however, she was able to discern shapes, and finally details.

It began with a chin. That it was a male chin was undeniable—firm, cleft, with a shadow of beard just beginning to show. A thin scar cut through the perfection of its form, running from that chin until it disappeared into the twists and coils of the exquisitely tied cravat framing it. It was a familiar chin, somehow, and yet not Papa's; as well, neither Papa nor his man would ever expend so much effort on such a knot. Her gaze travelled to his hair, a bit overlong and barely brushing his collar, curling at its ends in just such a non-conformity as to exasperate any good valet. The urge to touch it seemed a natural one; she found it as soft as it appeared.

Her touch moved to the bristled chin, held suddenly still, motionless as a deer once startled. Her vision had not deceived her as to the hardness of its shape. A stubborn chin, she decided. A chin which knew the direction it faced, and was unafraid to travel it. The jaw supporting it was a worthy accessory, squared, determined,

unwavering, perhaps even descending into dogged. She reached up farther, to the lips set above it. They ought to be soft, gentle, and tender, to restrain that chin and jaw's effect upon the whole. Gleefully tracing them with her fingertips, she realised they were everything lips ought to be.

It was absurdly difficult to lift herself so that she could explore further; thankfully, the strong arms supporting her helped, else she would have had lips and chin only, and how foolish a partial face would that be? With his assistance, however, she could now see the nose—a patrician nose, noble, even. A nose perfectly matching that chin and jawline. A nose of which, undoubtedly, his aristocratic ancestors had pridefully bequeathed to their progeny, an inheritance equally as valuable as castles, forests, and fields. She traced its aquiline shape up to an equally princely brow. The sable brows were soft; the eyes beneath shut, shielded from her explorations.

This was unacceptable. His eyes must be revealed to her. Her mouth opened, her voice emerging only as a whisper.

“Your eyes...they cannot be anything faded, mild, or meek. They must be dark, mysterious, resilient enough to hold the weight of a thousand acres. A thousand tenants. A thousand homes. A thousand mouths to feed. A thousand hearts to break.”

At her charge, his eyes opened to her. They could not have been more perfectly set within his features. So shadowed, they were almost black, a fathomless regard that could have sent soldiers to their willing deaths. They were the eyes of command, of duty, of domination. They stared into her soul, seeing too much, stripping her bare. Uncomfortable eyes, and yet, somehow, she knew no other eyes would ever measure up to them in her own sight, again. Sighing, she returned her gaze to his mouth.

“Your saving grace,” she said softly, touching once more his lips. “A woman could forgive much, for this.”

He was a dream, a fantasy, a man like no other. He would not capitulate to feelings, to emotion; he was much too accustomed to ill winds, stormy seas, citadel-sized obstacles in his path. In that moment, she knew that if she wanted him, she must seize him herself; he would not surrender to simple need or desire. She was inexperienced, yes; but she had power in her, untapped, and he was an admirable foe. If he thought her yet an impediment to his decisive direction, unworthy, easily dismissed, she would show him the error of his ways—and she smiled at the thought. Carefully, she set her lips to his.

In the hour or so since Elizabeth had fallen asleep in his arms, Darcy had conceived a plan—or at least, an objective. The moment she awakened, he must carefully explain to her the situation, ask her where it would be best and safest to deliver her, and get himself away as quickly as possible. He was in the worst of circumstances—with an unchaperoned young lady of good birth. He had considered taking her to the home of her aunt Philips—but that was her mother's sister, and possibly she was not to be trusted. He knew of no other relations except those somewhere in Cheapside. Her friend, Miss Lucas, would probably take her in happily enough, but Sir William was an unmitigated gossip, and instinctively he knew Elizabeth would hate anyone else knowing what had happened. Besides, whether he had her alone in his carriage for twenty minutes or twenty hours, the Sir Williams of this world always drew their own conclusions and told them to anyone who would listen. Avoiding the Lucases seemed best. For lack of a better idea, he continued on towards town; he could always turn a different direction, or even bring her home to Longbourn again once she was fully recovered.

Yet, there were further problems. He did not worry about Harwood or Frost; they would never say a word. He had given Bingley's stableman a large gratuity which hopefully ensured his silence, although one could never be completely certain. Still, it was Mrs Bennet and Collins who were the real unknowns in this situation. Mrs Bennet had shown herself to be ruthless and amoral; Collins was certainly governed by neither intelligence nor common sense. Darcy could, he was certain, have his aunt

shut Collins's mouth, but how to shut Mrs Bennet's was, in a word, a pickle. The best strategy on his own part was to rid himself of Elizabeth as soon as he could manage it; the Mrs Bennets of this world could not touch him. But might Elizabeth pay a price, regardless?

He should not care, he told himself. This was not a situation of his own making. He had been avoiding the dropped handkerchiefs—and other, less obvious schemes—of managing mamas and manoeuvring misses for years. He had done what he could, would do what he could for her, but nothing more.

Then she opened her eyes, those lovely, trusting eyes.

Reaching up, she touched his lips, his nose, his brow. He was paralysed, frozen, helpless beneath those featherweight touches.

Move away , he ordered himself. Move her away. Put her on the opposite bench, as you ought to have done immediately, instead of worrying she might tumble to the floor. Do not be a fool .

He nearly obeyed that reasoned, sensible voice...that is, until she smiled at him, a slow smile, a dawn's sunlight lighting the horizon, bringing his every sense into the sharpest focus. Until she returned her fingertips to his lips, murmuring words he could not understand.

Until her lips touched his, and he lost his mind.

Darcy was a man who held his passions rigidly in control, always. He had lived in the shadow of a man, nearly his own age, who delighted in freeing them, exorcising them, using them and being used by them. He had seen the destruction in the lives of those wrecked by it. He had spent years attempting to undo its effects, trying, usually futilely, to sort through the ruins for survivors.

One touch of her mouth to his and he was the one wrecked, ruined, destroyed. One touch of her mouth to his and he simply...forgot.

His hand slid up her back, up the slim strength of her spine, up into the dense locks of her hair falling over them both, then shaping around her head, holding her to him close and closer still. Her mouth opened beneath his, sweetly, plunging them both into a new country of feelings, a wild hinterland, begging to be explored.

He forgot duty.

He forgot discretion.

There was only Elizabeth, water to a thirsting man lost in a desert so long, he had forgotten its revitalising flavour, the taste of it, its quenching power. In the history of the world, he was certain, there had never been such a kiss. She was Niagara Falls to his parched and drab life, and he could not drink deeply enough. He wanted to drown in her.

“Elizabeth,” he said, in what he feared was a moan. “Elizabeth.”

His mouth came back down to hers, but she reared back and looked at him, really looked, with shocked and startled eyes. She scrambled off his lap, except her limbs did not quite move properly and she fell—or would have done, had he not caught her. Still, she lunged for the door.

“Elizabeth!” he cried, trying to stop her from throwing herself again towards it. “We are moving, drat it! You will be hurt!”

“You do not understand,” she panted, struggling. “Out! I must get out!”

Sunshine gleamed in from the window since he had not bothered to pull the blinds,

and at last he noticed what he ought to have seen at once—her skin had turned unnaturally pale. He pounded on the roof of the carriage and immediately felt the slowing of its motion. Not waiting for aid from without—or, even, the carriage to come to a complete halt—he half-leapt from the vehicle, hauling her away from it as quickly as possible. Seeing that they were on a deserted portion of the road surrounded only by fields, he set her down beside some shrubbery growing along a low stone wall. They made it only just in time, as she dropped to her knees and retched.

At first, Elizabeth could only shudder with the spasms. She could not stop the audience to her painful humiliation, not when he gathered her hair back and held it away from her so she could cast up her accounts without interference.

Why, oh why was she here in the middle of nowhere, wretchedly ill, before none other than Mr Darcy?

He said nothing, but she could feel the heavy weight of his autocratic stare, as if she was the one at fault for this entire bizarre not-a-dream state of affairs.

Was she the one? Had she truly been kissing him? Had he been kissing her? Surely not!

As soon as her stomach seemed to have ceased its upheaval, she made a motion to stand. Unfortunately, her limbs were trembling, clumsy, and disobedient. What should have been a nimble move was a general lurching towards the ground, which he only just managed to avert so that she narrowly avoided falling upon her face. It was excessively lowering, when she had already believed she could descend no lower.

“Perhaps you would excuse the imposition of proximity, and remain where you are until your balance resumes?” he asked in his usual haughty tones. “You are not

feeling quite the thing, I daresay.”

Sarcasm! What she wanted to do was demand explanations, censuring him for familiarity and possibly her abduction. What emerged from her mouth was...ridiculous.

“Ditzwilliam Farcy,” she mumbled. “No. Argh.” She slapped her palm to her forehead and nearly knocked herself to the ground again.

The act did not prevent her seeing the corner of his mouth tip up, causing an unexpected dimple to appear. “I have been called worse,” he said. That almost-smile softened the supercilious air usually attending him; at the same time, it reminded her of the...dream. It had surely been a dream, had it not? It could not be real. No one kissed like that, except in foolish dreams.

Suddenly, she wanted to weep, and only the remnants of her tattered pride prevented her from bursting into tears.

Instead of anything sensible, anything at all, she heard herself semi-incoherently plead three words: “H-help me sit.” She wasn’t sure whether she had managed to voice even that, but as if he understood her regardless, Mr Darcy picked her up and gently set her on a shaded portion of the wall some distance from where she had...lost her composure. As he moved away from her, she nearly fell over backwards; with one swift motion he settled down beside her, a strong arm around her shoulders, supporting her.

One nod of his head to his men—both stationed beside the coach, pretending to notice nothing—brought a skin of water to her. Carefully he held it to her lips; she took small sips until at last she could no longer taste the strange metallic flavour upon her tongue.

“What... the matter w’me?” She heard the slur in her question, and wondered at it.

“You have been drugged,” he said, as complacently as he might have commented upon the weather.

“Wha-what?” The single word she had managed did not begin to express the horror and fear she felt at this revelation. She struggled to move away from him, nearly tumbling off the wall in the process.

Gently, he plucked her back, tucking her into his side. She strained to move away, albeit futilely, until he caught her hands in his own.

“Not by me, mon rêve . To the best of my understanding, you must blame your mother. Evidently, she very much wished you to wed your cousin Collins, and administered to you some medication of your father’s in order to render you more agreeable to the idea. I think she overdid it.”

Mama ? Truly? How could it be so? It must be impossible! And yet, a memory struck her, of her mother’s arrival in her bedroom this morning, carrying a breakfast tray. Had she not noted how unusual Mama’s determination that she eat all of the rather unusually spiced breakfast provided to her? Since when did Mrs Bennet ever carry breakfast to any of her daughters? Her excuse of worrying over Elizabeth’s exertions at the ball made no sense, in retrospect. It had been odd; she ought to have been suspicious. She had simply never dreamt that her mother would stoop to such an action.

“H-how...did you...”

“How did my intervention come about? One of your servants informed one of my servants of the plot, and he informed me, only just in time to prevent it. I apologise that there was no opportunity to procure proper chaperonage. Neither did I wish to

inform any others, believing you would rather it be kept private.”

“I...yes.”

She had believed she could be humbled no further, but knowing now that he had been required, by his gentlemanly honour, to save her from an ignominiously plotted marriage to her cousin was the last straw. A tear fell, and then another. She felt them trickle down her cheeks and had neither the strength nor the will to stop them. Every vulgar belief he doubtless held about her family had been proved correct, and she prayed fiercely that if only she could at this moment be struck by lightning, she would never ask God for another thing.

Unfortunately, the sky remained clear, the weather mild. Another debilitating wave of dizziness swept through her, adding to her misery.

“I am sorry,” she whispered. There was nothing else she could say.

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Five

Her silent tears slayed him. If it were within Darcy's power to knock Mrs Bennet's head into Collins's and pound some sense into them both, he would do it. How could they have so easily dismissed her feelings, her choices, her health ? Finding his handkerchief, he placed it upon her lap. She took it without a word. Though still supporting her with his arm, he had not felt so helpless, so useless, since his sister's melancholy over her failed romance.

Harwood, however, had never in his life been thus afflicted. He chose that moment to approach.

"Miss," he said quietly, holding out an open tin, "perhaps you would have a peppermint? It settles the belly, it does, and sweetens the tongue."

She looked up then, and Darcy watched as she visibly took command of herself. With a still-trembling hand she selected one, thanking his man graciously, and placing it delicately in her mouth. The mouth he had plundered as if it were pirate's treasure spilled upon a desert isle. Guilt assailed him.

Harwood retreated, and he knew he must as well. In her presence, he was out of his depth; he could not trust himself.

"Where can I take you?" he asked lowly. "My carriage is yours to command."

Turning to face him, her expression was startled, as if he had said something remarkable. But her voice, when she spoke, was calmer now, more...herself.

“Where are we? I have no idea, I fear.”

“Frost,” he called. “How far are we from London?”

“A bit over half-way.”

“London,” she whispered. She turned to him. “Can you bring me to my uncle’s house? On Gracechurch Street, in Cheapside.”

She sounded more assured, as if the thought of these relations gave her strength. It was none of his business; he was duty-bound to carry her wherever she wished. However, if he recalled correctly, was this not her mother’s brother? Could the man, a merchant, be trusted?

“If you are certain of a welcome,” he said warily, “then of course.”

“I am.” She took a deep breath. “I think I can walk now.”

Darcy realised that his arm was still about her; she was, undoubtedly, wishing for distance. He removed it, grateful that she was more composed but regretting the loss. He stood, holding out his hand to her. She bit her lip. Was she reluctant to take it, to re-enter the carriage with him? Did she no longer trust him?

“If I fall upon my face, do catch me, will you?” She smiled at him, a little crookedly, and the relief he felt was beyond anything. He smiled back.

“Word of honour,” he murmured.

Taking his proffered hand, she allowed him to ease her up. He gave her his arm, and together they walked back to the carriage; she trembled a little, he noticed. She was not so steady as she pretended. He handed her in, and then seated himself opposite.

Even though their knees were nearly touching, she seemed much too far away. He longed for her nearness, to hold her once again.

For several minutes after the coach was underway, they were silent. As for himself, he did not know what to say. Did she remember what had happened between them? If he apologised, would it only embarrass her? And then—most importantly—the question now constantly circling his brain: Should he offer for her?

The idea did not fill him with the alarm he had once supposed it might. Yes, he would have some work to do in order to compensate an absent settlement, but he was prospering; there was no reason to believe his children would go hungry or Pemberley would suffer, whether or not he married a woman of wealth. Was not a woman of Elizabeth's beauty and spirit worth a thousand fortunes?

And yet...there was her family to consider.

At last night's ball, Miss Lydia and Miss Catherine had made numerous trips to the punch bowl, their flirtatious laughter growing ever louder as the evening wore on, their behaviour towards the officers outrageously appalling. In an obviously hungry bid for attention, Miss Mary had displayed her 'talent' at the pianoforte, without interruption, for far too long—seemingly unaware that she ought to surrender the instrument to anyone else. The idea of introducing any of those younger girls to Lord and Lady Matlock was off-putting. Elizabeth's elder sister had almost completely entrapped Bingley; after Sir William's words of anticipation regarding a wedding between them, he had carefully observed Miss Bennet. Her manner, like Elizabeth's, was in every way proper, but there was absolutely no sign of especial attachment. For all he knew, this was yet another, albeit subtler, scheme of Mrs Bennet's, to foist her daughter upon a hapless young man while encouraging the entire community's expectations.

But there were worse considerations—namely, Elizabeth's words spoken in defence

of Wickham. Was she taken with the scoundrel? She did not, could not truly know him; it was not within her power to discover his practised deceptions. Ought he to explain something of his past association with the man? Everything within him rebelled at the idea of even speaking his name, bringing him into what had thus far been one of the oddest and yet rightest mornings of his life.

Unfortunately, Wickham was already here, a poisonous echo of their history—almost a physical presence in the carriage. So numerous were his reflections, so lost was he within them, that he nearly startled when she spoke.

“Please, tell me the truth, sir,” she said, head bent, her voice low and serious. “Did I...did I brazenly attack you?”

He leant forwards, not nearly as close as he wanted to be, but closing some of the distance between them.

“Miss Elizabeth,” he said.

She would not look at him, so he gently lifted her chin with one finger. “I knew you were not yourself. I ought to have stopped you. I could have, and yet...the truth is, I forgot myself. You are, to me...” Darcy floundered, searching for words adequately describing his infatuation, his affection. “I had not known you a week before I regretted the poor first impression I gave of myself. You are surely the handsomest woman I know.”

Her mouth opened, her eyes widening. “That is not possible. Please, sir, you need not invent flattery. I understand I was not...I was not well. I wish to apologise for what happened, and promise that you need never worry that any word will ever escape this carriage. My uncle and aunt are most trustworthy. If you could only see your way to forgetting this entire day, you would have my sincerest appreciation.”

“How I could possibly forget the best few minutes of the last year is beyond me,” he said a little drily, remembering those sweet, scorching kisses.

He meant it in acknowledgement of their mutually thwarted passion; she must know what she had done to him, what she did to him even now, sitting so near, her lips still swollen from his kisses returned so passionately by her own, her hair in wild disarray from the way he had mussed it within his desire.

But her expression turned to dismay. “You would not...surely you would not go to all the trouble to rescue me, only to see me ruined? If anyone were to hear?—”

He sat up straight. “You cannot believe I would do that,” he said, much offended.

“I hope you would not.”

She sounded doubtful. How could she distrust him? He had changed all of his plans and practically thrown himself at her feet in effecting this rescue! She ought to be looking at him with admiration, gratitude even. Did she believe he would make love to anyone he was alone with? There was a man she knew who would, but it was not him.

The ugly spectre of Wickham’s influence forced itself again to the forefront of his mind. Was she, even now, wishing that he had been her rescuer, her knight in shining armour? Hah! If Wickham found himself alone like this with her, he would not hesitate to seduce her. If seduction did not achieve the result he coveted—and even though she was a young lady of good birth—he might, probably would take what was not offered freely, and blame her for all of it.

Elizabeth had kissed him , first! Yes, he had not thrown her off, but he had hardly pressed his advantage, either. A cold feeling crept down his spine, chilling him. In her dazed state, had she been imagining another? Had it been Wickham’s eyes she had

seen, when she looked into his? Wickham's mouth to which she had wished to join her lips? A tiny voice in his brain urged him to say nothing more, but frustration, repressed desire, pride, and...yes, hurt, all combined to silence it.

"My mother was the daughter of an earl. My father's family has owned a goodly portion of Derbyshire for over a century and a half. Your mother drugged you and nearly handed you over to your moronic cousin! Which of us, I wonder, could be thought most trustworthy?"

"That is certainly a self-righteous stance you take," she snapped, "considering the unjust and ungenerous part you acted in your friendship with another."

He had been correct. Wickham lived in her mind and heart.

"You refer to Mr Wickham, I suppose," he spat. "You take an eager interest in that man's affairs."

"Who that knows what his misfortunes have been, can help feeling an interest in him?"

"His misfortunes! Yes, his misfortunes have been great, indeed!" Jealousy, thick, ugly and venomous shot through him. "Let me give you one piece of advice, to take or discard at your leisure. Do not ever pay him such attentions as you so generously bequeathed me, lest you find yourself bearing the consequences of it alone—he would never do the honourable thing, even did you hold a pistol to his head!"

"And you call yourself honourable?" she asked, her voice rising, her eyes narrowing.

"Yes, I do," he said, struggling to put just the right insouciance into his tone, so that she might not know how much the words he uttered now meant to him. "I have been contemplating offering you marriage, after all, for the sake of a few careless kisses."

She sat up straighter, and her eyes sparked with fury. “Well, let me ease your sanctimonious conscience,” she all but hissed in fuming contempt. “I would not marry you if you were the last man in England! I had to be drugged in order to accept your attentions! May your conceit, your selfish disdain for the feelings of others rise up to choke you!”

Her words sliced through him, inflicting pain with every syllable. In the distress of it, his dignity, his very sense of self rebelled; how dare she, possessing near relations of such tremendous inferiority as to be nearly unmentionable, pretend that his attentions meant nothing ?

“Oh, it will not, for my pride is under perfect regulation. Of what have you to be critical? If you are in the mood for meting out judgment, why not complain of the total want of propriety possessed by your younger sisters? They certainly could use a lesson or two upon sobriety.”

She flushed but did not remain silent. “My sisters are none of your concern!”

Again, a part of his mind began flailing, cautioning him to cease and desist. Unfortunately, the wild way he wanted her had not diminished; her now obvious disdain only drove him further into a despairing sort of rage. He managed a sneer.

“Miss Lydia, Miss Catherine, Miss Mary, yes—their behaviour is beneath my notice. Your eldest, however, has attracted the attention of my dearest friend. With unscrupulous apathy, she has allowed your manipulative mother to move him as a pawn in her scheming. I bow to her mastery. If it is Wickham you wish to ensnare, I highly recommend your sister’s technique—Miss Bennet pretends to desire nothing of her victim, an appealing indifference he would find irresistible. If lessons are to be taught, perhaps she ought to dispense them. You might find her sort of Machiavellian purity to be rather instructive.”

Her jaw dropped. Suddenly, to his amazement, once more she dove for the door of the carriage.

Outrage, pure and simple, filled him as he grabbed her to keep her from throwing herself out of it, while she struggled violently against his hold. “What is wrong with you? This carriage is moving! Would you bash your head against the pavement in defence of your absent lover?”

As if in answer to his question, she suddenly stilled. For a moment, she simply looked at him. Carefully she straightened; somehow, during their struggle, she had become perched upon his knees, his hands clutching her shoulders. Her chin lifted.

“Unhand me,” she commanded, her voice low and firm. “You need not worry that I shall risk so much as a scrape, much less my head, over any man.” Tears glistened in her eyes, but somehow he knew that she would never allow them to fall. Not before him.

His anger deflated, his rage defeated. What he wanted to do was enfold her in his arms. He wanted to beg her forgiveness with every fibre of his being. The steely expression upon her face told him his desires were useless. Practically one finger at a time, he forced himself to release his hold.

She lifted herself from his lap onto the seat opposite.

“You, sir, are an idiot,” she said.

“Yes,” he agreed, scrubbing his face with his hands.

Momentary surprise flashed across her features.

There must be an apology she would accept, and he needed to come up with it

quickly. At least some of his history with Wickham had to be explained. He must make her understand, somehow, why the man was so vicious, so untrustworthy. Above all, he could not allow their brief association to end like this. As if she truly had cursed him, words rose up in a flood, choking him with their panicked incoherence.

And then as he watched, her eyes fluttered shut and she pitched forwards, collapsing in a graceful heap at his feet.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:02 am

Six

Elizabeth woke to darkness. Disoriented, confused, she sat up quickly and immediately regretted it, rather more gently easing herself back down upon the pillows and shutting her eyes again. Her head pounded with the rhythm of her heartbeat, drumming pain into her body. Was she at home, back to Longbourn?

And why had she wondered if she were back to Longbourn? Had she left? Where to? How long had she been gone? Why? For some unknown reason, she felt panic at the question and forcibly quelled the line of examination.

It does not matter at this moment, she told herself. All that is required at present is one breath in, one breath out. In. Out. When she felt sufficiently calm, she carefully opened her eyes.

The darkness, she saw, was not absolute. A screen had been carefully positioned by the fireplace to prevent the light from shining directly on her, but the fire was built up enough for the glow to be visible. The air was warm. Cautiously, she smoothed her hands across the linens surrounding her; they were fine ones. She lay upon the softest of mattresses, perhaps more than one. Gingerly, she turned her head to try and take note of her surroundings.

She was not alone. A young woman, probably a servant, sat on a chair by her bedside, chin upon her chest, dozing. On a bedside table, a pitcher was near at hand; at the sight of it, Elizabeth became aware of tremendous thirst. An inch at a time, she eased herself up, but some rustling of her covers must have alerted the sleeping servant.

“Oh, miss! Ye be awake!”

“Water, please,” Elizabeth tried to say, but her voice emerged as only a husky rasp. Nevertheless, the girl understood, and poured a cup.

Never had any water tasted so refreshing as this did. She drained the glass, and might have asked for more, had her need for information not been so acute.

“Who are you?” she croaked.

“Molly, miss.”

“Where am I, Molly?” she asked, pleased when her voice emerged a bit more strongly.

“At the Golden Fleece, miss,” the girl said.

An inn, then, but the name meant nothing to Elizabeth. “Where is the Golden Fleece?”

“Past Barnet, not so far as Whetstone,” Molly replied.

It took a moment for Elizabeth to associate the names, but of course she had travelled to her London relations numerous times, and the towns named were along the main road. Had she been on her way to visit the Gardiners? A carriage accident, perhaps?

The servant stood. “The doctor’s been and gone, but now that ye be awake, he’ll be coming again, I suppose. Such a to-do as ye caused us! Such commotion in the place as he stirred up, I was like to be getting a pain in the noggin myself. I’s to be fetching ye a tray once ye wakened, himself said.”

“Himself? Who is ‘himself’? Mr Gardiner?” Although making a tremendous fuss was the last thing she would ever expect of her placid uncle.

“I don’t know of no Gardiner. Ye came with your pot ’n pan. Mr Buskers gave him nothing but the best of what we have, and the Fleece has enough for the Regent himself, I always say.”

“My pot and pan?” Elizabeth rasped, utterly confused.

“You know. Your pot ’n pan, your man. Your husband. Mr Darcy. Ye must’ve hit your noggin but hard. Who could forget him ?” She bustled out of the room.

“My what? Who?” Elizabeth tried to cry out, but Molly did not turn back.

Husband? Husband! Mr Darcy? The room spun sickeningly as she tried to rise, forcing her back down upon the pillows. She made herself take deep breaths, until gradually the dizziness eased.

Think, Elizabeth, think. You must remember!

The past replayed disjointedly in her memories, a magic lantern show with the slides tilting madly or missing altogether. Her mother’s voice, saying, ‘Come my poppet, it is time to be wed’; Mr Darcy’s, telling her in commanding tones that she was being taken to a church to be married. For some reason, Mr Collins was present, blathering on and on. Had he been the one to perform the ceremony?

Strangest of all was the memory of a kiss.

She had been kissed twice before. Once was by John Lucas when they were both twelve, more in the nature of an experiment with a friend. It had been interesting, but not particularly appealing, especially after they both burst into laughter afterwards.

The other had been Reginald Goulding at an assembly a couple of years prior; five years her senior, she had thought him exciting for that reason alone, and he pursued her after imbibing a bit too heartily at the punch bowl. It had been reckless, to be sure, and her feelings had been bruised, but not shattered, when he had quite determinedly ignored her ever afterwards.

Nevertheless, there had been nothing in her entire life like the kisses she had experienced within these fragmented memories.

They could not have been a dream, for she could never have dreamt such an experience, could never have imagined it. Even now, her body livened at the recollection.

It was Mr Darcy who had kissed her, she was certain of it. Had he married her? How could she possibly have agreed to marry a man for whom respect was lacking, a man she was not even certain could behave as a gentleman? Yet, she remembered those kisses. She had wanted them, desired them, and, even weak and bewildered, wanted more. She wanted them still. They were not stolen moments nor fleeting, friendly experiments; they were neither clumsy nor confusing.

They were the kisses of a grown man to his wife. And she had kissed him as a wife would kiss her husband. It was mortifying. It was shameful. It was...intriguing.

Carefully she felt along her hairline, over her face, across her brow, searching for injuries, intent upon finding a lump on her head that would indicate a cracked and fractured skull. It was the only possible explanation.

Darcy paced the inn's narrow corridor, silently cursing his inability to do anything useful. When Elizabeth collapsed, unconscious at his feet, he nearly panicked. The next hour—of stopping his carriage, of finding an inn, of demanding a physician, treatment, anything—while Elizabeth lay unresponsive and pale, was the most

dreadful of his life.

Worse, he had no idea what sort of toxic brew Mrs Bennet had administered, and thus could only tell the doctor the symptoms of it. The man administered some sort of purgative, and only half-conscious, Elizabeth began retching again. It was horrible, but the doctor's firm opinion was that once she rid her body of the poison, her current weakness would be resolved by rest and proper diet. While undoubtedly sensible, Darcy's worry and guilt only increased.

He had lost his vaunted control of his temper, of his emotions; he had stooped to mean jealousy, to ridiculous and unkind argument, resentfully blaming Elizabeth for being unable to see through Wickham's machinations. How could she? His own father had been blind to them; the more innocent and good his victim, the less likely they were to see him for the scoundrel he was.

Does she despise me now? He could hardly blame her if she did. His own feelings were ever clearer; seeing her collapse, wondering whether she was at death's door, only emphasised just how much she meant to him.

Life, he knew, was altogether too short for far too many; his father had never seen his fiftieth birthday. His mother had not lived to see forty.

The maid who had been sitting with Elizabeth emerged from her room, interrupting his pacing.

"Your wife be awake, sir," she said. "I be fetching a tray for her now, sir, just as ye wisht."

"Thank you," he replied with a twinge of guilt at his falsehood. He could hardly reveal the truth, however—that he had plucked a young lady away from her mother and groom because she had been poisoned into accepting a fool.

He knew he ought not to enter Elizabeth's room; he was not truly her husband, after all. Yet, until he could see for himself that she was in her right mind, recovering, he would be stretched between the unbearable agonies of doubt and dread.

Just a few words, that I might know she will be well , he thought, and opened the door.

It took his eyes a few moments to adjust to the gloom, but finally he made out the slight figure upon the bed.

"Mr Darcy!" Elizabeth said, her voice sounding both weak and alarmed. Her expressive eyes darted around the room, as if she looked for a means of escape. She was, plainly, anxious—and yet, she faced him bravely.

His heart, which alternated between pumping too hard and stopping entirely, melted. He pulled up a spindly wooden chair to sit beside the bed. In the dim shadows, he saw one slender hand lift slightly from the blankets. Unable to help himself, he took it within his own, and was relieved when she did not pull it away.

"The servant," she said in almost a whisper, "she said that we are—we are married."

"Well, yes," he said, wondering how to explain. "It was necessary to tell the innkeeper, due to what happened."

"What happened?" she repeated, her voice wary. "I cannot remember much of anything. Was there an accident?"

He was determined, this time, that the conversation might not devolve to accusations. "You were given a medication meant for your father, in order to soften your feelings towards matrimony. I believe you were given too much."

“Given what ? Surely you would not?—”

“No, no,” he protested immediately. “Not by me. I-I heard of the plot, and only meant to stop your marriage to Mr Collins, your cousin, while you were not in your right mind.”

She was quiet for some moments. “I remember him...talking and talking,” she said at last. “He would not stop talking. Mama was there, too. Mama.”

He said nothing in reply; she had drawn her own conclusions, plainly.

“So... you married me instead?”

She sounded bewildered, her voice trembling—the voice of a woman who was holding herself together on sheer will. Darcy knew he had only one chance to get this right.

“To call you wife would be an honour and privilege for any man. I understand you do not know me well. I beg that I might be given a chance to earn your respect.” He stopped himself from saying more of his love, his admiration and devotion. She loved another, and he was the only one who knew how futile were her feelings for the despicable Wickham. His earlier jealousy, spoken aloud, had been poorly done, his worst self on display. He did not wish to be that man, and prayed she would never remember it.

Her eyes were wide in the dimness. “You are forced, then, by your conscience, into matrimony.”

“I do not consider myself forced, but am wretched that you must feel so. I am only resolved to protect your name by any means and to any extent necessary.”

“And your own?”

He thought about how to reply. “My name is such that it will weather many storms. Please, allow it to shield you now.”

“It is past the point, I suppose, where I have any choice.”

The words were bitter—and yet her hand clutched his, giving him hope that she did not find him utterly repulsive.

It was not quite so dire as her words implied, he knew—they might yet escape the situation with everyone’s choices intact. If he had thought to give an alias to the doctor and innkeeper, the odds would have been even better that they might remain unrecognised and anonymous. Nevertheless, he was not sorry that in his distress and anxiety at her collapse, he had cast his own reputation and protection over her, and he wished her to prepare herself for the necessity of marriage should it come to that. He opened his mouth to explain it all—as he should probably have done from the beginning—but was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“I has your tray,” the servant said, entering at his command.

“Yes, thank you,” he said, turning back to Elizabeth. “Please, try and eat something. The doctor recommended plain broth and toast, feeling you would recover your strength quickly if you could eat.”

Nourishment and rest, as the doctor had advised, was what was most required at the moment. Fuller explanation could wait. Reluctantly, he let go of her hand, and forced himself to take his leave of her.

Mr Darcy did not return, although she admitted to herself that she waited for him to do so after finishing her bland meal. Her mind alternatively raced and moved

sluggishly as she sifted through broken and cracked memories.

There were too many frightening ones.

As best she could remember and piece together, her mother had been behind an attempt to marry her to Mr Collins. How very like Mama, neglecting not only to take her daughter's feelings into consideration, but failing to consider that ingesting so much of Papa's tonic might be dangerous!

How could she have done it? Is her understanding so mean, her will so pitiless, that she would throw me away at any cost? She might have ruined my mind, or murdered me outright!

Mr Collins, in her memory, was vacuous, vague, and voluble. It was incredible and yet unsurprising that he could not have understood her to be out of her wits, but then, he truly cared only for himself.

But Mama, Mr Collins, even concern for her ailing Papa possessed only minor bits of her attention. Again and again, she returned to the fantastic idea that somehow Mr Darcy had married her. Somehow, she had married Mr Darcy.

Elizabeth had no doubt that the very notion of matrimony was against his wishes and will. Also, she was certain Mr Darcy had not taken advantage of the situation to do it. That entire idea made no sense whatsoever. If he did not precisely hate her, he certainly was no admirer—and with his wealth, excellent birth, and outward beauty, he could obviously have his pick of brides more attractive and affluent.

She had not liked him, it was true—had been well on her way, in fact, to despising him for his mistreatment of her friend, Mr Wickham. But the recollection of this mistreatment, in fact, was what led her to the deepest mystery of all.

How could he disregard the friend of his youth so callously, while showing such extraordinary concern for me? At the ball, he had refused to defend himself from her accusations—conveyed when she ought to have been dancing, not pressing him for explanation—regarding Mr Wickham. On the other hand, why should he have? What am I to him, that I should deserve to hear any vindication of his motives or actions? I am an insect beneath his shoe .

An insect he had kissed in a wild, passionate manner, and inexplicably married while she was out of her senses, in order to protect her.

Her head ached. Nothing made sense, no matter how she wrestled with her fractured memories. Finally, she fell into a deep, if troubled sleep.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:02 am

Seven

Despite the beauty of the chilly November afternoon, George Wickham was restless. The other officers, even Denny, were jealous of him, leaving him to his own devices more and more often. Chafing at the inaction and lack of opportunities in Meryton and its surrounds, he found few marks available for a man of his talents—and now that Darcy was in the vicinity, he must keep his head lower than ever. The few unsatisfying flirtations he had managed had done nothing to satiate his appetites, and there were far more concerned mamas and papas lurking round every corner than available females willing to risk reputation for a bit of sport.

Speaking of which, one of the noisiest of those mothers was currently marching up the street, looking as militant as any soldier in the regiment. Had Napoleon himself dared pop up before her, she would have obliterated him with one strike of her swinging reticule.

“Mrs Bennet,” he called in his most charming voice. “How lovely to see you on a fine November’s day. Meryton is quite dull today, as everyone exhausted themselves last evening. Do not tell me that you failed to dance until dawn? If only I had been able to attend, I should have made certain you were never lacking a partner.”

Her expression lost a degree of chill, as he had known it would.

“If only you had been there!” Mrs Bennet cried. “You might have put that awful Mr Darcy in his place! There is no one to stop him now!”

At that moment, a breathless, heavyset young man caught up to her—Mr Collins,

Wickham remembered. A vicar now, but the future heir of Longbourn. Envy twisted in his malevolent soul.

“Dear, dear! Stop Darcy from doing what, good madam?” Wickham asked.

She opened her mouth to speak, but Collins beat her to it.

“From stealing my bride,” he said sourly. “Mr Darcy has eloped with the faithless, fickle Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

Wickham’s brows rose as high as they could go.

Mrs Bennet gave Collins a quelling stare. “We are on our way to my brother Philips,” she explained. “He must lend us his carriage. We shall follow the couple and ensure that the nuptials are performed. My Lizzy is entirely blameless in this matter, and if Mr Darcy believes he can make away with my daughter without repercussion, I will give him something else to think about!”

Wickham nearly burst into laughter—as if this foolish pair could possibly exert any influence over Darcy! The man could not be bought nor bullied into doing anything he did not wish. I should know.

There must be more to this supposed ‘elopement’ than these two were admitting. Darcy would never approve of an elopement of any kind, not for any reason—Wickham also knew that all too well.

For that matter, neither could he envision Miss Elizabeth Bennet indulging in any kind of improper behaviour. If she were the sort, I would certainly have already indulged with her!

Nevertheless, Darcy’s honour often could be used against him, as had been proved in

times past. Miss Elizabeth and Darcy were caught up in something , and Darcy was unlikely to want her hurt. Oh, they could never force him to a marriage he did not wish—no one could, else he would already be wed to the de Bourgh chit.

No, whatever had happened between Darcy and Miss Elizabeth, Darcy would expect to use his wealth and influence to remove all stain. Wickham did not pretend that Darcy could not succeed. However, the more witnesses there were to this supposed infraction of society's rules, the costlier it would be. If Mrs Bennet and Collins were the only ones who knew of it, Darcy could escape practically unscathed. If, however, someone whom Darcy could not trust to keep his mouth shut—at least, not without significant incentive—were to witness him in a potentially scandalous situation, why, Wickham could almost guarantee he would pay. And pay. And pay.

“I will escort you,” he offered handsomely. “I know just how to find him in town. I was practically raised with him, you know.”

It was dark when Elizabeth wakened, still a trifle disoriented, but feeling much more herself. The same servant, again, was dozing in the chair, and again wakened instantly when she—carefully this time—sat up.

“You’re awake!”

“Good evening, Molly,” she said. “You have had a very dull day of it, I am afraid.”

“It’s happy I am to have a dull one, every now and again,” the girl said kindly. “And your husband’s been paying me well to have it. Is ye hungry?”

Elizabeth thought about this. “You know, I think I am. Perhaps something more substantial than broth? I truly feel much better.”

Molly seemed uncertain about whether such a meal would be allowed, but obediently

left to ask ‘himself’—or so Elizabeth assumed.

Cautiously she stood, noting with distaste that her frock—never one of her favourites—was wrinkled beyond belief. In her stocking feet, she took several experimental steps around the small room, pleased to find that she was now quite steady. Molly returned with a tray—soup again, but a much heartier version. Once the meal was consumed, Elizabeth felt almost her usual self.

Molly carried out the empty dishes, promising to give assurances to ‘himself’ that she was really quite restored.

With the return of her health, Elizabeth’s mind fastened again on the problem at hand, and the many questions begging to be answered. What kind of character has Mr Darcy? Why did he rescue me from Mama’s designs? If he is honourable enough to the point of marrying me in the process of saving me from Mr Collins, why did he treat Mr Wickham so abominably? Why did he marry me?

Besides all that, there were so many important details absent from her splintered memories. Who even had married them? Mr Palmer? Her mind was fuzzy on the order of things, but she remembered being at Longbourn with Mama and Mr Collins and then riding in a carriage. There had been a licence, she somehow recalled, although she could not remember any details about why she knew this. Why could she not remember a ceremony, or even the foggiest notion of a church? There was a memory of a stranger, an older man, offering her a peppermint. Was he a vicar?

At that moment, she spied her half-boots resting beside the hearth.

These were questions only Mr Darcy could answer, and she was no child, afraid of treading the stairs of a respectable establishment in search of him. He might not be in a private parlour, or even the tavern proper. If that were the case, however, someone could fetch him from his room, could they not? She donned her shoes.

A glance in the mirror, unfortunately, told her that her hair was a wild mess, her dark curls having taken on a life of their own—and there was no brush available to tame it. It would be best to wait for Molly, and ask her to obtain an audience with her benefactor. My husband. My husband? It seems impossible.

She waited. And waited. The girl did not return.

Her impatience with the entire situation grew to unbearable proportions. Finally, she freshened herself as best she could with the bowl and pitcher of water provided, and quickly left the warmth and quiet of the small chamber before she could change her mind.

“Mr Darcy!” cried a snivelling voice. “Where is my bride?”

Darcy sighed. He knew he ought to have waited for a private parlour to empty, but in his relief at hearing of Elizabeth’s apparent recovery, he had opted to forego one in favour of immediate fortification. He had been nearly trembling with relief and elation at the news of her improvement. Reluctantly, he turned to face his accuser.

“She never was your bride, idiot,” he said—not bothering with politeness.

A second person rounded on him. Wonderful. A duet of dunderheads. Just what Elizabeth does not need—a public spectacle.

“What have you done with my daughter?” Mrs Bennet shrieked.

“I do not know what you are talking about.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she looked as though she might begin beating him with her reticule. Every person in the inn—including Molly, he abruptly noticed, who was supposed to be waiting on Elizabeth—turned to stare at them.

“Tell me now or I shall search every room in the place!” she screeched.

He would not allow it—and nor, he suspected, would the innkeeper, whose bushy brows were already drawn together in a frown. This was a respectable inn, and the attention they were drawing was anything but.

“Listen to me,” he growled in the low tones of one accustomed to deference, his eyes narrowed in wrathful command. “If either of you have a brain in your head, you will turn round immediately, and walk out that door. There is no one here. Everyone is safe. Everything you desire shall be returned to you with no harm done, but only if you quietly leave. Do it. Now !”

The last word was uttered with such vehemence that the two before him quailed, slumping accordingly into a compliant obedience. In fact, everyone in the entire room seemed to find something or someone else to look at.

That is right. Nothing to see here . As long as they departed without a fuss, there was unlikely to be any scandal. He could maintain Elizabeth’s choices for her, as he was honour bound to do, and which he knew she would prefer. His own preferences mattered little in comparison.

But into that sudden quiet, a soft voice emerged. “Mr Darcy, I would speak with you, please.” He swivelled to meet it. Elizabeth—lovelier than he had ever before seen, pink-cheeked, her long hair tumbling and curling over her slim shoulders and a crumpled dress, looking for all the world as if she had just emerged from his bed after a long day of play—stood at the inn’s stairwell.

“Mama? Mr Collins?” she questioned, her confusion obvious when they, too, turned to look at her.

And then the awful voice, the voice he hated most in all the world, the voice of one

he had wished beyond reason that he would never have to hear again, called out loudly, derision in every word.

“Well, well, well, Darcy. How fortunate that I spotted your carriage. Methinks the cat has been caught cavorting with the canary, with a few sweet feathers still sticking to his lips.”

Elizabeth was not stupid. She heard and understood Mr Wickham’s insinuation; she supposed he might be excused for some misinterpretation of the circumstances, but she did not appreciate his blatantly coarse—and loudly stated—assumptions.

Darcy shot to his feet, glaring, anger pouring from him; he was a good half a head taller than Mr Wickham, who reddened, but did not move away. Mrs Bennet glanced at the two men warily, as if she had just grasped that the situation might be a bit beyond her touch. Mr Collins took an actual step backwards.

“Shut. Your. Mouth,” Darcy ordered, his voice low and wrathful.

“Oh, happily,” Mr Wickham said smoothly, never even glancing at Elizabeth. “For a price.”

Elizabeth gaped. Was this man—whom she had believed a friend, at least, if not a suitor—threatening extortion ? What if she had been abducted? What if she had needed rescue? Apparently, all she could expect from this...this villain, was more trouble.

Darcy did not appear surprised at Mr Wickham’s coercion.

“You may toss your lies and allegations at me all day long. I could not care less for the accusations of a worm. One note of caution however: say one more word which implicates or alludes to anyone else of anything except the highest standards of

comportment, and you shall be very sorry indeed.”

Darcy had not raised his voice—although with the patrons all so silent, he could be easily heard. Nevertheless, and despite the softness of his tone, Mr Collins took another step back. Mr Wickham, however, managed a laugh—although she was certain she heard the tension in it and saw the shifting of his feet, as if he were tempted to bolt.

“Who am I to accuse you, my good man? I see nothing wrong with a bit of bed sport with a willing female—and all females are willing at heart, are they not? If you have finally shaken a few feathers from her stingy little tail, ’tis all well and good. I require only a few pounds to forget what I witnessed here.”

Darcy moved so quickly, Mr Wickham never saw the punch coming. One moment, the vile man was standing, taunting—the next he was on the floor, blood dripping from his nose, his face a wreck of damaged cartilage. He scrambled to his knees, attempting to rise, spewing curses—but Elizabeth had had enough.

“You contemptible vermin!” she hissed, going at once to Darcy’s side. “This is my husband whom you accuse. You are unworthy to be standing in the same room with him! It is fortunate indeed that he began with a warning knock—a little tap, really, and only a small portion of the anger and disgust he rightly feels for you.”

Mr Wickham sat back down on the floor, looking at her and then at Darcy in astonished disbelief. She heartily wished she had the strength to punch him herself.

“B-but...you cannot be married to her !” Mr Collins cried. “You are betrothed to Miss Anne de Bourgh!”

Darcy gave Mr Collins a look such as Elizabeth never hoped to receive, taking a threatening step towards him. He scurried from the room.

Darcy turned to her then, his expression immediately gentling. She held out her hand and he took it, tucking it in the crook of his arm, his dark eyes fathomless.

She glanced at her mother, who appeared strangely satisfied. “How could you, Mama? How could you? You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and I hope you are—but regardless of whether you feel any guilt or regret, I will never agree to receive you after the trouble you have caused my husband. You may tell my papa...” Here, her breath hitched.

Darcy would be well within his rights to cut her off from all her family, and certainly to distrust them—they had forced his unwilling hand. Perhaps in time, she could convince him of the goodness of the Gardiners; she hoped he was not unreasonable. But she would not blame him if it required some years—indeed, she was very fortunate he did not hate her along with them. “Tell Papa to quit taking that awful tonic, and he will likely be well in no time at all. And Jane...”

She could not manage a message for Jane. She would burst into tears and might never stop crying if she thought too much of her sister. “I will write to her,” she said. She looked up at...at her husband. “Shall we?” she asked.

He nodded soberly.

Together, arm in arm, they walked from the room.

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:02 am

Eight

Elizabeth maintained her dignified countenance until the heavy inn door shut firmly behind them and they had walked several steps into the darkness beyond it. Suddenly she stopped, forcing Darcy to pause with her, and looked up at him.

“I have no idea where I am going,” she said.

“I was following your lead.”

She burst into laughter. “That is not at all wise, sir, when I have been out of my head for most of the day. I suppose your belongings are still at the inn?”

“A few bits and bobs only. Oh, and my man is there, awaiting my return. I suppose he might begin to wonder, if I did not.”

She shook her head ruefully. “Let us turn back, then.”

“I would never dream of spoiling such a perfect exit as you provided us. I will send someone to fetch him, and my coachman as well.”

“It is long past dark, and unfair to drag them out,” she worried aloud.

“Probably the innkeeper would insist upon our departure regardless—engaging in fisticuffs in his taproom is frowned upon, I am certain. My men will understand, once they know Wickham is in the vicinity. Besides we are a mere couple of hours, give or take, from town, and doubtless they would prefer to have their own beds.”

Which they could have had long ago, had they not had to deal with me and my illness , she thought. The fact that Darcy's entire contingent would want to remove him from Mr Wickham's vicinity was no longer surprising.

Matching words to action, he gained the attention of a stableman, who promptly ran to do his bidding. People had a way of doing that, she noticed. In fact, it seemed like no time at all before once again, they were ensconced in his carriage, rumbling along the pavement. Moonlight flooded the vehicle, lighting the interior and yet Darcy remained cloaked in gloom.

Elizabeth had more questions than answers, but for some reason was reluctant to break the silence between them. He sat across from her, a large, silent, dark silhouette; with almost surprising boldness she heard herself burst out with the last words she had ever thought to utter.

"I wish you were not so far away from me." Realising how brazen she had sounded, she tried to explain. "It is difficult to speak to your shadow."

Instantly he moved into the space beside her, so quickly it was startling—almost as if he had very much wanted to sit next to her.

Well , she thought, since we are married, there is no reason why we should not begin to be comfortable with each other . And so she leant against him, and was gratified when he moved his arm around her and covered her hand with his much larger one. It was an unfamiliar feeling, to be resting in the arms of a man.

It was also sweet, satisfying some need she had never known she possessed.

"I am sure you require explanations," he said, but then did not offer any.

"Yes," she agreed.

More silence.

“Who is Anne de Bourgh?” she asked at last. It was the least of the questions brimming in her thoughts—but if he possessed an affianced bride, one that probably ought to be addressed quickly.

He made a small noise of displeasure. “She is my cousin. I can assure you, we never were betrothed, although my aunt likes to pretend it is so, no matter how often I remind her otherwise.”

“That must be annoying,” she replied. “I?—”

“I am so sorry,” he interrupted, and his words spilled out in a sudden rush. “I am sorry for Wickham’s insinuations, and for losing command of myself so completely that you were forced to witness violence. Further, if there is any way you could forget our argument, the things I said to you concerning him earlier today, I would be grateful beyond reason. I meant none of it.”

“Your wish has already been granted,” Elizabeth said, after a moment’s bewilderment. “I have no recollection of any argument. My memories are random and erratic, having more to do with events that perhaps occurred earlier in the day? We argued about...Mr Wickham?”

He sighed. “I am unsure you were arguing at all. It was I who...behaved poorly at the mention of his name.”

She thought about this, trying so hard to remember, it almost hurt. There was hardly anything, beyond the vague, nonsensical recollections of her mother, of Mr Collins, of the peppermints, and kissing Darcy. Some parts of the past, I think, probably ought to stay happily buried; no doubt he, too, has had cause this day to be upset. “I truly have no recollection of this quarrel. Mr Wickham behaved despicably this evening,

however, and I shall henceforth call him no friend of mine. I suppose it is possible that he might spread rumours about me within his regiment, but my family's name is a good one. Hopefully he would not be believed."

"As to that," said Darcy, "I doubt he will return to Meryton. He does not usually behave so callously before witnesses, but his greed got the better of him, imagining, as he did, that he had caught me in a compromising situation."

"You were rescuing me! He is a churl!"

"In the end, it was your quick thinking that achieved the rescue."

Elizabeth could not see how quick thinking had entered into it, but before she could ask, he continued speaking. "I should perhaps better account for the, er, depth of my hostility. Wickham was a great favourite with my father, but my friendship with him was finished while still a schoolboy."

"I have heard his claim that your father left him a legacy, a valuable living—but you would not give it to him. I suppose he lied."

"Only if he neglected to mention that he was paid three thousand pounds to sign away any rights to it."

She sat up straight, looking at him. "Truly? Why, it is positively criminal to make such claims on you now, then!"

But he only sighed again. "That, along with another thousand my father left him, satisfied the monetary requirements of the will. But he wanted the obligations and commitment of family...to the point of attempting an elopement with my fifteen-year-old sister. I have no doubt of your secrecy on this matter—I only hope you might more fully understand how the very mention of him creates misery for me. I

will admit that I have wished to throw that punch for several months now, and was finally given an excuse.”

His young sister? Elizabeth could only gape, shaking her head in disbelief. “No,” she whispered. “He is a monster.”

He hesitated, piercing her with the intensity of his gaze even in the dim carriage, and then added, “Especially when it is you who shows interest in him. There is no excuse for my jealousy—it was never within your power to understand how great a scoundrel he is, and I certainly enlightened no one.”

We argued over Wickham because Darcy was jealous ?

“That seems incredible. Before today, you did not even like me.”

He huffed a soft breath of what might have been laughter, and before she could even realise what had happened, his mouth was on hers, his big hands alternately framing her face or his fingertips threading through her hair, stroking her scalp.

At first Elizabeth was shocked, holding still as a trapped bird, her heart beating wildly. Yet, the astonishment could not remain, not with the taste of him, the heat of his mouth, igniting a fervour in her blood. Before she knew she would even want to touch him, her own hands were seeking, tracing the breadth of his shoulders, searching, even slipping beneath his coat to find more of his precious warmth and closeness. It was the kiss from her memories except more, even, as if the fire of his passion had kindled ever more hotly in the interim, striking sparks everywhere they touched.

“In case you were unsure,” he said, spreading kisses up her jaw to a delicious place below her ear, “I have been dying for this—to hold you, to kiss you, to make you mine.”

“I cannot think,” she murmured. “I cannot tell whether I am still dizzy or if I have forgotten how to breathe.”

At her words, he halted mid-kiss, tilting his head back to look at her. After a moment, he let a breath out, resting his forehead against hers.

“I am a beast,” he said. “You have been ill.”

“You are my husband,” she said softly. “You need not stop. Although we do have a problem—I am not of age. I suppose my father will not challenge it, however, and would give his permission after the fact.”

But at this he reared back. “What did you say?”

Elizabeth was confused by his obvious astonishment. “I am only twenty. It is yet a good four months until my birth?—”

“We are not married!”

“You said we were!”

He gaped. “I am sure I never did.”

“I could hardly have made up such a thing! You said it!” Realising that she was still seated on his lap, she hurriedly moved off onto the upholstered bench.

Elizabeth was mortified. Had she imagined it? Were his words a mere product of her imagination and illness? But no, she was certain!

“You spoke of the honour and privilege of marrying me, when I regained consciousness at the inn. It was almost the first thing you said to me. I am sure you

did!” She grimaced. “I think.”

His brow smoothed, a hint of white teeth showing her a slight smile. “And so it would be both honour and privilege. You misunderstood me, my dear. I said that I told the innkeeper we were married, justifying our travel alone together. I only meant to explain to you that a marriage might become necessary, if circumstances did not permit our remaining anonymous. Many know me. These things have a way of getting out—as you know, now, for yourself.”

“You did not argue the marriage when I announced it to my mother and Wickham!”

He gathered up her hands in his, holding on when she would have pulled away. “Of course I did not. You were brilliant. I will get a licence and we will quickly turn the lie into truth.”

She stared at him. “What you mean is that from the moment you heard of Mama’s plotting, you were doomed, your choices surrendered. What you mean is that I have forced you into a marriage, without your consent.”

“Rather, I think it was the push I needed, to take the step I wanted. I stupidly allowed the inferiority of your connexions and that total want of propriety so frequently displayed by your mother and your three younger sisters to stand in the way of my feelings.”

Elizabeth saw it then, all too clearly. He had been attracted to her, perhaps deeply attracted. But mere desire would never have been enough for him. He had expected to...to do better.

“In other words, had you not been forced by your conscience to rescue me, you would never have asked me to marry you. There are trunks atop this carriage. You were already packed when you received word of this plot by Mama and Mr Collins.

You would have departed Netherfield and never looked back.”

Even in the near-darkness, she could tell his gaze slid away from hers; her heart dropped to her half-boots.

“What does that signify? I was wrong. My eyes have been opened.”

“Your desires have been tempted. It is not a good enough reason.”

“A few minutes ago, it was,” Darcy said, jaw clenching. “You were prepared to accept the marriage when you did not recall it.”

She tugged her hands away from his. “I was prepared to make the best of an unfortunate situation. I trusted that if you said we must be married, we must already be.”

“And so we must. You have announced the marriage to your mother—not known for her discretion—and who else heard, one can only guess. Collins, for one, has seen you in a disreputable circumstance. Will he be quiet? Not to mention Wickham.”

“My father can enforce my mother’s silence. Mr Collins is a fool—I cannot believe anyone would care for a word he utters. Mr Wickham believes us to be wed, and you have already said he is unlikely to return to Meryton to learn differently. If you take me to my uncle Gardiner in Cheapside, I can stay with my ‘inferior connexions’ until it all blows over and some new scandal comes along for small minds to fuss about. It might take some time, but if nothing comes of this incident, it will all be forgotten eventually.”

“You and Miss Bennet must always be excluded from any like criticism of inferiority,” he said. “I did not mean to insult you.”

“Of course you did not. To you, it is simply truth—you are of one rank, and I am of another, a much lower one. My portion is abysmal, my nearest relations are embarrassing. Imagining Mama as your mother-in-law is unbearably preposterous. Why would you do anything else except depart and call it a lucky escape?”

He appeared to be struggling to find words to refute hers. And then he said ones she had not expected. “Because I love you.”

Almost, she threw herself back into his arms. It was the first time anyone had ever made such a declaration to her, and she was mightily tempted to hold onto it, to treasure it...to believe it. But she had an education in this particular circumstance that he likely did not. Briefly she touched the roughness of his cheek, her heart breaking, her conscience forcing her to be truthful, to not do the easy thing.

“My father fell in love with my mother many years ago, and nothing would do but that he should quickly marry her. Relating it now, it always becomes a cautionary tale to his daughters. They have been very unhappy together, I think. What you and I feel for each other is desire, an apparently fleeting emotion that cannot survive the first year of wedlock.”

“Thank you for explaining my feelings to me so fully,” he said, frustration in his voice. “Has it occurred to you that you might be wrong? That your father will be unable to prevent rumour and scandal, affecting not only you but your sisters as well? That not everyone will think Collins’s tales ridiculous? That you might be exposing us both to the world for disgrace and dishonour?”

It was hard to hear the anger and hurt in his tone. It was difficult to consider that her choices now might poorly reflect upon her sisters. She did not know whether she loved him; her feelings had only recently undergone a rapid transformation. But she knew that, once she had accepted as fact a belief that they were married, she had felt neither panic over the future nor distress in the present. Instead, it had been as though

she had been handed a gift; upon opening it, she had glimpsed something of inexpressible value, a dream she had never dared to dream.

Now she was tossing the gift back at him, as if it were worthless.

“I do this for you,” she made herself say. “Your honour demands immediate action—you are literally unable to do aught but try to protect me. I also do this for me—lest with any and every future disagreement, I wonder how many regrets you harbour over this day.”

His jaw firmed at her words as the silence grew fraught between them. Abruptly, however, he sighed. In that sigh, she heard acceptance.

He sees the sense in it now, she thought, even as regret filled her. Had she wanted him to argue? Refuse to take ‘no’ for an answer?

Yes, her fickle heart answered for her. Yet, her sensible brain realised his cooperation was for the best.

For what seemed an endless time, they sat in a silence grown miserable, at least to her—side by side, but as if a brick wall had arisen between them. The well-sprung carriage swayed with the undulations of a rough patch of road beneath the wheels.

“Can you give me your uncle’s direction? I will relay it to Frost at our next stop.”

It was nothing less than what she had asked for—to be taken elsewhere, away from him. But regret was an ache in her heart and a lump in the pit of her throat. Quietly, she gave him the information. He only nodded in response, and silence fell again.

The night was cold. She had not noticed it before, but now that she had no distractions it was positively frigid. She wrapped her arms around herself, wretched,

and tried not to think, not to remember, not to hurt.

But his words would not leave her mind.

“To call you wife would be an honour and privilege for any man. I understand you do not know me well. I beg that I might be given a chance to earn your respect.”

“I have been dying for this—to hold you, to kiss you, to make you mine.”

“Because I love you.”

She was trying so hard to do what was right, what was best—only to have his words haunting and taunting the honour she attempted. In situations such as these, a good memory was unpardonable! Why was it so difficult to leave him, when she had known him so little? Yesterday, she had thought them practically enemies! Beyond that, she was fatigued, heartsick, and freezing. The first tear fell, and then another. She did her best to weep silently, desperately not wanting him to know, but even a small snuffle sounded loud in the quiet between them. Perhaps, however, he would politely pretend not to notice, thereby leaving her dignity intact.

“Elizabeth,” he said, his voice low. “Come here.” He turned towards her, breaching the invisible distance, pulling her into his arms.

Instead of refusing as she ought, she went easily, burrowing into his warmth willingly, allowing him to cradle her unresistingly as he wrapped the edges of his greatcoat around her and held her close.

“You are so cold,” he said, by way of excuse for both of them. It was an insufficient one; he might have offered to give her the coat instead.

But it was the last time she would ever feel his arms around her, safe and soothing.

One final memory to cherish, as the sound of horse hooves and the grind of carriage wheels against the gravel, his strong heartbeat beneath her head, created an odd sort of lullaby. Her tears dried almost instantly on her cheeks within the peace of it, and—though she tried to fight it, to stay awake, to relish every remaining moment—between one breath and the next, she slept.

Nine

Darcy held Elizabeth in his arms for the rest of the journey. She stirred a bit when Frost stopped just beyond the outskirts of London, but he was able to give directions to Gracechurch Street without waking her. She was exhausted, the poor girl; he admitted, if only to himself, that he was glad of it. Had she possessed her full strength, she would never have allowed him to continue the embrace—even though it was only Frost, his trusted coachman, who saw it.

In the meantime, he memorised every inch of her face in the unsatisfactory flashes of carriage lantern lights through the window—high cheekbones, perfectly shaped lips he longed to kiss again, thick lashes resting against the pale, perfect beauty of her skin.

He wanted her, oh yes, that. Holding her like this was exquisite torture. Yet, it was not all desire, as she feared.

How stupid I was , to remind her of the flaws of her mother and sisters when she already was feeling such mortification! She truly was the victim of her mother's machinations, had already made clear that she did not expect him to receive Mrs Bennet—and while her sisters had shown themselves to be undisciplined, that, too, was a failing of their parents. Elizabeth's behaviour was always faultless, as was her elder sister's.

It was not as though his own family was perfect. His uncle, though an earl, constantly overspent his means, while his aunt, the widow of a wealthy baronet, preferred to talk instead of listen, meddling in the lives of everyone around her without doing anything

to improve them. He was powerless to change either of them—indeed, it had never before occurred to him that he ought to try. Why had he even mentioned his distaste for her family members? Had he expected her to rejoice in his critical opinions? No, he had only succeeded in making her feel more deeply their differences, emphasising a fearful approach to the future.

Her father had chosen poorly, a once pretty girl of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. Nevertheless, her eldest daughters were lovely women of charm and steady disposition. To that, Elizabeth added poise, a clever wit, a happy nature, a keen intelligence, and exceptional fortitude. He could not think of another who could have withstood the day she had just endured with such grace and courage.

She had wakened that morning with a poor opinion of him, thanks to Wickham—and thanks to his own refusal to counter any of Wickham's deceits, to give her or anyone else a reason to think better of him. After being poisoned by her mother and believing herself married to him, she had nevertheless proceeded to 'make the best of a bad situation'—by joining him in a passion he had never dreamt. Deep down, Elizabeth trusted him—without it, she never could have responded as she had. Many women would be eager to wed him simply due to his wealth and standing; she thought only of whether they could truly be happy together.

She did not wish to repeat her parents' mistakes, of course—but they could avoid them. His thoughtless pride had caused their current rift; he only needed to be the gentleman he had been raised to be, to continually show her, by every civility within his power, her importance to him and his respect for her and for those she loved.

Would she give him the opportunity to prove his worth? Would this be the last time he would ever hold her? He did his best to stay fixed in the present, to cherish these moments of closeness—but with every passing minute, he grew more and more aware that he was about to deliver her to unknown relations who may or may not be

amenable to his continued interest in her life. He could not know whether they would allow her to stay in London, or if she might be whisked away elsewhere. His future—once so staid, so predictable—had become a great unknown.

Elizabeth did not rouse until the carriage stopped before a well-lit, surprisingly grand home in Gracechurch Street. Plainly a bit disoriented, she sat up, looking sleepily at him. “We are here already?”

Maintaining an equanimity he did not feel, Darcy brushed her soft cheek with one thumb. “You did not wake when we stopped on the outskirts of town. You are exhausted, and I wanted you to remain asleep if you could.”

The carriage door opened then, and he hurried to hand her out himself. Before she could think of a protest, he took her arm so that he might be allowed to accompany her to her uncle’s door. A neat servant answered it, and, recognising Elizabeth, greeted her warmly before hurrying to fetch her mistress.

“Lizzy!” her aunt cried. “This is a pleasant surprise!” She stopped short at the sight of him.

“Aunt Gardiner, this is Mr Darcy—a very good friend of Mr Bingley, whom I think I have mentioned in my letters. He has done me a great service today, one which I can hardly repay.” She bit her lip, obviously uncertain of what next to say.

He bowed. “It is a pleasure to meet any relation of Miss Elizabeth’s. I am certain she will wish to give you lengthier explanations of why we have appeared, unannounced, upon your doorstep. I wonder if her uncle, Mr Gardiner, is at home, that I might have a private word with him? I promise not to take up much of his time.”

He was a stranger to these people, and it was an irregular request to be sure, but it was obvious that their presence here was anything except ‘regular’. Elizabeth gave

him a measuring look, which he did his best to return with a reassuring smile. Whether he was successful or not, he could not say.

One thing was certain—Elizabeth obviously had no reason to be ashamed of either Mr or Mrs Gardiner. Their home was lovely, their decorum flawless, their manners impeccable. Gardiner's study was as elegant as Darcy's own at his Mayfair home; the man himself was immaculately dressed in perfectly tailored clothing. It was with a niggling sense of shame that he recalled his expressions of near contempt to the Bingley sisters. Though many gentlemen refused to have anything to do with trade, he had made several wise investments in promising businesses—and in his inexperience, a few unwise ones as well; he supposed a man like Mr Gardiner seldom made the same errors. My low assumptions of the Gardiners' respectability were completely mistaken.

“Thank you for bringing my niece to me, Mr Darcy,” Gardiner said politely, once they were both seated. But Darcy heard a note of steely discontent within his mannerly address. This was not a man who would be impressed by the Darcy name or be put off by vague explanation, no matter who gave it. “I admit to a good deal of surprise at finding my favourite niece upon my stoop—and accompanied only by a man with whom I am unfamiliar.”

“You may well be—although probably not quite so surprised as I am,” Darcy replied ruefully. It was remarkably difficult to know how to tell the tale. “It began this morning, when my man informed me of a plot against Miss Elizabeth—although I suppose, truthfully, the story starts at a Meryton assembly some weeks ago.”

“Your mother did what ?” Mrs Gardiner had taken Elizabeth aside in her private sitting room, where they would not be disturbed; a tray of tea, biscuits, and breads sat between them. “Lizzy, I can hardly credit it!”

Elizabeth took a bite of a biscuit, staring at it contemplatively. “Believe me when I

say that I am now certain she will go to any length to achieve a marriage for one of her daughters. You do not want to know how many times I cast up my accounts between Longbourn and here. She gave me far too large a dose of Papa's tonic, I am certain."

Her aunt looked aghast. "Because she wanted you to agree to a wedding with that cousin you wrote me of? It seems too fantastic for words."

"I agree! Especially because I was, in essence, drunk as a sailor. Only Mr Collins would be so stupid as to have failed to realise it. In my memories, the entire world was spinning madly. I am sure I seemed absolutely nonsensical."

"I cannot believe any parson would conduct such a ceremony."

"I wish I could not believe it, but he apparently had a licence and old Mr Palmer... Let us just say that I have had a very near escape, thanks to Mr Darcy's quick actions."

"Mr Darcy," Mrs Gardiner repeated thoughtfully. "I grew up in Lambton, which was near a grand estate, Pemberley, owned by a Mr George Darcy. I wonder if he is the son?"

"I have heard Pemberley praised by Miss Bingley. It must be the same family."

"If so, Lizzy, he is a great man, indeed. Pemberley is beyond anything."

Mrs Gardiner was no stranger to the finer things in life; for her to compliment Pemberley in such words was significant. For a moment, Elizabeth could not suppress a streak of longing to see it; in the next minute, the memory of her mother's unconscionable behaviour became that much more embarrassing, the differences between herself and Darcy growing that much more vast. "I suppose that explains his

general contempt for our little society,” she said, trying to make sense of it. “He has not been amiable—indeed, even yesterday I would have said he hated us all.” At her aunt’s expression, she suddenly felt the need to defend him. “However, he has recently dealt with troubles in his family that would dampen anyone’s spirits. Indeed, he has had much weight upon his shoulders.”

Mrs Gardiner gave her a shrewd look. “I must say, you do not seem nearly as distressed about the experience as I would expect you to be—nor so angry with your mother as she probably deserves.”

Elizabeth sighed. “Oh, I am furious with her, never doubt it—furious and mortified. But other matters also occupy my thoughts. You see, Mama’s guile is only the beginning of my tale.”

Elizabeth told her aunt the whole of it—almost. She did not share anything of kisses, nor of hours spent in his arms. But she told her of falling ill and being taken to an inn, and believing, in her confusion and stupor, that she and Mr Darcy were married, of the surprising feelings of acceptance, and the subsequent confrontation at the inn with Mr Wickham, her mother, and Mr Collins. She told her of learning otherwise—and how Mr Darcy had gallantly offered for her.

“I believe that he might even now be suggesting to my uncle that we be married immediately,” Elizabeth finished. “He strongly feels there is a chance that my reputation is at grave risk, due to our stop at the inn, and the confrontation that took place there.”

Her aunt shook her head in astonishment. “This is...an incredible day you have had, Lizzy,” she said, with massive understatement. “Nevertheless, it is just one day. I am certain your uncle will advise that we all take an interval of recovery and see how the world responds to your, um, adventure. Such a marriage may not be at all necessary, especially if you remain with us for a nice, long visit, allowing the situation to cool.

However, should the worst happen, at least he is respectable—beyond respectable, even.”

“I will not marry him, Auntie,” Elizabeth insisted. “He is being heroic, and saddling himself with a bride he could not possibly want, and all because Mama, once again, has behaved appallingly, and this time, dragged me into her horrid scheming.”

Mrs Gardiner took her time responding. “I agree that it would be difficult to accept a marriage proposal out of gratitude, and given for reasons beyond, almost, imagination. However, Lizzy, allow me to caution you—do not allow your pride to make such an important decision on your behalf. If you believe him to be a good man you could like and respect, why not allow those feelings to grow into a foundation for happiness?”

That is the problem , Elizabeth would admit only to herself. I could love him so easily—but how could he love a bride foisted upon him by deception? But she did not say so aloud, lest her aunt accuse her again of having too much pride. Perhaps she did—but such an unequal connexion must surely lead to resentment instead of happiness!

“It is late,” her aunt suddenly said briskly. “You must be weary beyond belief. I have had your usual room prepared for you. You are not to think of anything else except rest and recovery. I ought to have put you to bed immediately and left these explanations for morning.”

In no time at all, Elizabeth was donning a borrowed gown and tucked into a comfortable bed. Sleep, however, was a long time in coming.

Ten

Darcy wakened the next morning with a good deal of hopefulness. Elizabeth's relations were the exact sort of people he most respected—polished and mannerly. Gardiner, while not being at all brash, had assured him that he would not allow Elizabeth's reputation to suffer any damage. He seemed to appreciate Darcy's intention to see everything put right, and while not agreeing to any talk about settlements, he would likely be an ally in promoting marriage, should the scandal bloom and Elizabeth continue to resist.

Elizabeth was not resisting out of any dearth of feeling, Darcy judged—but because he had not done anything before this point to court her. She must think his feelings for her were new and motivated only by his rescue and a few kisses. If a scandal resulted, she would continue to believe he offered only because of it.

The best course of action—at least, according to Gardiner—was to leave her at Gracechurch Street and resist encouraging that possible scandal. If one did not arise, she could hardly suppose Darcy to be forced by it, could she? Unfortunately, this meant he must stay away from them all until such time as the situation could be presumed to be resolved.

Nonetheless, he had made clear to Gardiner his intentions—that he wished for Elizabeth to become his wife. He hoped the man believed him to be sincere, and that his motivations had nothing to do with dishonour or possible rumours. He was not quite sure that her uncle was convinced, but time would prove his friend in this matter.

Two weeks, he had agreed to keep his distance—unless Gardiner discovered that rumours had begun. Two long, endless weeks. He would not be idle, however. There was a settlement to prepare—he meant to see that his future wife was kept and cared for as well as if she had been the heiress he had expected. He would bring Georgiana to town from Matlock, where she currently resided with her governess, Mrs Annesley, and prepare her for the possibility of a new sister. Come to think of it, the mistress' suite of rooms in both town and at Pemberley were much in need of refurbishing. Elizabeth would probably prefer to do them herself, but at least in his Mayfair home, he could see the faded wallpapers removed and have the walls painted. Something lighter, he thought. Making and carrying out these plans would pass the next weeks, albeit slowly; he dared not think too much about how he would possibly fill the rest of his life, should she continue to refuse him.

First thing the next morning, Elizabeth wrote a lengthy letter to her father—at her uncle's request—describing what had occurred in every particular.

“I do not know whether he will read it,” Elizabeth said. “He mostly sleeps.”

“Your description of this tonic he has been ingesting convinces me that he must cease taking it,” Mr Gardiner replied. “I will deliver the letter to Longbourn myself. I have a few choice words for my sister—and Mr Collins, if he is still there. I will remain at Longbourn until I am certain your father is in his right mind, and tell him exactly how I feel about the management of his household. It is high time he set it to rights.”

“You might never return, if you intend to wait for that happy day,” Elizabeth replied, with a little bitterness.

Mr Gardiner smiled. “I shall return within a few days, I think. If this whole mess does not bring Bennet to his senses, nothing will. He will see the disaster this could have been, had your mother been successful in her plotting. It does not bear considering.”

As the days passed, Elizabeth could not help wondering if Mr Darcy would call, or send a note to her uncle, or make some...gesture. She told herself she was being foolish to expect it. He had not wanted a bride before accidentally abducting one. If he could release her without incident, he would surely do so. And yet, with every caller, her heart leapt before she could prevent it, and disappointment welled before she could beat it back.

Late in the afternoon of the fifth day of his absence, Mr Gardiner returned. He looked...tired.

“Uncle? Are you well?”

He kissed his wife’s cheek and withdrew a letter from his inner coat pocket, handing it to Elizabeth. “I am absolutely well, and even better now that I have returned to my favourite place in the world. I must look in on my warehouses, but I shall pop up to the nursery before I do so and greet the children.”

“And give them the treats your pockets are doubtless full of? Edward, you will spoil their dinners.” But there was no heat in her words as Mrs Gardiner smiled fondly at her husband. He winked at her and made his way upstairs. Patting Elizabeth on the shoulder, Mrs Gardiner tactfully left her alone with her letter and followed him.

Such a great sympathy existed between her aunt and uncle! It was just what she had always wanted for herself—but was such a dream even possible?

She looked down at the letter she held; her father’s writing was even, not at all shaky nor betraying any weakness, and containing two sheets of letter paper, written quite through, in a very close hand. The envelope itself was likewise full. Carefully, she unsealed it, and began to read.

My Dearest Daughter,

Your recent letter has succeeded in astonishing me exceedingly. Of course, your uncle did not give it to me until yesterday, after directing, upon his arrival, that I should take no more of the heart tonic prescribed by Mr Jones. I have only the vaguest memories of the last two weeks; therefore, I must accept as fact what your mother says—that I gave my signed permission to Mr Collins to procure a licence for a marriage between you and him. I pray you know I was not in my right mind, or it never would have been granted.

Your uncle assures me that you have married neither Mr Collins nor Mr Darcy; nor are you upon the brink of matrimony to any other. Thankfully, he arrived before your mother or her sister Philips could announce a marriage of any sort to the neighbourhood. Mr Collins did not return with her from wherever it was that you met her on the road to London. I shall write to him as soon as I finish this letter to you, and command him to say nothing of any of it. He is unquestionably the weakest link in this chain—now that Mr Wickham has, rumour reports, deserted his regiment—but I cannot think that a vicar in Kent can have so many connexions that he would be able to ruin your good name with such an absurd tale as he possesses. Who, that knows either, would believe that you would elope with Mr Darcy, or that Mr Darcy would elope with you? Had it been any other man, it might have meant great danger; but Mr Darcy's perfect indifference to you—and your pointed dislike of him—shall protect you both. It is to be hoped that Collins's own participation in the affair shall remain likewise unacknowledged.

You may of course write to all your friends here, and announce that your uncle visited and took you back to town with him upon his return. I sent your trunk with him so that you can stay until the new year. Within that period, I expect all potential or possible drama to be cast aside in favour of my other news: Mr Bingley has returned to Netherfield.

I, naturally, had no idea that he had ever departed Netherfield. Your eldest sister received a letter from Miss Bingley the afternoon following your own exodus from

Longbourn—announcing that all Bingleys, Darcys, and attendant parties, would be leaving for town and would not be returning—an event which, apparently, cast everyone into a state of despair. But this proved to be untrue, at least insofar as her brother is concerned. Bingley has called twice already, and seems well on his way to an understanding with your sister. Or so I am informed by Mrs Bennet; Jane only smiles and blushes, and has hardly had a useful word to utter since he reappeared upon my doorstep.

Lizzy, your uncle has made sure I understand how mortified you have been made to feel, and how easily either your good name or your future might have been ruined. Even now, to imagine you held hostage as the wife of Mr Darcy, who never looks at any woman except to see a blemish, and who probably never regarded you in his life—until he was forced by some gentlemanly code to come to your rescue—causes me such trembling and fluttering as even your mother has never experienced. Your uncle Gardiner blames me for all of it.

He accuses that I have left the futures of all my daughters solely in your mother's hands, a task which is quite beyond her abilities. Try as I might—and believe me, I have tried—I cannot fault his reasoning. My own health has been mediocre, it is true. Still, whilst I have living breath, I cannot ignore my obligations any longer.

However, neither can I cope with having five daughters out at once; it is too much, and I will not live to see my next birthday should I attempt it. Therefore, only Jane and you are to be given the privilege of appearing in society. This shall remain the rule until the eighteenth birthdays of my younger daughters, when they might be allowed more freedom—and then, only if they demonstrate any small scrap whatsoever of maturity. At present levels of good and common sense, it seems they shall all remain at home for the next decade.

As you can expect, there has been much weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth, especially from the two youngest. However, I have threatened to die—and leave them

all to present their complaints instead to Mr Collins—if they wail and gnash too loudly. Your mother worries that I might, since quitting Jones's tonic, and thus far has done her best to restrain them. I will not tell her that I am feeling, despite the lack of medicinal dosage, in exceptionally good and cheerful spirits. Your mother, whatever her other failings, has proved an excellent nurse. I trust your discretion with this information, and that you will not undo all her good work by taking part in kidnap, poison, or any other indiscretion for the foreseeable future.

With a quieter social life and fewer dressmakers' bills, who knows but that I shall even manage to save something to add to your settlements? I have promised to try—that is, unless Jane's wedding clothes bankrupt me.

Your loving father,

T Bennet

Elizabeth put the letter down feeling equal parts amazement and irritation. Her father was finally putting some effort into restraining her younger sisters, which was wonderful and an answer to her prayers. But to read his contemptuous words about Mr Darcy ! It was the idea of a marriage to Mr Collins which should have caused his deepest distress! Elizabeth could not even imagine what it would have been like to waken from the tonic's stupor to find herself irrevocably tied to that imbecile; it was her guardian angel, in the form of Fitzwilliam Darcy, who had prevented it.

Papa's letter should be singing his praises!

Further reflection, however, gave her pause. Am I not somewhat to blame? If I have not done as much to wound Mr Darcy's reputation as Mr Wickham, neither did I help it in any manner—blind to any of his goodness and sensitive to his every flaw, all in favour of my pride . Beyond ensuring her family knew of his callous remarks at the assembly, she had repeated Mr Wickham's stories as if they were fact, and searched

for fault in his every look or action.

It was good to read of Jane's new happiness, and while she was sorry she had not been available to comfort her sister, it was just as well she had not been at home in the dark hours following Mr Bingley's departure and the letter from his sister. Knowing my former antagonism, I probably would have blamed Mr Darcy for that, too .

If only he would visit! Once again, she smothered the wish before it could take firmer hold. He was well rid of them all, and she must settle for the life she had once been content with, being forever grateful it was not a worse fate.

Eleven

Not a week had passed before wonderful news arrived from Longbourn: Jane was engaged to Mr Bingley. Jane's happiness overflowed in her letter, and Elizabeth was genuinely pleased for her dearest sister.

She was also envious. Mr Darcy had neither called nor left word of any kind. A tiny tentacle of hope that had refused to be crushed was finally withering its slow death. Realising he had not been forced to honourable action, he had reconsidered his options. It is all for the best, she told herself. According to Jane, there was not a whisper of rumour regarding her reasons for removing to town. All was well. There was time, if she met him in the future—perhaps even at Jane's wedding—to learn to pretend. She was now rehearsing the pretence every day; never mind that she expected to do so for the rest of her life. After all, once having been almost in love with Mr Darcy, who else could compare?

She and Mrs Gardiner were sitting together in the breakfast parlour on a grey winter's morning the very day after the news of Jane's engagement, when their attention was suddenly drawn to the window by the sound of a carriage—a chaise and four coming up the drive. It was too early for visitors, and besides, the equipage did not answer to that of any of their neighbours. Neither the carriage, nor the livery of the servant who preceded it, were familiar to them. As it was certain, however, that somebody was coming, she and her aunt went to the formal drawing room to await them.

The housekeeper soon entered. "Lady Catherine de Bourgh," she said, giving her card to Mrs Gardiner. A large, tall woman followed the presentation of the card.

“We have not been introduced,” the woman announced to the room at large, her tone imperious, her every feature a demanding imprint upon a face which might once have been handsome. “I expect, however, that you know who I am.”

Elizabeth recalled the name—Mr Collins’s patroness, and Mr Darcy’s aunt—possessing a daughter she wished him to marry.

“You are Miss Bennet?” she said, rounding upon Elizabeth.

“I am,” Elizabeth replied. The uncivil air of the woman put her back up; however, she was determined, for Mr Darcy’s sake, to be polite.

“And that lady is your aunt?” she asked ungraciously.

“She is. Mrs Gardiner,” she added, although no introduction had been requested.

Lady Catherine proceeded, in very short order, to issue a critique on the location of the home and its placement off the street, the west-facing windows, the arrangement of the furniture, and the fabrics used in its upholstery, saying all as if she was entitled, by right of birth, to come into a stranger’s home and issue disparagements.

Elizabeth glanced at Mrs Gardiner—and to her surprise, she saw that her aunt was holding back laughter. In that moment, something inside of her eased. She did not have to protect anyone here today. She would benefit from Mrs Gardiner’s example, and live up to the behaviour of a true lady—regardless of birth—while this one made herself ridiculous.

“Since you hold such disapproval of my home,” Mrs Gardiner interrupted when Lady Catherine paused for breath, “you will please forgive my surprise that you have entered it. I am certain I received no prior warning of your arrival.”

Brilliant, Auntie! Elizabeth thought. Lady Catherine had never before called nor left her card—vulgar violations of basic etiquette.

Lady Catherine simply pretended not to have heard. “Miss Bennet, I require a private word with you. Does this home even possess a garden walk? I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company. ”

But the lady had not counted on Mrs Margaret Gardiner, who refused to be cowed by her disdain. “Unfortunately, your ladyship, I do not know you, and nothing in our very brief un-acquaintance leads me to believe my niece ought to be left alone in your company. If you have anything to say to her, you may say it in my hearing. Anything which I may not hear is, frankly, better left unsaid.”

Lady Catherine looked down her nose with a hostile stare, and narrowed her eyes; Mrs Gardiner remained implacable and unaffected. Finally, her ladyship gave it up and proceeded, again, to pretend the other woman did not exist.

“Let us sit down. Miss Bennet, you can be at no loss to understand my reason for coming.”

They sat, and Elizabeth did not hesitate in replying. “Indeed, you are mistaken. I have not been able to account for it at all.”

“I have been to visit my nephew, Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy. Do you pretend to be unacquainted with him? I have heard an insupportable claim, and I demand to have it countered.”

“Until I have any idea what the claim is, I can hardly contradict it.”

“It is that you so deceived my nephew as to convince him of some false notion of rescue, so that instead of marrying my vicar and remaining in the sphere you were

born to, you might marry him instead. He says that the marriage has not yet taken place, but he refuses to promise that it never will.”

Despite Lady Catherine’s disingenuous description of the affair, it was all Elizabeth could do not to smile. “How kind of Mr Darcy. He wishes to protect my reputation.”

The housekeeper entered with a tea tray, and Lady Catherine was forced to hold her tongue until the servant departed.

“The very idea is insupportable! He is engaged to my daughter!”

“Then you have nothing to worry over, do you?” Elizabeth, copying Mrs Gardiner’s disinterested, unaffected air, turned instead to the tea tray. “Might I serve the tea for you, Aunt?”

Lady Catherine glared at this activity, as if they ought to remain awed in frozen silence while in her presence.

“Their engagement is of an informal nature. It was the dying wish of his mother. Are you so lost to delicacy, that you could ignore his family’s claims upon him?”

Elizabeth poured her aunt’s cup, adding a touch of fresh cream. “If I can ignore your insults, I can certainly ignore that . Here you are, Aunt. Biscuit?”

“Thank you, yes, Elizabeth,” Mrs Gardiner said, taking a sip. “You know just how I like it.”

Her ladyship’s eyes narrowed. “Unfeeling, selfish girl! Do you not consider that a connexion with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?”

Mrs Gardiner frowned, opening her mouth to respond, but Elizabeth gave her a little

shake of her head. “I certainly do not. You are wasting your time. I am neither standing in the way of his marriage to Miss de Bourgh, nor preventing him from offering for her. If he wishes to do so, he certainly might—and, it seems to me, could have already.”

It was as if she had not spoken. “You have no regard, then, for the honour and credit of my nephew?”

“It is due to his honour and credit that he has refused to give you the promise you demand.”

“Nonsense! Mr Collins has told me of a disgusting scene—at a public inn, no less—in which you made a sordid spectacle of yourself, but I have sworn him to silence! Believe me when I say that he shall not ever mention it again—he will never dare even think of it! You are to understand, Miss Bennet, that I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose. You have no fortune, I am told. Providentially, I am a most generous woman. You will be happy to learn that I have decided to take your impoverishment under consideration, in examining your previous conduct. Promise that you will not marry my nephew, and a thousand pounds will be yours now—the same amount, I understand, you will receive upon your mother’s death. I have not been used to submit to the whims of any such a person as you. You will accept my liberality, and our association will be at an end. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment.”

That blabbermouth Mr Collins obviously gossiped, and this shrew believes me to be a grasping, conniving, deceiver! Had Elizabeth not been determined to counter the old lady’s coarseness with an opposite behaviour, she might have sunk to her level with a few sarcastic rejoinders.

“I am certain you believe yourself to be offering protection to your nephew, but you betray your daughter’s private concerns to a disinterested party. I will never speak of

what occurred on the road to London. It is all to be forgot. You waste your time and mine mentioning it. It is to him that you must give your assurances, and fifty times that amount would not buy me.”

“Assurances! He requires more than that, obstinate, headstrong girl! He swears he will wed you before the year is out whether Collins speaks or not! He has been confounded by your arts and allurements, and in a moment of selfish infatuation, has forgot his obligations.”

“You have said more than enough,” Mrs Gardiner said, standing. “I shall see you out. Perhaps you are satisfied with such unbecoming conduct as you have demonstrated in word and action this morning—but my niece is accustomed to a much higher standard of behaviour. We are finished here.”

Lady Catherine’s voice rose to the level of a shriek. “I am shocked and astonished. But do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till I have been given the promise I require!”

It looked very much as though, if Mrs Gardiner wished her ladyship gone, she would have to have her removed—perhaps with ropes and oxen, Elizabeth feared. But at that moment, Vincent, Mr Gardiner’s man, entered without knocking. Vincent was quietly dressed and even quieter of manner. However, having been raised on the docks, he had made himself indispensable to Mr Gardiner in a hundred ways—one of which was his ability to scent trouble from two floors away.

“Shall I call for the master, Mistress?” he said in his very quiet voice.

There was something about Vincent that warned one not to cross him, and even Lady Catherine was not proof against it.

She stood, sniffed, and stalked out, Vincent stepping back to permit her exit—and

probably to ensure she actually departed. But at the door, she stopped. “You do not deserve my attention. Do not suppose this matter is finished. I will carry my point.”

Vincent closed the door behind her; Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner stared at each other.

“Well,” said her aunt. “That was something.”

Elizabeth grinned, and then, because she could not help herself, laughed aloud.

Mrs Gardiner raised a brow, although she smiled back. “She was absurd, was she not? I did not mind her silly opinions of my home, but her accusations against you were insupportable. I cannot find amusement in it yet, but give me an hour or so. I am certain by the time I relay the tale to your uncle, we shall all be chuckling.”

“There is little to respect about her,” Elizabeth agreed, reining in her laughter. Nonetheless, she could not help the happiness bubbling through her.

Mr Darcy was a man perfectly capable of speaking his mind—and was also a man of strong opinions. It was possible that his aunt had goaded him into saying it, but the very fact of his refusal to affirm that a marriage was not imminent—never mind promising her that it was—told Elizabeth that his feelings remained unchanged. It was not, perhaps, the message Lady Catherine had intended to deliver, but it was the one received.

He wanted to marry her, still. She did not understand why he stayed away, but hope, like the resilient phoenix, rose up again from the ashes of her disappointment.

Exactly two weeks after Darcy and Elizabeth’s adventure on the road to London, he presented himself upon the Gardiners’ doorstep. He wore his finest coat, a green wool tailored by Weston, his boots polished to a nearly blinding gleam; his man—obviously sensing romance in the air—had fussed over his cravat endlessly. He

felt like a dashed fop, even clutching a posy in the hopes of catching the eye of his lady-love while sporting an over-elaborate, dandified neckcloth.

Those nerves faded the moment he set eyes upon Elizabeth. She was dressed charmingly in yellow, her dark eyes shining, her perfect, pretty mouth smiling. For a moment he was utterly dumbfounded as feelings of adoration rushed through him, urging him to his knee right there in the parlour while her aunt looked on. He only just managed to contain them.

“Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth murmured, in response to his bowed greeting. “How lovely to see you again.” She glanced at the flowers. “Are those for me?”

The sound of her voice sent a thrill through his very being. “Yes,” he said, thrusting them at her like a green lad and then feeling equal parts foolish and lustful as she twinkled up at him from amongst the blossoms.

Mrs Gardiner, whom he had hardly noticed upon bringing Elizabeth to Gracechurch Street, greeted him graciously, took the flowers from Elizabeth, and made some excuse about putting them in water. Unbelievably, within minutes of his arrival, he was alone with the woman he loved.

“My aunt says you require fifty thousand to marry me,” he said.

“Did she?” Elizabeth raised a brow. “And how did you respond?”

“I told her I would write the bank draft at once, if I thought you would take it—but as you are worth a hundred times the amount, I did not believe I could get you so cheaply.”

She grinned, and warmth flooded him.

“Such a reasonable answer to give. Although I suppose it did not please your aunt.”

“I could not care a farthing for her opinions.” He could wait no longer, and foolish and gauche or not, he dropped to one knee. “Elizabeth, my love, keeping away from you to assure that your hand would not be forced has made for the longest two weeks of my life. Please say you will marry me, and that this is the last separation we must ever endure.”

To his surprise, she, too, went down on her knees before him. “I am not nearly so honourable as you,” she said, wrapping her arms around him. “I shall endanger your reputation, thoroughly, so that you shall have to marry me immediately.” She moved her lips to his.

She was far too innocent to know exactly what her words meant, he realised, and happily returned her kiss; what she lacked in experience, she made up for in enthusiasm and he quickly realised he could be carried away, right here in her aunt’s parlour unless he allowed his better self to govern at once. Carefully he stood, drawing her up with him, struggling to contain his own passion.

“I missed you,” she murmured against his lips, and his heart swelled.

“I shall get a licence,” he said.

“I shall write to Papa today. He can give any permission necessary.” She bit her lip, looking up at him with a little hesitation. “Did you know that Mr Bingley is returned to Netherfield? He has evidently asked for Jane’s hand.”

“I knew. I was not certain your sister wished to give her hand to Bingley, but I told him that she is a woman of integrity and he must be very certain of her feelings before pressing.” He smiled. “I did hope he would press, however. I was devious, you see. I thought perhaps if your sister became attached to my good friend, you might

think better of my own suit.”

She smiled back. “I do like how you think, Mr Darcy. However, Jane’s feelings for Mr Bingley have never been in doubt. Cannot you tell a woman in love when you see one?”

He brushed her cheek with one hand. “I am afraid to hope. We did not begin— I did not begin well.”

“It is fortunate, then, that we are to be given more than one beginning,” she replied softly.

Epilogue

It was a wedding breakfast to end all wedding breakfasts.

“Mama has outdone herself,” Elizabeth whispered. Her husband smiled. He truly followed a gentleman’s code, and when it came to her mother, he usually had very little to say. He watched Mrs Bennet like a hawk, however, not trusting her judgment, let alone her table. He had sworn that he would taste every dish before Elizabeth was allowed to consume it, for the rest of her mother’s natural life.

“She will never do such a thing again,” she murmured, as he cut a small sliver off her honey cake.

“She will not, lest she be put on the next sailing bound for New South Wales,” he murmured back. Yet, he ate the bite anyway and nodded his approval. “I do it so she knows I am always watching her. I never want her to be too comfortable around me, so that you may be always comfortable around her.”

Elizabeth smiled, and under the table, well-hidden by the tablecloth, squeezed his knee. Because she could—and never tired of teasing him, she moved her hand a bit higher.

“Careful, my girl,” he warned. “However safe you think yourself from your mother, there are other dangers in the room.”

“I am not afraid of you,” she grinned.

Her husband did not return her smile, but only draped a casual arm over the back of her chair.

“How much longer is the performance?” he leant close to ask.

Elizabeth glanced around. Her mother had actually knocked down a wall between the dining room and the breakfast parlour in order to create one huge dining hall, complete with a dais at one end upon which she had arranged the seating for her most illustrious guests. It really did appear as though she and Darcy were on a stage.

“They will just have the toasts now,” she whispered back. “If everyone is as brief as my father’s will be, not long.”

But it was Bingley who stood, rather than Mr Bennet, tapping his crystal flute with an attention-getting chime.

“Welcome, everyone! Welcome! How happy I have been to see you all! How delighted my family is to share this wonderful day with so many of our friends!”

“Oh, perfect, your mother has enlisted the lengthiest toast-maker in the kingdom,” Darcy muttered drily.

“Whatever shall we do to pass the time?” she teased, her hand a featherweight touch upon him beneath the tablecloth.

Something within those dark eyes of his flared, and she felt her husband’s thumb graze the bare skin at her nape, an almost imperceptible motion of his hand, causing gooseflesh to rise.

“Firstly, to our host and hostess, Mr and Mrs Bennet, at whose fine, heavily laden tables today we gather to celebrate the marriage of their daughter and new son, lift

your glass in a toast!”

The crowd dutifully raised their glasses to her mother and father; Mr Bennet appeared quite satisfied—as well he might be with such a son to join his family—and Mrs Bennet beamed. Elizabeth would never truly understand the relationship between her parents, but she did know that they had somehow bridged many of their differences ever since her mother’s noxious interference in her life. At least Papa has taken more seriously his duties as a father, while Mama pays him a good deal of attention—and I will not think any further on that than I have to! However one considers it, his health has been exceptional ever since.

“Secondly, a toast to Miss Mary for the brilliant playing we heard today,” Bingley continued. “Her mastery of the church’s pipe organ provides music that is a gift to us all. Hear, hear!”

He lifted his glass, and Elizabeth was pleased to see her neighbours join him with cheering enthusiasm for her sister’s talent, with her uncle Gardiner leaning over to kiss her sister’s cheek and her aunt nodding appreciatively. It was Darcy who had hired Mary a master for the complicated instrument, with its multiple keyboards and soaring pipes—and also who had had the magnificent organ installed in Meryton’s church.

“Thank you for helping her,” she leant over to him to whisper.

He shrugged. “Look at her face,” he said simply. Elizabeth glanced over at Mary, whose cheeks were pink with delight, her smile wide—she looked almost beautiful in the pleasure of her hard-earned recognition.

Bingley’s voice interrupted the merry congratulations of her neighbours. “And speaking of the church—although I am certain the beloved Mr Palmer is much missed—we can all take heart in the fine services conducted by Mr Ludlow. Never

were any bride and groom better ushered into holy wedlock. Mrs Ludlow, may I mention that I have never seen the church so exquisitely bedecked in blossoms? I fear you denuded the rectory garden in support of your sister's wedding, a gift of beauty on this happy day." He raised his glass towards Kitty and her husband, the village's new vicar, who both smiled happily as the room cheered. The former Charlotte Lucas, wed to Pemberley's vicar, Mr Bradley—and thus an expert in village weddings—had come home from Derbyshire to visit on this great occasion, and leant over and whispered some obvious compliment, for Kitty's smile showed even brighter.

"If Bingley begins an admiration of the church's plasterwork and stained-glass windows, I shall toss my glass at him," Darcy muttered, so that only she could hear. He had a certain gift, a way of both touch and whisper, that caused her awareness of him to climb sharply up her spine and through her every nerve. He followed it by a look, a look that revealed to her—and only her—a naked wanting, quickly shuttered before the crowded dining hall could notice.

"I cannot toast anyone else until I have raised my glass to my own beloved wife," Bingley proclaimed, beginning a recital of Jane's many perfections.

"Dear lord," Darcy murmured. "It appears he means to keep us here for the rest of the summer."

She grinned at him. "I can think of many worse places to be."

"A challenge, my dear?" he replied, and then set about driving her mad.

He knew just how to do it, of course. The brief touches, his whispered approvals of everything from the colour of her gown to the arrangement of her hair, and how pleased he would be when they were alone again and he would be free to touch and do and say all of what he felt for her. Elizabeth slowly fanned herself, trying to pay

attention to the endless toast and not betray her weakness for the man beside her... the wretch .

“Let us see,” Bingley said, pinching his chin thoughtfully. “Have I forgotten anyone?”

Lydia giggled.

“Ah, yes, Mr and Mrs Darcy. What can I say of two people who are known far and wide as one of the most ravishing couples in the kingdom? The ton is still whispering about the number of times you required Mr John Bridge, of the renowned jewellers Rundell, Bridge, and Rundell, to cart ever-greater trays of astonishing stones to Mayfair—in the hopes of winning your approval for a stone fine enough to celebrate your engagement. Was it three times or four that you sent him tottering in defeat back to Ludgate Hill?”

“It was only twice—I quickly discovered that no stone on earth would truly be fine enough for my bride,” Darcy drawled. “The Pigot Diamond was still in France at the time, you understand, forcing me to settle for something less, hm, substantial.”

The crowd’s attention was drawn, quite naturally, to the exquisite ring of sizeable diamonds and sapphires upon Elizabeth’s finger, which happened, at that very moment, to capture the morning light in a blinding flash—generating a great deal of good-hearted laughter.

“We thank you all for coming to Longbourn, for celebrating this happiest of occasions with us, for being our friends and our family. One more toast: Champagne to our real friends and real pain to our sham ones!” Bingley raised his glass.

Almost as one, the gathering cheered, and Bingley made a show of retaking his seat.

“Mr Bingley! You forgot us!” Lydia exclaimed.

“What? Oh, dear me! I seem to have neglected to toast the bride and bridegroom!”

“Would that she let it go,” Darcy murmured.

“She has been planning this wedding with Mama for, oh, twenty-four of her twenty-five years now. She must have her moment in the sun.” She gave her husband a sideways glance. “Besides, ’tis you who encouraged your friend Mr Montclair to take Netherfield in the first place, and you who introduced him to Lydia. One might say this lengthy proceeding is all your fault.”

He shrugged. “He was too inclined to dullness, and requires a lively bride. I had to wait for her to achieve a modicum of restraint before introductions could be made, however, which took longer than I supposed.”

Elizabeth shook her head, smiling. He did not fool her for a minute—her interfering husband had been unable to rest until each of her sisters were happy or happily settled. Ten years of marriage had taught her that he was the very best of men. She leant over to whisper in his ear. “I love you.”

Bingley finished his speech at that moment, to great applause and clinking glasses. The moment the guests began converging on the head table, Darcy whisked her away, out the door, down the private paths they knew so well from their previous visits, towards the lovely cottage he’d had constructed out of sight of the main house—closer to Meryton on land adjoining, that he had purchased, and not a part of the estate. Someday, once her father was gone, it would be home to her mother and Mary, that they might not ever have to share one with Mr Collins—who had, as yet, never convinced anyone to marry him. Her husband’s generosity truly knew no bounds.

“In such a hurry?” she teased again, once they reached the cottage door. But instead of entering, he leant against it, grinning down at her, his hands placed rather tantalisingly upon her shoulders.

“Inside this home,” he said, “I have no doubt, the Harwoods will have prepared us a quiet, private meal of our own.” His trustworthy valet had retired from his illustrious career as a gentleman’s gentleman and accepted a generous pension—both Mr and Mrs Darcy were deeply indebted to him and never forgot it. To their surprise, he returned to Hertfordshire and promptly married the former Mrs Hill. Together, the couple had embarked upon a second career, becoming the cottage’s caretakers.

“Inside this home,” he repeated, “is a lovely suite of rooms, furnished to my wife’s tasteful particulars, which happens to include a soft, rather splendid bed. I will tell you what is not within this home: three obstinate, headstrong children who have a terrible habit of popping up in all the places one would rather not see them.”

Elizabeth Darcy smiled up at him. “Perhaps, if they did not have such an affectionate father, whose pockets were not often full of sweets and other surprises, they might grant him more of that privacy he desires.”

His expression grew serious. “What I desire most,” he said softly, “is the wife of my heart, bare in the morning light, so that I might show her all the ways I am still in love with her—a thousand times more today than a decade ago. Will you come with me, my darling?”

“Always,” she whispered.

He lifted her in his strong arms, carrying her over the threshold to a new and glorious celebration of their very own.

The End

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:02 am

One

August 8, 1812

On the road to Longbourn

Be not alarmed, Madam, on receiving this letter, by the apprehension of it containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you. I write without any intention of paining you, or humbling myself, by dwelling on wishes, which, for the happiness of both, cannot be too soon forgotten...

Elizabeth Bennet surreptitiously wiped away a tear by pretending to tuck a coil of hair beneath her bonnet. Mr Darcy's words, penned in such bitterness of spirit four months prior, struck her with a pang beneath her ribs. As if I shall ever forget! Though he must, even now, be congratulating himself on his escape.

Resting her head against the squabs of the Gardiners' travelling coach, she closed her eyes and allowed Mr Darcy's letter to fall into her lap. Yet more tears threatened her equanimity, though she had believed them spent the day before. It had been agonising to leave Derbyshire—and for such a reason!

Thoughtless, thoughtless Lydia! To have run off with a man she hardly knows without any regard for the consequences! I shall never forgive myself if she comes to harm because I failed to warn her of Mr Wickham's proclivities.

Elizabeth was torn between despising her youngest sister for her foolishness and

being desperately worried for her welfare. There was no telling what a blackguard such as Mr Wickham might do to her—assuming they were still together—or what sort of awful situations Lydia might be forced to endure. What if she fell ill? What if she were left vulnerable to yet another villain, one even worse than Wickham? The myriad possibilities were too horrible to contemplate.

Even with the best possible outcome—marriage—Lydia would pay a high price for her youthful indiscretions. As Mrs George Wickham, she would face a future of dissipation, deprivation, and depravity; no woman could expect better from a man like him. Her poor sister—the poor, stupid girl—would be chained to him for life because of an ill-considered choice made at the tender age of sixteen. The alternative for Lydia was worse, but presumably not by much. And for this they must hope!

To think that all of this might have been prevented had Elizabeth only made her case more strongly to Mr Bennet in May. She had shared as much information from Mr Darcy's letter as she dared at the time, but she should have done more. She should have revealed Mr Wickham's most dastardly deeds, even if Mr Darcy had not given her liberty to do so. Her father, having daughters of his own to protect, could be trusted with the fragile reputation of a young girl; why had she hesitated? Such a disclosure might have shaken Mr Bennet from his laissez-faire attitude towards his youngest daughters, but she had withheld it for fear of breaking a confidence, albeit a weighty one. What if she had revealed Miss Darcy's folly and her father still had not taken her concerns seriously? She would have risked much for no material gain.

Her rational considerations of many weeks' past were of little comfort to Elizabeth in the present situation. Certainly, the bulk of the blame should fall upon Wickham for taking advantage of Lydia's naivety, but Elizabeth could not help but feel some responsibility for her own failure to speak. Now her sister was ruined and the rest of their family along with her. No one would solicit their society now. Mr Bingley would never return for Jane, and Mr Darcy...

Realising that she was crushing Mr Darcy's letter within her fist, Elizabeth relaxed her hand and frantically sought to smooth it out. A snuffling sound startled her into stillness. A glance at her relations across the carriage found the Gardiners still asleep, thankfully, and unconscious of her doings. She released a relieved breath and pressed the missive against her chest, its secrets still safe.

The rational thing to do would be to dispose of the letter into the next fire Elizabeth came across, but she could no sooner do that than throw her own heart in along with it. It was her last precious talisman of a love which had never been allowed to flourish and was now entirely at an end. If Mr Darcy had been intending to renew his addresses, as she had begun to hope, he most certainly would not be doing so now. Even were Lydia recovered and Wickham made to marry her, no gentleman wished to become brother to the reprobate who had nearly seduced his own sister.

Still, Elizabeth was fully conscious of what the ramifications would be should the letter be discovered. Not that she had much reputation left to protect, thanks to Lydia's ill-advised actions, but whatever remained she ought to guard carefully. It should not be said that all of the Bennet girls were wanton and reckless. Further, it could prove an embarrassment to the man who wrote it and she would never, under any circumstance, wish to cause Mr Darcy any further distress. Her intemperate words from April still haunted her; she would not have additional transgressions on her conscience.

To Elizabeth, it seemed that she and Mr Darcy were destined to be kept apart by one thing or another. If it were not his pride, her prejudice, or some combination of both, it was the unwitting machinations of others. It was as if they were separated by a wrought iron gate; they could see one another, even touch, but there would always be an impenetrable barrier between them. Their story was not meant to have a happy ending.

Lowering her gaze back to Mr Darcy's letter, she exhaled a warbling sigh and traced

the precise, even lines with her fingertips. Who would have believed that such an austere man could write with so much feeling?

“You ought not torture yourself by reading and rereading that letter endlessly.”

Elizabeth’s heart seized; she hastily tucked the bundled pages behind her as her aunt’s voice rang out in the otherwise silent carriage. She looked up to find Mrs Gardiner observing her with palpable sympathy. How does she know? Did she...read it?

“I know you are worried over the situation with Lydia—we all are—but there is nothing new to glean from Jane’s report and you only distress yourself by brooding on it. For all we know, by the time we arrive at Longbourn, Lydia will have been found and all of this ado will have been for nothing.”

It was several stuttering heartbeats before Elizabeth’s alarm subsided and she could assure herself that her correspondence from Mr Darcy remained secret. Of course, Mrs Gardiner believed she was poring over Jane’s missive informing them of Lydia’s sorry situation—that would be the most logical assumption.

Being fully aware of Mr Wickham’s past crimes made Elizabeth sceptical of her aunt’s optimism, but her advice was kindly meant. Swallowing, she replied, “You are perfectly right, Aunt. I ought not to assume the worst. Perhaps it all will turn out well in the end.”

She forced a smile and turned her gaze out the window where the passing scenery was growing more familiar by the minute. They would be home within a few hours and all possible pretence would be at an end.

At Elizabeth’s back, Mr Darcy’s letter crinkled with her at every bump and jostle, reminding her of what lay behind them in Derbyshire.

Two

August 14

London

The carriage shifted as Thomas Bennet climbed inside and threw himself upon the backwards-facing bench with a weary groan. His entire body ached from bouncing about in the vehicle for days on end, to say nothing of tromping about the seediest portions of London until his feet blistered. He was much too old to be gallivanting after his youngest, most provoking child and that libertine with whom she had run off. The door shut behind his brother Gardiner and they were off again into the stinking, dirty streets to the next likely hovel in which they might find Lydia. Bennet held no great hope of finding her there, but they must press on until all of said hope was extinguished.

A spasm in his hip required his shift in pursuit of a more comfortable position. As he was rearranging himself, he heard the distinct crinkle of paper. Reaching behind him into the back of the seat cushions, he discovered a much-worn packet of papers folded in on themselves and addressed to Elizabeth. It appeared to be some sort of letter, though he did not recognise the hand. How odd; she must have forgot it when the Gardiners returned her to Longbourn.

“We will find her, Bennet.”

It would have been unfeeling to deride Gardiner’s guileless encouragement, but this constant refrain was beginning to chafe Bennet’s already taxed temper. Tucking the

letter into his jacket pocket with the intention of returning it to Elizabeth, he replied, “Even if we do find her, I know not what we shall do with Lydia. She cannot come home to Longbourn, she cannot remain in your household with innocent children, and I have no distant relatives to foist her upon—though it is tempting to send her to the Collinses.” He emitted a rueful chuckle which Gardiner did not emulate.

“You think her entirely lost, then?”

“I think she was lost before she ever ran off,” retorted Bennet, bitterly. “Lost to all decorum, decency, and common sense. I have always thought her silly like her mother, but this latest misadventure proves her to be lacking even in the fundamentals of morality.”

And to think all of this might have been prevented had he only listened to Elizabeth’s advice back in May. She, at least, had shown the greatness of mind that he himself had lacked in predicting that Lydia would make a cake of herself with only Mrs Forster as chaperon. Had he but taken her concerns seriously and kept Lydia home, they would not now be scouring London for the wayward chit and her wicked beau.

“Surely you do not believe her as bad as all that! She is but a child led astray by a scoundrel.”

“I think her more than culpable,” Bennet growled. “Lydia has always had a knack for getting her way and leading others down the path of destruction—just look at Kitty!” While not as wilful as Lydia, Kitty deserved some share of the censure for what had occurred. Keeping her sister’s ruinous scheme a secret! Was her head entirely empty? That girl would not stir from Longbourn again until she could prove that she had two words of sense to rub together!

“Nonsense, Lydia can still be redeemed,” Gardiner said, his voice low and full of misplaced optimism. “She is but sixteen and has her entire life ahead of her to

improve.”

Bennet snorted. “You presuppose, first, that we shall find her—which I doubt at this juncture—and, second, that her reputation can be salvaged when we do.”

“You genuinely believe this Wickham will refuse to marry her, then? Elizabeth seemed fond of him several months ago.”

“Lizzy’s former recommendation notwithstanding, I cannot think that a man such as Wickham, swimming in debts and apparently fond of all manner of debauchery, will take Lydia for a farthing less than ten thousand pounds.”

Gardiner’s mouth flopped open, apparently aghast. His expression might have brought Bennet some amusement in different circumstances. “Ten thousand pounds! Surely not.”

“He would be a greater fool than even I consider him if he did not. That said, he is most probably aware that I cannot afford even half such a sum for his worthless hide and so it is a lost cause. Lydia will have thrown away her virtue—what little of it she had—for nothing.”

Gardiner shook his head and the shock dissolved from his features. “There is no cause to borrow more trouble. Let us find her first and worry later over what must be done to restore her reputation.”

Weary of the subject, Bennet merely grumbled an indistinct response and fell silent.

The remainder of the day was similarly disheartening and the wayward couple remained undiscovered in whatever nest in which they had holed themselves up. Bennet hoped Lydia was comfortable wherever she was—little though she deserved it—because she would not be found until the morrow, at least.

As he was shedding his greatcoat in the vestibule of Gardiner's home, the butler approached his master with a card.

"A Mr Darcy paid a visit today, sir. He was quite anxious to speak to you."

"Darcy, you say?" Bennet queried before Gardiner had the chance. "Whatever could he want?"

While his eyes perused the calling card, Gardiner distantly replied, "We made his acquaintance in Derbyshire before we were called away. In fact, we were set to dine with him the very day we left."

Bennet, though benumbed by fatigue and worry, felt stirrings of surprise at this news. "Was this a different Mr Darcy than the one I met in Hertfordshire? I cannot imagine him lowering himself to so much as speak to a tradesman, much less invite one to dine at his table."

Gardiner flicked him a terse glare. "I assure you, it is the same Mr Darcy you met last autumn; there is only one master of Pemberley, after all. Furthermore, he and Lizzy were...familiar with one another."

"Familiar? I suppose he felt his slight acquaintance with Lizzy required him to issue the invitation, though I cannot imagine why."

"Actually," Gardiner said, his gaze now trained keenly upon Bennet, "he was most attentive to us while we remained in the country, and to Lizzy, especially. I believed him rather taken with her, if I am to be honest."

"Lizzy?" He guffawed at the notion. "I daresay that Mr Darcy never looks at a woman save to see a blemish and I doubt he ever looked at Lizzy at all. You are mistaken."

Gardiner pressed his lips into a grim line but did not press his point. Instead, he ushered Bennet into the dining room, where a late supper of bread, cold meat, and cheese was set out for them.

After eating as much as he could stomach, Bennet trudged upstairs to his chambers; he hoped to get at least a few hours' sleep before resuming at daybreak what he was certain was a doomed quest. He required it if they were to have any sort of chance at accomplishing their mission.

He dismissed the servant Gardiner had sent to him, desirous only of time alone with his miserable reflections. He could undress himself capably enough and did not require the attentions of a gentleman's gentleman.

As he shed his jacket and threw it over the back of a chair, he heard the distinct crumple of paper. Curious, Bennet searched the pockets until he discovered the letter addressed to Elizabeth; he had entirely forgot about it. He moved to set it aside, but stilled his hand when he caught a glimpse of the writing which formed his second daughter's name. If he were not mistaken, it appeared to have been penned by a man.

A surge of panic burned in his chest. The writing was not his, nor did it belong to any gentleman of his acquaintance who might have the innocent privilege of corresponding with Elizabeth. Could she, his most sensible offspring, be cavorting with a man behind his back? Bennet never would have believed it before, but he had learnt much from Lydia's escapade about how greatly he underestimated his daughters' wiles. He had shirked his responsibility as a father long enough. He would not do so again.

With shaking fingers, he unfolded the missive and looked to the bottom of the second page for a signature.

Fitzwilliam Darcy

Three

August 15

Darcy House

Darcy set down his pen and flexed away the ache in his fingers as he read through what he had written. Wickham's debts discharged, a new commission far away from decent society, and a thousand pounds settled upon his bride. Yes, everything was in order and ready to be sent off to his solicitor. Wickham had wanted more, of course, but eventually he had been prevailed upon to be reasonable. He would still receive far more than he deserved, but then Darcy was not going to such lengths for the sake of his erstwhile friend. Nor was he doing it for Lydia Bennet, who had not shown a single ounce of gratitude towards their benefactor for his largess or any consciousness of guilt for her own actions. No, he was doing it for her .

Elizabeth.

An image of Elizabeth, the last look he had allowed himself before their abrupt parting, flashed before him and Darcy felt a sharp pang at the tearful devastation which had been prominent in her fine eyes. Any fondness she might have been cultivating towards him—gone in an instant. Just as soon as she had learnt what her sister had done and with whom, any kind feeling was dismissed.

Darcy reclined in his chair and rubbed at his eyes, which had begun to sting. Regret rose like bile in his throat and he swallowed to drive it back down. How she must detest him now! He, who had ruined the chances of happiness for not one but two of

her sisters. There was yet hope for Miss Bennet and Bingley, but there was nought anyone could do to prevent the miserable future of Miss Lydia. She would be married to Wickham to save her own reputation and spare her family's; there simply was no other way. Had Darcy done what he ought, what was right, and set aside his pride to alert the denizens of Meryton of Wickham's vicious propensities, the miserable cur would not have been allowed to prey upon any of them. Since he had not, Miss Lydia and, by extension, his beloved Elizabeth, would suffer an unbreakable connexion with the lout. And for this, the Bennets must be grateful!

At least Elizabeth's reputation would be preserved. She would eventually marry and... No, he could not stomach the thought at all. She deserved every happiness, but the idea of her bound to someone besides himself was unpalatable, to say the least, and he would not torment himself with the notion. Still, he could— would , eventually—be content with the knowledge that she was out there in the world unencumbered by her sister's folly. If only he could be assured that she was not also thinking ill of him.

A rap at the door recalled his attention to the present. "Come."

The butler entered with a salver suspended upon his splayed fingers. He crossed the room and held it out to his master. "A visitor, sir. He says his business is urgent."

Without glancing at the card, Darcy said, "I am not at home to callers."

"It is a Mr Bennet, on behalf of Mr Gardiner. He is most insistent."

Darcy jerked upright in his chair. "Mr Bennet?"

He had left instructions with his butler to allow Mr Gardiner entrance; he had not expected Elizabeth's father to arrive on his doorstep. He would have preferred to deal with the uncle, who had proved himself more reasonable and dependable in Darcy's

experience, but it seemed he had little choice in the matter.

“Yes, sir. Shall I send him away?”

“No! No, I will see him. Bring him here, Clarence, thank you.”

Clarence bowed and retreated from whence he had come. During the anxious minute or so before he returned, Darcy stood and donned his jacket, which had been thrown aside some hours ago, and did his best to repair his appearance. He was tugging at the hem of his waistcoat when the door opened again.

His visitor was, indeed, Mr Bennet and he looked more haggard and sombre than Darcy had ever seen him. No small wonder, given his purpose for visiting London. He declined refreshment and took up one of the chairs before the desk while Darcy resumed his own seat.

“Mr Bennet, to what do I owe this honour?”

“I have come on a particular errand which is rather delicate. Is our privacy assured?”

Darcy folded his hands and rested them lightly upon the desk as he leant forward, seriousness in his purpose. “You have my word that nothing which you tell me in confidence shall escape this room.”

Mr Bennet’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he nodded. From within his coat pocket, he withdrew a much-abused packet of papers and placed them on the desk between them. With two fingers, he slid the papers towards his host. When Darcy realised what they were, he felt the blood drain precipitously from his face.

“As you can see, Mr Darcy, I have come into possession of a most remarkable letter, one addressed to my daughter Elizabeth.”

“Where—” Ashamed to hear his voice tremble, Darcy cleared his throat and made a second attempt. “Where did you get this?”

“I found it between the cushions in my brother Gardiner’s carriage yesterday. Fear not, I am reasonably certain that its contents remain private. He disclaims any knowledge of it and, given how long ago it was dated, I am certain someone at Longbourn would have mentioned it by now had they been aware of its existence. That aside, I believe you are familiar with what it says?”

Darcy tore his gaze away from the letter, his letter, and reattached it to Mr Bennet’s grim visage. He swallowed. “I am.”

“Then I am sure you know what I am about to demand of your honour, sir.”

For a fleeting moment, Darcy was filled with light and elation, only for said light to be snuffed out as quickly as it had flared into being. “If you have read the letter in its entirety, then you know why I cannot oblige you. Much as I would wish to, your daughter is almost certainly of a different mind.”

Mr Bennet snorted derisively. “I think we are far beyond what Lizzy would wish, Mr Darcy. No, I have come here, as her father, to demand satisfaction on her behalf. She will obey regardless of her opinion on the matter.”

Although disgusted with Mr Bennet’s apparent disregard for Elizabeth’s preference, Darcy could not entirely fault him for it. It was every guardian’s duty to see to their charge’s welfare, even when that conflicted with their wants and desires. He had been forced into similar situations with Georgiana in the past—most notably when he had denied her the so-called privilege of marrying Wickham last summer. It had been done and done for the best, though his sweet sister had sworn initially that she would never forgive him for it.

Mr Bennet found himself in a similar situation now, not only with Miss Lydia but also with Elizabeth. It did not escape Darcy that both situations were in part, if not wholly, his fault. Wickham certainly had a hand in the ruination of the Bennets, but it seemed Darcy could claim yet more responsibility.

“Well? Are you amenable, sir, or must I call you out?”

Darcy startled. He had quite forgot that Mr Bennet was expecting a response. “It is not my cooperation at issue, but that of your daughter. Are you really willing to demand this of her? I can assure you, she retains no amiable feelings for me, especially since she received word of her sister’s elopement.”

It was Mr Bennet’s turn to appear startled. “How do you know of that?”

Darcy grimaced; he would not have stated the matter so baldly had he realised Mr Bennet thought him ignorant of the affair. “I happened upon Miss Elizabeth not long after she received word of it from Miss Bennet.”

“I suppose this at least saves me from awkward disclosures,” Mr Bennet grumbled. “You can understand why I must insist upon you marrying Lizzy. I have yet to find Lydia and, even if I do, the reputation of my family is irreparably tarnished. My other girls still require husbands and a connexion with you cannot hurt their chances. If we are fortunate, your standing might even repair ours.”

“You would use my good name to wipe away the stain upon yours?”

Mr Bennet’s expression was serious and implacable. “If I must.”

If Mr Bennet were not Elizabeth’s father, Darcy might have thrown him from the house for his demands. That said, he would never do anything which might cause his beloved distress, and so he could not. Further, Mr Bennet was in an untenable

situation and some allowances must be made.

Darcy sighed and sank into his chair. Rubbing his aching eyes with his thumb and index finger, he said, “What if I could promise to restore your family’s reputation in another way? By assuring a marriage between Miss Lydia and Wickham?”

“I should say you were dreaming, sir.”

Darcy dropped his hand and levelled a glare at Mr Bennet for his glib jibe. “As a matter of fact, I have seen them. I have even taken the liberty of reaching a settlement with Wickham on Miss Lydia’s behalf which would discharge his debts and set him up in a new commission in exchange for marrying her. It was the matter I wished to speak to Mr Gardiner about when I left my card yesterday.”

Mr Bennet gaped at Darcy. “You have found them?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“I have known Wickham for many years and am aware of some of his regular haunts. Between that and a few coins to one of his friends”—Darcy could not help but sneer at the oblique reference to Mrs Younge—“it was a relatively simple matter. I have just this morning written notes for my solicitor and expect to have the documents prepared by the morrow.”

Mr Bennet sat up straighter in his chair. “It changes nothing about your obligation to Elizabeth. Not only have you have corresponded with her, but Gardiner is certain that you showed her pointed attentions in public. I have learnt much from my recent trials, sir, and shall not have any gentleman sporting with my daughters’ respectability again.”

Darcy flushed and looked away. He had been courting Elizabeth in Derbyshire, as much as he was capable. Her relations, his guests, and the residents of the village had undoubtedly noticed, given his two visits to the inn where she was staying and her frequent attendance at Pemberley. Miss Bingley had turned absolutely green, he had been so obvious. Of course, all this had been before he had lost hope of possibly earning her affections.

“She will not wish it and I will not force her.”

“It is not up to you to force her hand, but to me,” said Mr Bennet. “Trust me when I say that Lizzy will see reason.”

“I still cannot countenance requiring Miss Elizabeth to accept me against her will. It is abominable and I shall not be a part of it.”

Mr Bennet regarded him coolly over the rim of his spectacles. “I think you are forgetting that it is not only Elizabeth’s reputation at stake over this letter. Should the contents become known, others also might suffer.”

Darcy tensed to spring to his feet, but restrained himself just in time. With his fingers clawing at the arms of his chair, he growled, “Are you threatening my sister, sir?”

Though Mr Bennet did not shrink back, he did, at least, appear somewhat abashed. “No, of course not. However, I would remind you that you have faced a situation similar to mine not so long ago. Would you not do anything conceivable to put it all to rights? I am sorry to be taking Elizabeth’s choice from her, but there must be reparation made, for her sake and the rest of her family.”

“She did not write the letter!”

“She did not burn it, either.”

Darcy was forcibly struck by Mr Bennet's observation and his grip loosened. Why had Elizabeth held onto his letter all this time? It was incredible that she had even read it, but to keep it and even carry it with her—as he supposed she must have if she had lost it in her uncle's carriage on her trip to Derbyshire—defied explanation.

Unless...

“Aside from this supposed unwillingness,” said Mr Bennet, impatiently interrupting Darcy's contemplations, “are you prepared to oppose my demands?”

Darcy shook his head, both in response to Mr Bennet and to dispel the unlikely hopes teasing his heart. Even if Elizabeth had kept the letter out of some sort of fondness for him, surely her improved opinion had been obliterated over his part in the ongoing calamity. No doubt she had thrown it away, which would explain how Mr Bennet had come into possession of it. “Not at all.”

“Then I believe we have an accord.”

Mr Bennet stretched out his hand and Darcy eyed it with unease. He was more than a little tempted to capitulate, but also deeply worried that he would be hurting Elizabeth. Then again, he was potentially harming her by not acquiescing to her father's demands, now that his own carelessness had put her respectability in jeopardy. As far as he knew, only Mr Bennet had seen the letter aside from himself and Elizabeth, but it was not certain. Even if it remained reasonably secure, more than one person had expectations of him eventually making her an offer. More than that, Mr Bennet was correct in that Darcy's reputation could rehabilitate the Bennets', thus improving the chances of the other girls making matches.

Most importantly, though, he loved Elizabeth. He loved her more than he could will or reason away, even in a hundred lifetimes. She gave him the strength to become a better man, to do whatever it took to right his wrongs regardless of any inconvenience

to himself. It was this strength which was also his undoing, his weakness; he could never walk away from the opportunity to marry her. And if there is a chance that she once cared for me, even slightly, perhaps I can convince her to do so again.

Feeling equal parts despicable and jubilant, Darcy shook Mr Bennet's hand.

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Four

August 16

Longbourn

Elizabeth growled in frustration as she again turned her reticule inside out and failed to find Mr Darcy's letter. She knew that she had searched there previously at least half a dozen times and could not reasonably expect it to suddenly appear therein, but she was far beyond thinking reasonably and well into a state of panic.

She had been searching fruitlessly for days for the missive and had yet to discover it. She feared not only that she had lost it, but that it was now in the hands of someone who might not treat it with the discretion it deserved. Had one of the servants found it while cleaning her chambers? Or had one of her sisters been snooping through her things? No, no, that was unlikely—it was usually Lydia who showed such lack of respect for others' privacy and her whereabouts were currently unknown. Days ago, Lydia was my larger concern!

Regardless of where it was or who had it, Elizabeth needed to find Mr Darcy's letter. Where could it be?

“Lizzy?”

Elizabeth jumped and turned. Jane stood just inside the room, evident concern written in the wrinkle of her brow.

“What are you doing?”

Pressing a hand to her fluttering heart, Elizabeth entreated Jane to close the door. After her sister had complied, she exclaimed in a fervent whisper, “I have lost Mr Darcy’s letter.”

Jane’s expression smoothed into one of surprise. “The one you showed me when you returned home from Kent?”

“The very same! Oh Jane, what am I to do?”

“There now, you need not be so uneasy,” Jane soothed as she rubbed slow circles into Elizabeth’s back. “I am sure it will turn up. Where did you last see it?”

“In our uncle’s carriage. I kept it with me in my reticule so that it could not possibly be discovered by someone besides myself.”

“And it is no longer in your reticule?”

“No!” Elizabeth stamped her foot. “I have searched it over and over again, though of course a single glance told me it was not there. Where could it be?”

Jane surveyed the room, which bore signs of Elizabeth’s frantic hunt, but had no more luck than her sister in spotting the missing letter. “Have you seen it since you arrived at Longbourn?”

“No, not once.”

“Then perhaps you dropped it somewhere along the road between here and Derbyshire?”

Heaven forbid! Thankfully, however, it was not possible. Elizabeth had held it in her possession between their last stop to change horses and their final destination. She recalled having to hide it quickly when Mrs Gardiner?—

“Oh dear.” Elizabeth cupped her hands over her mouth.

“Have you thought of something?”

Elizabeth groaned aloud at her own stupidity and more fully covered her face. “I might have left it in the carriage. Or it might have flown out when I arrived. I do not know, but the last time I saw it I had to tuck it out of sight! It could be anywhere.”

She buried her face in Jane’s shoulder as her sister shushed her gently. Tears, which had been her closest friends of late, spilled down her cheeks as the worst possible scenarios tumbled through her overwrought mind. It might be picked up by one of their neighbours. It might be used to further shame the Bennets. Word might reach Mr Darcy that she had been horribly irresponsible and thoughtless with his privacy. As if I do not disgust him enough already!

“There, there, I am sure it will turn up. Even if not, it has probably blown away never to be seen again. There is so much land betwixt us and our neighbours that I cannot see how anyone would ever come across it again. Even if they did, it is no doubt damaged beyond repair and unreadable. You need not fear.”

Jane’s words were meant to be consoling, but Elizabeth could only feel greater despair. Her one token from Mr Darcy, the only man she had ever come close to loving, was gone and she would never see it again. Without it, there was no proof that he had ever cared for her; it was as if his declaration of fervent adoration never happened.

“Come, dearest,” said Jane as she took Elizabeth’s hand and guided her towards the

door. "Let us walk in the garden. I am sure the fresh air and sunshine will do you good."

Elizabeth dabbed the evidence of her distress from her face and nodded. She would check under every bush, search the boughs of every tree, and perhaps recover Mr Darcy's letter. Or so she prayed.

Kitty sat in the window seat of the front parlour, her chin propped in her hand, and glumly watched her two eldest sisters tour the garden. Elizabeth was standing upon a stone bench and peering into the branches of an oak tree, which was odd, while Jane circled the base. At least someone has found some amusement.

Huffing and turning away from the strange scene, Kitty slumped down and crossed her arms. She had been restricted to Longbourn ever since news of Lydia's elopement had arrived and it was most unfair. It was not as if she had done anything wrong! Nor could she see that Lydia had done anything so terrible. Her stuffy family was so caught up in the impropriety of the elopement that they could not appreciate how romantic it was for her sister and Mr Wickham. Although Uncle Gardiner's letter from yesterday seemed to imply that Mr Wickham's intentions might not have been strictly honourable, Kitty found that difficult to believe. Why should handsome, amiable Mr Wickham want to cause trouble for his friends?

And why should I be punished for my paltry role in all this? It is not as if I encouraged Lydia to run away, I merely kept a confidence, which was what any good sister would do. She had tried to explain as much to her father, but he had been so absolutely beside himself with rage that she abandoned the attempt before she said more than a few words in her own defence. He clearly did not understand the bonds of sisterhood.

Thankfully, Mr Bennet had gone off to London only a few hours later. Kitty still was not allowed to go into Meryton or to accept any callers—save for Aunt Philips and

Lady Lucas, who occasionally came to condole with them—but at least she did not have to endure her father’s thunderous scowls. She hoped he stayed away for a long while.

Some noise in the vestibule pricked Kitty’s interest, but it was only Jane and Elizabeth returning from their excursion. She could hear their voices seeping into the room through the partially open door.

“I am certain it will turn up, Lizzy.”

“I dearly hope so.”

“Oh look, the post has come since we were out. There is nothing from London, but...”

Elizabeth and Jane entered the room a second later; the former was holding the post and scowling at a letter which had presumably just arrived. “What can Mr Collins have to say?”

Mary, who had been seated across the room from Kitty with one of her dull tomes, perked up. “Mr Collins?”

Kitty sniffed. Naturally, Mary would want to know all about what Mr Collins has to say.

Elizabeth nodded as she released the seal. Unfolding the missive, she began to read aloud. What poured forth from the pen of their horrid cousin was the most disgusting bit of cruelty Kitty had ever heard. Lydia’s death ‘a blessing in comparison’! Lady Catherine’s condescending opinions of their ruination! Mr Collins congratulating himself for escaping marriage to Elizabeth! What outrageous tripe.

Elizabeth mimicked their cousin's voice as she continued reading the letter to their father.

Let me advise you then, my dear sir, to console yourself as much as possible, to throw off your unworthy child from your affection forever, and leave her to reap the fruits of her own heinous offence.

At this heartless conclusion, Kitty stared at Elizabeth with wide eyes as she set the foul missive aside. Her second eldest sister appeared to share Kitty's disgust—if the wrinkle in her nose was any indication—though she looked not a bit surprised. Jane, seated beside Elizabeth, seemed aghast; perhaps even she could not find the goodness in Mr Collins now.

“Yes, it is exactly as I have been saying.” Kitty whipped about to face Mary, who remained seated at the table with her book spread before her. She was nodding primly and giving them a gimlet eye. “The loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable—one false step involves her in endless ruin and those connected with her must also suffer.”

“Mary—”

Outraged beyond endurance, Kitty interrupted whatever forgiving speech Jane was about to utter. “How can you defend anything that awful man said? Have you no heart?”

Mary flushed brightly red and retorted, “Mr Collins speaks only the truth and there is no profit in pretending we are not all ruined by Lydia's disgrace. Unhappy as the event must be for her, we at least may draw a useful lesson from it. If we do not, then we are as lost to sin as she.”

“Mr Collins is a mean-spirited, petty little man who merely wishes to rub our noses in our misfortune!”

“He is a clergyman and deserving of our respect and deference!” Mary stood and stepped closer so that she and Kitty were toe-to-toe. She brought up a finger and waved it beneath her younger sister’s nose like a scolding governess. “His notion of Christian forgiveness is, perhaps, a touch harsh?—”

“‘A touch harsh’?” Kitty hissed, angry tears burning her eyes and threatening to fall. “He proclaims we would be better off if Lydia were dead ! He wants us to cast her off and never see her again!”

She would have gone on in that vein, bellowing it in Mary’s face, had Elizabeth not intervened and driven them apart. “Stop all this shouting. Do you wish to disturb Mama?”

The four sisters, as one, glanced warily up to the ceiling; their mother was ensconced in her bedchamber just above them. Mrs Bennet had been more distraught than usual since Lydia’s disappearance and they had all made the effort to mollify her as best they could. Mrs Gardiner was with her at the present to alleviate the burden on her daughters, but any sign of discord in the household would require the attentions of the entire family—as well as most of the servants—to keep Mrs Bennet calm.

“There is no cause to fight amongst ourselves,” Jane added, placing a hand upon Mary’s shoulder. “I am sure Mr Collins meant well, even if he perhaps expressed himself poorly. He surely did not mean to imply that Lydia’s death would be a blessing. Our situation is not so bad as he seems to believe it is. I am sure all will be well in the end.”

To Kitty’s surprise, Elizabeth snorted. “Forgive me, Jane, but I must disagree with you there. Mr Collins is a pompous toad”—a shocked giggle burst from Kitty at her sister’s epithet—“and he meant every word the way he said it. Even so, he is not wrong about how the world will see us now because of Lydia’s infamy. We must prepare ourselves for the worst.”

Jane stared at Elizabeth, apparently aggrieved by the very suggestion that anyone, much less every one, could think so meanly. “Surely not, Lizzy!”

“A lady’s reputation is no less brittle than it is beautiful and we must?”

“Yes, thank you, Mary,” Elizabeth cut in with a glare for her next youngest sister. “While I do not disagree with you or Mr Collins on how far our family has fallen, it does us no good to dwell on our ruination. It is best to reserve our moralising for now and keep the peace. Just as there is no profit in acting as if we are unaffected by Lydia’s actions, there is none in harping on it endlessly, either. Have some compassion for our feelings and desist. Am I understood?”

Mary’s mouth pressed into a taut white line, but she nodded.

Kitty grinned at Mary in triumph, but Elizabeth was not yet done. “Kitty, you must recognise that our lives are never going to be quite the same again. You are young, but not too young to understand the consequences of one’s actions. Whether or not you agree with Mary and Mr Collins, the fact is that the rest of the world will not be so understanding of Lydia’s folly as her family is. They will see her behaviour as licentious—to use Mr Collins’s word—and assume that the rest of us are as immoral as she is.”

“But that is hardly fair,” Kitty protested. “Why should we all be punished for something that Lydia has done?”

“I did not say it was fair, only that this is how the world will regard us from here on. This affair will paint us in the worst possible light, and society is not terribly forgiving. Chances are that we, none of us, will—” Elizabeth choked, looked down a moment and then continued, “None of us will ever marry. Since Longbourn passes to Mr Collins after Papa’s death, we will find ourselves in a difficult situation.”

Kitty stared at her in disbelief. “But Lydia is getting married! Why should that ruin us? Just because it did not occur in the traditional way?”

Elizabeth shook her head, her face a study in melancholy. “There is almost no chance of Mr Wickham actually marrying Lydia. Had that been his intention, we would have had word of it by now. There is even a possibility that we shall never see Lydia again, unless by some miracle Papa and Uncle Gardiner manage to find her. She is lost and our respectability along with her.”

“B-But, if she was taken in by Wickham, would that not make him the villain? Why should Lydia be punished so harshly?”

The expression in Elizabeth’s eyes was one of pity. “That is the way of it in society, my dear. A man might be censured, but it is the woman who is most despised in such situations, even when she had no choice in the matter. However,” Elizabeth breathed a deep sigh, “from what I have learnt since I have been home, Lydia cannot plead innocence in her own case.”

“What do you mean?”

“She means,” Mary cut in, primly resettling her spectacles upon her nose, “that Lydia was corrupted long before this incident ever took place. Why, just look at her behaviour?—”

“Mary.” Elizabeth’s chastising tone quieted their sister. She turned back to Kitty, and in a softer voice, responded to her query. “What I mean is that Lydia’s own words condemn her. That letter she left behind for Mrs Forster is proof that she went along with Wickham willingly, without regard to the consequences. Now, it also proves that she believed his intention to be marriage, which is in her favour, but she spoke of her elopement in nearly the same fashion as she asked her friend to make excuses to another soldier and requested the maid to mend a slit in her gown. Do you think she

even once considered the repercussions for the rest of us? She knew what they would be, and yet ran off anyway. Her letter, more than any other piece of information I have seen, has deeply troubled me. To think that Lydia could be so inconsiderate of those who love her, so selfish..." Elizabeth's thoughts trailed off; the only sound in the room was Jane's tremulous sigh.

Kitty's knees shook and she sat down with a thump. No one had ever explained the matter so directly; she had assumed that everyone was making a mountain out of a molehill. She had expected Lydia to arrive home with a new husband in tow, laughing gaily for accomplishing that which none of her sisters had yet done, and she the youngest of them all. More than that, the way Elizabeth, the most clever and worldly of her sisters, told it, Lydia had essentially betrayed her entire family by running off with Mr Wickham on a lark. It was not as if they had not been warned before to guard their virtue and to behave with decorum, but neither she nor Lydia had ever taken these admonishments seriously. Why should the world care what we do? As it transpired, the world cared very much and was not inclined towards forgiveness.

A sigh recalled Kitty's attention to Elizabeth, who was rubbing at her forehead with her fingers. She looked distressed and tired. "I think I shall go lie down for a little while. Come get me up when it is my turn to sit with Mama."

Jane, still looking pale, rubbed Elizabeth's arm. "Do you wish my company?"

Elizabeth shook her head, wincing as if the motion pained her. "No, thank you. Solitude will be most welcome." So saying, she tossed Mr Collins's letter in the low fire, jabbed at it with the poker to ensure that it caught, and exited the room.

Kitty, from her perch in the window, glanced at her remaining sisters. Jane had taken up her sewing, though her needle did not move through the fabric; she stared at the pattern as if it somehow perplexed her. Mary sat back down at the table, but closed

her book, an expression of contemplation softening her usually severe features. For the first time, Kitty felt some measure of guilt for keeping Lydia's secrets to herself and not preventing the disaster which had befallen them. Perhaps her father had been right to chastise her.

The distant sound of a carriage drew Kitty's attention out of doors. Just coming round the bend was a familiar equipage—Papa was home! But what sort of news did he bring? Swallowing, she steeled herself for the worst.

Five

Though visibly road weary, Mr Bennet took only enough time to shake the dust from his boots before calling the ladies of the household to the parlour. Upon being informed that his wife was too weakened by her poor nerves to attend him there, he gathered his obviously tattered patience with a deep inhale and led his daughters upstairs to their mother's bedchamber, insisting he did not wish to share this information more than once. Elizabeth dearly hoped that her father's attitude did not bode ill for what he meant to tell them.

"I have a few announcements," he said as the four sisters and Mrs Gardiner gathered round Mrs Bennet's bed. Elizabeth, squeezed into the window seat beside her eldest sister, clutched at Jane's hand as she awaited their father's news. "Firstly, Lydia has been found and she is to be married."

Elizabeth turned to Jane and embraced her, full of relief that their tribulations were nearly over. Certainly, Lydia's were only just beginning, which diminished the joy of the event, but some of the repercussions of her folly might be mitigated for the rest of them. Even if they were not destined to make great matches—Elizabeth experienced a surge of pain for the potentially great love she herself had already lost—they might still have a chance at being respectably settled. It was all Charlotte Collins had ever wanted and now all the Bennet ladies could reasonably expect.

"Oh, praise be!" cried Mrs Bennet, her voice filling the room with rapturous joy. Her recovery from her debilitating hysteria was remarkable; Elizabeth traded a look of fond exasperation with Jane. "I knew how it would be! Mrs Lydia Wickham—how well that sounds! But there is so much to be done, so much to purchase. Tell me, Mr

Bennet, how much will you give her?"

He met his wife's enthusiasm with a dour glare. "Nothing more than she has already been granted, madam. She is lucky to get that."

"What?" Mrs Bennet pressed a hand to her heart and gasped. "How can you be so cruel? Lydia must have new things! We would not wish to see her shamed before the neighbourhood by seeing her married in an old frock."

Mr Bennet's eyes narrowed. "You need not worry over that, for Lydia shall never return to Longbourn—not so long as I live."

The outcry from Mrs Bennet was immediate and cacophonous, and worsened Elizabeth's headache considerably. "What on earth can you mean? Lydia must come home to be respectably wed! She will want to stand up in church where all her friends can see her and?—"

Mr Bennet raised his hand to still her tongue, but it had no significant effect on his wife's ravings. In the end, he was reduced to speaking over her. "Lydia cannot possibly come home unmarried, you must see that. She will be married from London and then be off to Newcastle with her husband. That is final."

"Newcastle! What can possibly be waiting for them there?"

"Wickham's new regiment. Though I cannot say he deserves it, his... friends have helped him purchase a commission in the regulars as a wedding gift. We can only hope that the newly married couple will be kept busy and out of trouble."

Elizabeth knew not what to feel at this pronouncement. She had hardly expected Papa to welcome Lydia back to Longbourn with open arms, but to deny her entry entirely was a harsh punishment, indeed. Especially for a sixteen-year-old girl whose first

foray into the wide world had ended in near-tragedy. Should she be denied the loving embrace of her family for a single foolhardy decision?

And yet, she could not blame her father for this lack of charity. Given Lydia's infamous behaviour and Wickham's proved debauchery, how could he not wish to protect his remaining unmarried daughters from their influence? His caution—Elizabeth glanced at Kitty, the most susceptible of her sisters to unsavoury influences—and his anger were admittedly warranted. Perhaps some distance would be best for now.

Mrs Bennet continued to argue with her husband while Mrs Gardiner sought to soothe her ruffled feelings, but only Mr Bennet's next pronouncement sufficed to provide a quelling effect. "Your opinions are duly noted, but I should like to leave the subject of our youngest daughter for the moment. You may recall that I have more than one announcement to make. Well, here it is—Lydia is not the only one of our girls to be married."

Every eye fixed upon Mr Bennet and several mouths fell open. "What do you mean?" his wife demanded. An instant later, she brightened and sat up, her nerves once again conveniently forgot. "Has Mr Bingley returned for Jane?"

Elizabeth felt Jane squeeze her fingers tightly. Her elder sister's pallid expression did not reveal whether she was more hopeful or horrified by their mother's conjecture, but it was not unreasonable to assume either—or both.

"No, our Jane will remain with us a while longer. I refer to Lizzy."

The collective gaze of the room turned from Mr Bennet and settled upon Elizabeth. She could practically feel it warming her skin. "Me, Papa? I cannot imagine who it is I am supposed to marry."

He peered at her through his gleaming spectacles. “Can you not?”

Elizabeth felt the slap of his implied accusation sting her cheeks. This provocation, however, did nothing to enlighten her to the identity of her mystery bridegroom.

When she remained mute, Mr Bennet unleashed a heavy sigh and relieved them all of their anticipation. “Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth felt suddenly unbalanced. Had she been given a hundred guesses, a thousand, she never would have supposed that her father would return from London with a betrothal to the very man she had been regretting these many weeks. Much as with Lydia’s exile, she knew not how to feel about it: Should she be overjoyed? Concerned? Relieved? Anxious? All she presently felt was dizzy.

“M-Mr Darcy?” she repeated in wonder.

A sentiment which was echoed more brashly by Mrs Bennet. “Mr Darcy! That odious, proud man? Do be serious, Mr Bennet—he does not find Lizzy handsome at all! Oh, how you love to vex me.”

“I am entirely serious on this point, I assure you,” said Mr Bennet, frowning at his wife. “I have met with Mr Darcy in London and he has agreed to marry our Lizzy. So you see, even if you cannot parade our youngest about Meryton, you at least have the privilege of doing so with our second born.”

Mrs Bennet turned to Elizabeth—who remained stunned, unable to meet even the warm gaze of Aunt Gardiner—and eyed her up and down. “Are you in earnest, Mr Bennet? Mr Darcy is really set to marry our Lizzy?”

“Quite in earnest, I assure you. Though I am not inclined to part with any more money on Lydia’s behalf, you may spend as much of it as you like planning a grand

affair for Lizzy. No doubt our future son-in-law can afford it.”

Just like that, Lydia and Wickham were supplanted in Mrs Bennet’s most immediate concerns. She shrieked more loudly in her joy than in her despair and leapt from her bed, intending to dress for an outing. She apparently meant to inform the entire neighbourhood of Elizabeth’s good fortune—“Oh, and Lydia’s too, of course!”—in securing a man worth ten thousand a year. Mrs Gardiner and Mary attempted to rein in her impulsiveness, but Mrs Bennet would hear nothing of it as she rang the bell for Hill and enthused loudly over how many gowns, fine carriages, and jewels Elizabeth was sure to have as Mrs Darcy.

Mr Bennet shook his head at the scene and turned to leave. The rest of them were caught up in Mrs Bennet’s activity, but Elizabeth’s attention remained affixed to her father’s movements. As he crossed the threshold into the hall, she quickly stood and followed him through the house and into his book-room. There, she watched as he went immediately to the port decanter and filled a glass to the brim. He drank down half, poured out some more, and finally took his seat behind the desk. “I suppose it was too much to hope that you might allow me to settle in before beginning your inquisition.”

Elizabeth ignored her father’s dry witticism and closed the door behind her. She was too agitated to sit in her usual chair, so remained standing. “I cannot marry Mr Darcy, Papa.”

He stared at her for a long, silent moment as if searching for something. Elizabeth did not know what he might find aside from her excessive agitation. “I am sorry to be requiring this of you, my dear, but I fear I must. Were there any other way, believe me, I would not ask you to tie yourself to such a cold, ill-mannered gentleman. I know you have always hated him, but you must try to put that aside now.”

“That is not at all my meaning!” Elizabeth was quick to object. Her father’s brow

twitched with apparent interest, but not surprise. “Mr Darcy is the very best of men and I esteem him more than I can possibly say. He is honourable, loyal, and feels more deeply than anyone I have ever known. He deserves so much better than to share in our disgrace.”

“And yet, it is a settled thing.”

“But why? Why would you go out of your way to ruin him by shackling him to our unfortunate family?”

From within his coat pocket, Mr Bennet revealed a familiar letter and placed it upon the desk between them. Elizabeth regarded it in wide-eyed horror.

“I believe this explains my decision adequately.”

Mr Darcy’s letter! Elizabeth blindly grasped about for the chair she had disdained upon entering and flopped into its seat. “Where did you get that?”

“I discovered it in the Gardiners’ carriage while we were out and about searching for Lydia. Imagine my surprise later that evening when I opened it and read the signature at the bottom.” Mr Bennet’s brow was now fully raised and his mouth pulled taut. Only rarely had Elizabeth been on the receiving end of such an expression from her beloved father and his censure was keenly felt.

Swallowing, she collected herself as best she could. Though her voice still trembled, she again attempted to defend Mr Darcy’s freedom. “You do not understand. He cannot want this, and it would be cruel to force him.”

Her father leant back in his chair and took another sip of his port, to all appearances as idle as ever. However, a sharp glint in his eye belied his veneer of indifference. “I find it rather interesting that the both of you have attempted to refuse my demands

upon the premise that the other would not wish it. Methinks you both protest far too much.”

Elizabeth experienced this declaration like a blow to the chest. It came as no surprise that Mr Darcy would not wish to marry her, but to hear it stated outright was painful in the extreme. So painful, in fact, that it took a few seconds for her father’s implication to properly sink in. “You believe—” Elizabeth swallowed. “He actually wishes to marry me?”

Mr Bennet snorted. “If he does not, then he has gone to a great deal of trouble on Lydia’s behalf for nothing.”

“What do you mean? What does Lydia have to do with any of this?”

“Your Mr Darcy”—Elizabeth’s heart fluttered to hear her father call him her Mr Darcy, however much she doubted the truth of it—“has saved us all from imminent ruin by finding Lydia and persuading Wickham to marry her. When he discovered them, Lydia refused to remove herself from her disgraceful situation.” Mr Bennet sneered into his port. “That wilful child had the gall to defend herself to me by saying she was sure that Wickham would have married her some time or another, and it did not much signify when the blessed event took place. I could barely look at her again after that.”

Though Elizabeth was impatient to hear more of Mr Darcy, she bit her lip, clasped her hands together in her lap and bore the anticipation as best she could. Her father did not like to be rushed and it was clear that Lydia’s betrayal—which was far worse than even Elizabeth had believed, if his account was accurate—injured him greatly.

Mr Bennet used his free hand to rub at his eyes beneath his spectacles. “Mr Darcy bartered with Wickham to restore Lydia’s virtue through marriage. He was on the cusp of approaching your uncle Gardiner on the matter when I confronted him with

his own piece of disreputable conduct.” He gestured at the infamous letter. “There was nothing to be done that he did not do himself. Obstinate, high-handed...” His speech trailed off into unintelligible muttering.

Elizabeth’s astonishment was complete. How could he have gone to so much trouble for a girl so unrepentantly dissolute and the man who had nearly ruined his own sister? It seemed impossible, but her heart did whisper, he did it for me .

No, that was ludicrous. Mr Darcy’s farewell in Derbyshire had been final and indifferent; it left no room for hope. He had been disgusted and scandalised by Lydia’s folly, as was right and proper for anyone of unimpeachable character; she could hardly expect him to rejoice in this new evidence of the inferiority of her closest connexions.

But would he have done so much for a woman he could no longer esteem? He would have outright refused to marry her, letter or not, unless he retained some tender feeling for her.

Unless he felt obligated to make reparations.

Elizabeth pressed her fingers to her temple, her head throbbing as the contradictions battled it out in her overtaxed brain. She could make no sense of this new information.

Her father recalled her attention to the present, his tone sympathetic. “Are you well, my child?”

“I...forgive me, I do not know what to think. I cannot understand Mr Darcy’s motives in all this.”

“I think,” said Mr Bennet, setting his glass aside and folding his hands upon the desk,

“you are too overwrought to see the obvious. Though I cannot be glad over how your engagement came about, I will say that the gentleman appeared relieved when I insisted upon him marrying you.”

Elizabeth’s heart swelled with foolish hope. “How can you be certain?”

“I suppose I cannot, but I suspect he would have been begging me for your hand had he even the slightest hint that you were willing to accept him. Whatever you said to him during his previous proposal seems to have convinced him that you would never have him. If only you had been equally plain with my idiot cousin, I should not have been forced to endure his and your mother’s lamentations last autumn.”

Though Mr Bennet smiled at his jest, Elizabeth could not share in his amusement. To make light of what happened in Kent at such a moment was... She could not think clearly enough to come up with a proper invective, but suffice to say she was resentful. To prevent herself from lashing out, she bit her lip and looked down at her lap where she was gripping fistfuls of her skirt.

There was a soft sigh and her father cleared his throat. “Forgive me, Lizzy, that was an unkind thing to say. I am wretched and bitter these days, but it is not your fault. It is mine, most probably, and Lydia’s. I cannot say that I am terribly pleased to find another gentleman tarnishing the reputation of one of my daughters, either, so regardless of what either of you wishes, I am afraid I must be firm: you will marry Mr Darcy. I will brook no opposition in this matter.”

Unclenching her jaw enough to respond, Elizabeth said, “Yes, Papa.”

“Very good. Now leave me so that I might enjoy some semblance of peace and quiet before your mother begins wedding planning in earnest.”

Dismissed, Elizabeth stood and made directly for the exit. She paused only to snatch

Mr Darcy's letter off the desk, holding it against her heart as she fled the room.

Six

August 17

As Darcy departed his lodgings at the inn at Meryton, he glanced at his pocket watch. It was still too early for a proper call, but his nervous energy would not allow for further delay. Today he would see Elizabeth for the first time since their fraught parting at a similar inn, as well as for the first time since her father had brokered their engagement. He had no idea what to expect from her and felt that his chances at either disgust or contentment were equally probable. The most optimistic part of him hoped for joy, but he was not such a simpleton as to anticipate it.

It was only a mile to Longbourn from the inn, so Darcy chose to walk with the hope that he could while away a bit more time and settle his anxiety. Mr Bennet had not extended an invitation to stay with his family, which was likely for the best; it would have been mightily difficult to maintain his composure round Elizabeth or his forbearance towards her father. Though he could not entirely fault Mr Bennet for forcing the engagement, it still rankled that they were left with no choice in the matter. What if she were made miserable by the match? Worse than a bride who simply did not care for him, he would be shackled to one who outright despised him. Darcy had already experienced more than enough of Elizabeth Bennet's contempt and did not know how he would bear it if he were forced to suffer it daily for the rest of his life.

Apart from his own misery, of greater import was Elizabeth's happiness. Darcy could not, as a gentleman and one who loved her deeply, be the instrument of her discontent. He had caused her enough grief between his thoughtless insults and

reprehensible pride. He had meddled too much in the affairs of one sister, not enough in those of another, and injured Elizabeth's reputation with his careless desire to improve her opinion of him. It transpired that she was right to revile him all along.

Darcy shook his head and dispelled that wretched thought. There was no profit in berating himself thusly, especially before the matter was entirely settled. He would find an opportunity to take Elizabeth aside to gauge her preferences and, regardless of what her father said, do what was best for her. He might grant her and her sisters' dowries as reparation, or purchase the Bennet ladies a house to live in after Mr Bennet's decease. If their respectability was too damaged in Hertfordshire, he might move them to another county where Lydia's infamy could not follow them. There was surely a way to do so discreetly.

Firstly, however, he must speak to Elizabeth. If there were even the slightest chance that she retained some of that promising softness she had displayed in Derbyshire before they were ripped apart by circumstance, he would gladly lead her to the altar without delay. Everything hinged on whether or not she could now abide him as her husband.

Having prepared his speech, Darcy was as ready as he would ever be when he approached Longbourn. His determination faltered, however, when he espied movement through the garden gate.

Elizabeth.

There she was, as lovely as ever in a soft-rose gown and a straw bonnet, pacing back and forth before the wrought iron gate. She was surrounded by late summer blooms and the soft buzzing of insects, though she seemed to pay them no heed. Even from a distance, her movements suggested agitation; Darcy felt dread welling within him.

Though he had not made a sound, some innate sense must have informed Elizabeth of

his presence and she turned to face him. Her expressive eyes were wide, but was it with surprise or apprehension? There was only one way to discover which, so Darcy tentatively approached.

He stopped just short of the garden gate, as did she. They left it between them as a barrier and stared at one another through the ornate wrought iron. It appeared that neither of them was certain of what to say.

“Miss Elizabeth?—”

“Mr Darcy?—”

As their words tumbled over one another’s, both stopped speaking abruptly.

“Forgive me, what?—”

“I am sorry, sir?—”

After their second attempt to begin a conversation failed in a similar fashion, Elizabeth released a nervous laugh. With a wave of his hand, Darcy silently encouraged her to speak first.

Elizabeth nodded, inhaled deeply and said, “I have spoken to my father on your behalf, sir, but I have never seen him so unreasonable. I am sure I can work on him, but in the meantime let me apologise to you most profoundly. I know it is unforgivable, but he has done it for the sake of his family, which must be his excuse.”

The disappointment Darcy felt at her speech could hardly be described, though he felt a crushing sensation within his breast. She did not wish to marry him after all, as he had rightly feared.

“There—” He was forced to stop and clear his throat before beginning again. “There is nothing to forgive. If your feelings on the matter are so strong, I shall join my voice to yours in urging your father to break our...our agreement. However, I am not sure it is possible without damaging your reputation.”

Elizabeth’s laugh sounded bitter to his ears. “My reputation was only just rescued from complete destruction thanks to your efforts. I have had it directly from my father how you found Lydia and forced Mr Wickham into an engagement, saving us all from the scorn of good society. I would not have your efforts rewarded by tying you forever to your most hated enemy, to say nothing of the scandal which is attached to Lydia’s folly. It is too well known to cover up, even if she is married in the end.”

“Think nothing of that!” he cried. “Were it not for my own mistaken pride, Wickham never could have swindled a young woman of character to love or confide in him. Had I not thought it beneath me to lay my private actions open to the world, your sister would not have been taken in by his charms.”

“I believe you give Lydia too much credit, sir,” Elizabeth scoffed, turning her head to hide her expression behind the brim of her bonnet. After a stuttering inhale, she faced him again, more composed but still visibly affected. “I should not speak so ill of her to just anyone, but I can be honest with you when I say that she has been all but waiting for the opportunity to make a spectacle of herself. Given the letter she left behind, I suspect she delighted in it. Mr Wickham might have afforded her the means and opportunity, but Lydia was as willing a victim as he could have found.”

“Even so, she might have been better protected. Your father, I am sure, would not have allowed her to go to Brighton had he been given the proper warnings.”

Elizabeth shook her lovely head and readjusted the blue shawl she wore as if beset by a sudden chill. “I tried to warn him myself that Lydia’s unguarded and imprudent manner would get her into trouble, but he would not listen. I assure you, I did not tell

him of Miss Darcy's situation, but was as forceful as I could be even so."

The palpable silence which followed was filled with awkwardness and confusion. Darcy struggled to discern Elizabeth's true sentiments regarding their betrothal. Was she refusing him only because she supposed he did not wish to marry her? Or was she using her sister's infamy to cover her own aversion to him? Did she, or did she not, blame him for all that had transpired? He could not know for certain, and it was maddening!

When he could stand the confusion no more, Darcy blurted, "Elizabeth, you are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, or you cannot forgive me for the role I played in your sister's elopement, tell me so at once. My affections and wishes are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me on this subject forever." He took a deep breath, and said more softly, "Indeed, I love you so well that I will release you from our betrothal and do my utmost to protect your good name if you ask it of me. I beg of you, however, not to let anyone else come between us—not your sister, not Wickham, not your father, or anybody else. I need you to answer for yourself alone: Will you marry me?"

Elizabeth stepped closer to the gate and wrapped her hand round one of the bars. Darcy approached likewise and, though his pulse beat erratically at his further boldness, placed his own hand atop hers.

She glanced at the spot where their hands mingled and a deep blush overspread her features. Softly, tentatively, she asked, "You are in earnest, then? You wish to marry me despite...despite everything?"

"More than I can possibly express, yes." If there was a tinge of desperation to his words, Darcy was in no position to feel ashamed of it. "I would endure far more to call you my wife."

Elizabeth stepped back, removing her hand from his keep. He again felt the sting of disappointed hopes, but this was banished when she reached for the latch, disengaged it and opened the gate wide. She was flushed and beaming as she said, “Then yes, I shall happily marry you, without any reservations.”

With the final barrier between them removed, Darcy rushed through the arch and gathered Elizabeth into his arms. In the next instant, his mouth was upon hers in a fervent kiss—one which she returned with equal enthusiasm.

Seven

August 31

On the road to Longbourn

The newly married Lydia Wickham— Lydia Wickham! How well that sounds —was not as jolly as she had expected to be on her wedding day. Not only had the wedding itself been a simple affair with only Papa and Mr Darcy present, but no one save herself had appeared properly gay over the event. Her father was churlish, as she had come to expect from him of late, and Mr Darcy cracked not a single smile all morning, but instead glowered most unpleasantly at her dear Wickham throughout the ceremony. Even the Gardiners, of whom she had once been fond because they gave such excellent Christmas gifts, had been severe when they bid her farewell.

It is not as if I anticipate returning to Gracechurch Street for a visit , Lydia thought to herself with a snort. Mrs Gardiner, before sending her off to the church, had scolded her— again —that she ought to feel her great good fortune that her elopement had been hushed up, that she could still cling to the last shreds of her reputation, and so on and so on. This had been her aunt's common refrain in the two weeks since Lydia had reluctantly removed from Wickham's custody and into the Gardiners' and she was excessively tired of it. It was most vexing, and so Lydia had listened with the minimum amount of attention she could spare from attempting to freshen her bonnet into something that looked new.

And that was another complaint. A married woman needed, nay deserved , pretty new things! Lydia felt she had more a right to a trousseau than most brides for she, at only

sixteen, had done what none of her sisters had yet accomplished. Mr Bennet had brought her the news that her two eldest sisters were each newly engaged, but their triumph, in Lydia's opinion, paled next to her own. Jane, at the advanced age of three and twenty, had been on the cusp of spinsterhood before Mr Bingley returned and offered his hand last week. Elizabeth was as yet just twenty, but more than five years after her come out, could only manage to attract a dull, unpleasant—albeit very rich—sort of man like Mr Darcy. No doubt she had accepted him because of the gowns, jewels, and pin money he could provide her, but she would lead a tedious life at the side of such a tiresome man.

By contrast, Lydia had met and married her dear Wickie— oh, dear, I promised him I would not call him that —within months. He had been so ecstatic to have her for his own that he had begged her to run away with him! What was money to all that unbridled passion, to say nothing of how handsome her husband looked in his regimentals? And yet she was treated like a misbehaving child and denied her rightful treat.

At least Mama shall properly rejoice in my success. Lydia cast a baleful glare across the carriage to her father, who seemed insensible to her ire with his head bowed and hands folded across his stomach. Mr Bennet had been absolutely ferocious with his youngest child upon finally discovering her and Wickham's hiding place and had not been much more friendly to her since. Whenever he could be bothered to speak to her, which was not often, it was only to snarl and lecture. Thankfully, Lydia was no longer beholden to her father's rule; she needed only please her husband now, and that was easy enough.

Lydia startled when she found her glower met by an icy stare from Mr Darcy, who sat next to Mr Bennet on the backwards-facing cushion. Lydia shuddered at the cold intensity of it and inched closer to Wickham, who snored loudly beside her.

Though she was not entirely certain how Mr Darcy had become involved in their little

adventure, Lydia found his interference unwelcome. Well, perhaps not entirely unwelcome, for he had purchased Wickham his commission and given them a bit of money—as a wedding present, of course. It was the very least he owed Wickham after so cruelly refusing him that living. Glad as she was that Wickham was not some wearisome clergyman, Lydia knew how it felt to be denied one's rightful share in trinkets and amusements just because someone else came before you. Therefore, it was only right that Mr Darcy make some reparation, even if it was not all Wickham deserved. Especially as Mr Darcy was soon to become their brother when he married Elizabeth. I suppose he must have decided she was 'tolerable' after all. I am astonished she could forgive him that slight—I surely would not, had he insulted me.

Wickham had not been best pleased to hear that bit of news. Lydia had, at first, been somewhat jealous, believing her new husband to retain a tendre for her elder sister, but he assured her that his anger was based on Mr Darcy's continued injustice towards him. He explained that they, as a family connexion, were entitled to more than they had received. Naturally, Mr Darcy should have been more generous with his future sister and brother. She would make sure that they were not forgotten by their wealthier relations.

Lydia pulled back the curtain on the carriage window and peeked out into the bright sunshine. Wickham snorted and swore at her for waking him, but she ignored his complaining; he was prone to it and she had learnt to overlook it. They were close to Meryton now and would be home within the hour.

Coming round the bend up ahead, a curricule appeared with one of her closest neighbours at the reins.

“Oh, look! There is William Goulding,” she cried as she rapped insistently upon the carriage roof. The vehicle stopped as Lydia let down the side glass, quickly shed the glove from her left hand, and rested it upon the frame. This was met by a trio of groans, but she was determined to receive someone's congratulations before she

reached Longbourn.

“Oh, my dear, dear Lydia!”

Whatever had been lacking from her father’s manner since Lydia became engaged was more than made up for by her mother’s ebullient greeting. Her sisters remained as still as garden statues as the party from London arrived, but Mrs Bennet rushed forward and gathered her youngest daughter up in her arms, as was good and proper for a glorious return.

“Here, let me look at you,” said Mrs Bennet, setting Lydia away from her. “You are absolutely blooming, my dear child. Marriage clearly agrees with you, as I am certain my new son will attest!”

Wickham, who had been grumpy upon waking from his nap, appeared to be back to his usual amiable self. He flashed a smile at Mrs Bennet and agreed, “It does indeed, madam.” Before he could say more, however, he fell victim to his mother-in-law’s exuberance and was drawn into a forceful embrace. Lydia giggled at the curl of his lip, which he quickly straightened into a more pleasant expression.

Just beyond him, Lydia’s eye caught a slight movement. It was Mr Darcy, who, upon exiting the carriage, made directly for Elizabeth and took up her hand in his. To her shock, Elizabeth not only allowed this—as Lydia supposed she must—but also blushed and smiled prettily when he kissed the backs of her fingers. Lydia had heard that they were to be married, of course, but it was unbelievable that her sister had put her prejudices aside so far as to appear bashful in Mr Darcy’s presence. If she had to guess, she would say that Elizabeth actually liked her haughty betrothed for more than just his money.

Lydia shook her head to dispel that notion. What nonsense! No doubt she is putting on an act for him. Men do enjoy a bit of flattery.

“Come along, Mrs Bennet. It has been an eventful morning and I, for one, should be glad of a spot of tea.”

Mr Bennet’s pronouncement recalled his wife to her duties as hostess and everyone was bustled inside.

The front parlour was largely the same as Lydia had left it; aside from a few newly acquired baubles and a side table which had been moved, it seemed almost as if time had stood still without her presence to make it pass. Even her family, save the additions to their party, took their familiar places while Hill bustled about with refreshments. Mrs Bennet reigned from her favoured chair, directing the housekeeper with flutters of her handkerchief, and her husband settled into the matching one across the tea table. Jane took her place at the fireside while Kitty sank into the window seat where she liked to daydream. The only oddity—aside from Elizabeth, who was no doubt forced by convention to take a seat beside Mr Darcy—was Mary, who disdained her usual position a little apart from the rest of the Bennets to squeeze in next to Kitty. La, poor Kitty!

Lydia was distracted from her perusal of the room by Hill thrusting a cup of tea at her and flouncing away with a huff. Despite the housekeeper’s churlish attitude, she was glad for the beverage, as she had much to tell her mother and sisters about her wedding and her adventures in Brighton. However, she was not afforded a chance to do so before her mother again commanded the conversation. This time, the subject was far less to Lydia’s liking.

“Three daughters married! Or soon to be married, at any rate,” Mrs Bennet exclaimed once everyone had settled themselves with refreshments. “And two of them to such wealthy, respectable gentlemen, too.”

Lydia followed her mother’s gaze to the sofa where Elizabeth sat next to Mr Darcy. He was leaning over and quietly whispering in her ear while she bit her lip and coyly

glanced his way. Never had she seen her prim elder sister behave in such a fashion, had not even believed her capable of it! And Mr Darcy, with all his austere condescension, only appeared more peculiar in his besottedness. It was a disconcerting scene to witness.

“I can hardly believe it! But then, I have always said that my girls were the prettiest, the cleverest in Hertfordshire, have I not? Attracting gentlemen such as Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley has vindicated me.”

“Where is Bingley?” asked Mr Darcy when he could be bothered to look away from Elizabeth. It was only for a moment and his cow eyes soon found his betrothed again.

By comparison, Wickham was eating a finger sandwich and seemed to have forgot his wife was in the room. He had barely glanced her way since they had spoken their vows and Lydia could not help but feel the contrast between him and the doting Mr Darcy.

“Without a hostess in residence, Mr Bingley’s presence is required at Netherfield this morning to straighten out some to- do with the servants. Rehiring them, or some such.” Mrs Bennet waved her fingers dismissively. “He has promised to come for dinner, however, so we shall see him then. You are invited to stay also, sir.”

Mr Darcy nodded and mumbled something about being honoured before returning his gaze to Elizabeth, who indulged him with a blush and a smile. The next moment, they were absorbed in exchanging teasing whispers once again. It was sickening.

I had no idea Lizzy was such an actress! Unless, of course, her sister’s affinity for Mr Darcy was somehow genuine. If that were actually the case, then Elizabeth had achieved a greater reward than money or excitement. Could it be possible?

As Mrs Bennet blathered on about Mr Bingley and how devoted he was to setting up

the household for Jane, Lydia continued to observe Elizabeth and Mr Darcy through narrowed eyes, watching for any evidence of her sister's previous disdain. She was certain there would be some sign or another, some hint that proved Elizabeth was only behaving in this manner for the benefit of others, but she saw none. To the contrary, every slight movement, every tilt of her lips, proclaimed that her improved opinion of Mr Darcy was sincere. She sat so close to him on the sofa that their knees touched, she could not seem to keep her eyes detached from his face and, at the height of their mother's joyful tirade, Lydia even witnessed Elizabeth discreetly seek out Mr Darcy's hand between them! She might have expected a few coy titters or a fluttering of lashes here and there, but every gesture of affection between them was intimate and private. They seemed in no mind to please anyone besides each other.

Feeling a surge of envy, Lydia grabbed hold of Wickham's nearest arm and clutched at it possessively. He hissed when his unsettled cup splashed tea into his lap and began urgently dabbing at the spill with his napkin.

Lydia ignored this and said, loudly above Wickham's complaints, "Do the people hereabouts know I am married today?"

There was a general acknowledgment which rumbled through the room, but, to Lydia's annoyance, neither Elizabeth nor Mr Darcy acted as if they had heard her question. To the contrary, they remained utterly absorbed in their own whispered conversation. "I was afraid they might not. We overtook William Goulding?"

"I am sure that they do, my love," interrupted Mrs Bennet. "I believe I mentioned it when Lizzy and I called on our neighbours to publicise her betrothal a fortnight ago. Or was it when I announced Jane's engagement the following week? We have had so much good fortune lately, I can hardly recall! I am quite the envy of Hertfordshire with two—that is, three daughters so brilliantly settled! Lady Lucas turned positively green when I informed her that Lizzy was set to marry Mr Darcy. Her Charlotte only managed to catch that awful Mr Collins and, heir to Longbourn or no, he is nought

but a clergyman and absolutely nothing to such a distinguished gentleman of Mr Darcy's ilk."

Beside her, Wickham grumbled a few words which caused even Lydia to blush. She was glad, at least, that he had not said them at a volume which might be heard by the room at large.

"Although Mr Bingley is an estimable prize, too." Mrs Bennet winked at Jane, who demurely lowered her gaze and took a sip of tea. "So friendly, so generous! And living only three miles from Longbourn. I shall have my dear Jane near me always! It is a shame that Derbyshire is so far away, but I am certain we shall all enjoy the occasional visit."

Finding an opening to draw the conversation back to herself and Wickham, Lydia interjected, "Newcastle is?—"

Mrs Bennet continued on as if she had not heard and Lydia slumped petulantly into her seat. "To say nothing of trips to London! Your house is in Mayfair, is it not, Mr Darcy?"

Mr Darcy, startled from his preoccupation with Elizabeth, blinked uncomprehendingly at Mrs Bennet. The question was repeated and he nodded in affirmation, his expression tight. It softened appreciably when Elizabeth placed her hand on his forearm, his vexation apparently forgot.

Lydia clenched her teacup so hard it was a wonder it did not shatter in her hand. What had Mr Darcy to be displeased about? That he was rich? That he was in love with his future wife, and she with him? That he was the singular object of admiration in a room full of people? I suppose he considers it all his due. Hateful, conceited man!

"And I am sure Mr Bingley will be wanting a house there, too, once he is a married

man. Are there any available houses on your street, Mr Darcy?"

"I cannot say, though I shall be certain to mention any that I come across to Bingley."

Mrs Bennet carried on praising London and its many attractions for some time, pausing intermittently to fawn over Mr Darcy and the absent Mr Bingley, and Lydia was left to stew in her own thoughts. For the first time, she thought that, perhaps, being the first to wed had done her no favours. Apparently, the quality of one's husband also mattered.

As Kitty observed Lydia from across the room, she grew more and more irritated with her younger sister's behaviour. It was apparent, from her manner, that she felt she had done no wrong and somehow deserved their admiration for her reckless actions. Just look at how she attempts to solicit Mama's attention! How she all but begs for compliments! Kitty had rarely been so disgusted in her life.

Upon exchanging looks with Mary, it seemed that she was not alone in this opinion. The pair of them had rolled their eyes and shaken their heads in silent communication more than once. Jane likely saw none of this, or if she did, had made some excuse for Lydia. Elizabeth seemed unconscious, or perhaps uncaring, over Lydia's attention-seeking, as wrapped up in Mr Darcy as she was. He was at least as distracted by Elizabeth as she was with him if the besotted gaze he frequently rested upon her could speak for him. Kitty had not believed it possible that a reticent man like Mr Darcy would behave in such a way, but it was endearing and made her happy for her sister.

Wickham, on the other hand, seemed content to ignore Lydia unless she was spilling tea in his lap. Then, he had discarded his charming facade and bestowed a scathing glower upon his wife. Lydia did not seem to notice, but there was no discernible affection in it and a great amount of animus. Wickham might be handsome and outwardly engaging, but Kitty had no doubt that he was much different in private. It

was obvious in the way he treated Lydia and the bitterness which flashed onto his features whenever he beheld Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. Given his recent infamous behaviour and his obvious jealousy, Kitty suspected there was more to Wickham's story of woe than he had heretofore shared with the neighbourhood.

Preferring not to dwell on the Wickhams and their collective malfeasance, Kitty returned her attention to Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. Elizabeth had taken Lydia's folly the hardest of any of them; now she wondered whether Mr Darcy might have been at the root of her misery. Looking at them, so discreetly affectionate and wholly attentive to one another without regard for anyone else in the room, it became perfectly clear that they were in love long before Mr Bennet brokered an engagement between them. It made sense, in hindsight, that perhaps Elizabeth was suffering a romantic disappointment when she returned to Longbourn after the news of Lydia's disgrace. With that understanding, it was not a stretch to assume she must have seen something of Mr Darcy in Derbyshire, explaining the when and where they fell in love—if not the how.

Kitty found that she quite preferred her elder sisters' way of getting husbands over Lydia's.

Eight

September 1

“...and my dear Wickie has the best seat in the regiment! Colonel Forster said so himself at dinner one night...”

Elizabeth followed the arc of her rolling eyes to the window and pulled back the curtain under the pretence of watching the passing scenery. She simply had no patience left for Lydia’s boasting and was certain it was showing on her face. Beside her in the carriage, Jane surreptitiously squeezed her hand.

It had been a trying morning of parading about the village of Meryton in Darcy’s carriage, paying calls and witnessing the vulgar behaviour of not only Lydia, but Mrs Bennet, as well. If Elizabeth thought her mother’s initial display of victory a fortnight ago upon learning of her second daughter’s betrothal to Darcy—or the subsequent spectacle for Jane a week later when Mr Bingley returned for her hand—had been mortifying, it was nothing to what the joint efforts of Mrs Bennet and Mrs Wickham could produce. The more Mrs Bennet crowed over Elizabeth and Jane’s excellent matches, the louder Lydia’s demands for attention grew. Elizabeth was eager to be married and off to Derbyshire if only to avoid further humiliation!

Well , she thought to herself with a tender smile, it is not the only reason .

Truly, it was not even the most pressing reason. Since Darcy’s return to Hertfordshire, Elizabeth had been floating along as if in a dream—a sufficiently wild one in which all of her most fervent desires were about to come true. Never had she

thought, upon bidding her tearful farewell to Darcy in Derbyshire, that they would reach such a happy conclusion. Not only did he still love her, most ardently, but he was willing—nay, eager—to marry her even though her youngest sister was united to his mortal enemy. He could not be pleased about a closer connexion to Wickham, of course, but he had shown remarkable forbearance when forced to be in the blackguard's company. And when they were alone...well, Darcy never spared a thought for unpleasant relations then .

“You are not coming down with a cold, are you, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth tore her unfocused eyes away from the window and retrained them upon her mother, who looked upon her fretfully from across the carriage. Praying that the content of her musings was not apparent to others, she replied, “No, Mama. I feel perfectly well.”

“You look so flushed, my dear. Are you certain?”

“Absolutely certain.” My mind was merely agreeably engaged in recalling the very great pleasure which a handsome gentleman can bestow upon his betrothed when no one is there to witness it.

“Good.” Mrs Bennet breathed a loud sigh of relief and relaxed into her seat. “We would not want you to fall ill so close to the wedding! By the way he looks at you, I would wager that Mr Darcy would not like any delay.” This bold statement was accompanied by a wink which intensified the tingle in Elizabeth's cheeks.

Next to their mother, Lydia rolled her eyes and huffed with far less discretion than Elizabeth had afforded her. “Let us hear no more about Mr Darcy!” Raising her voice to an unflattering pitch, Lydia cried mockingly, “‘Mr Darcy's carriage is so fine, Mr Darcy owns half of Derbyshire’...I am sick of Mr Darcy!”

The warmth under Elizabeth's skin shifted from a pleasant tickle to a prickle of annoyance, but she bit down on her tongue to prevent it lashing out at her youngest sister. Not that Lydia deserved any sort of consideration with the way she had been so infamously flaunting her misadventure, but nothing good could come from a row in a confined environment. Darcy's carriage was spacious, but not large enough to contain one of Lydia's notorious tantrums.

Unfortunately, their mother had not her second eldest daughter's foresight. Or restraint.

"Lydia! How could you say such a thing?" Mrs Bennet exclaimed. Since he had promoted himself to the position of future son-in-law, Darcy seemed unable to do any wrong in her mother's eyes. Thankfully, Mrs Bennet was too much in awe of him to endlessly flatter him the way she did with Bingley, but it was clear nonetheless that her old grievances against him had been banished and replaced by unquestioned reverence.

"Very easily!" Lydia cried, stamping her foot. "You only like him because he has ten thousand a year and is willing to marry Lizzy, but he is dull and tedious and high in the instep and...and..."

The temptation to give Lydia a blistering set-down was increasing apace; Elizabeth clenched her jaw lest one slip out. Another few invectives against her dear Darcy, however, and she would not be held responsible for her stinging defence on his behalf.

Jane, ever the peacemaker, placed a calming hand upon Elizabeth's arm and addressed Lydia. "Dearest, that is unkind. Mr Darcy has been a great friend to our family, to say nothing of his obvious adoration for Lizzy. Truly, you would like him if you gave him a chance."

Lydia tossed her head. “I have no interest in giving him a chance! I have heard all I need to know about Mr Darcy from Wickham, and he is hardly the gentleman the rest of you believe him to be. Did you know he denied my husband a living left to him by old Mr Darcy?”

“I had heard the same,” said Elizabeth through gritted teeth, unwilling to let a baseless accusation stand, “but I assure you there is far more to the story than your husband bothers to relate. In point of fact, Wickham resigned all claim?—”

“So says the perfect Mr Darcy! Really, Lizzy, he would say anything to get you on his side.”

“And Wickham would not?” Elizabeth countered, riled beyond further endurance. She could not allow Wickham to be vaunted as the better man. “Consider the source! Whatever Mr Darcy’s faults, he has never proved himself dishonourable or immoral, which are both traits your husband can boast. Just look at how he took advantage of you! He lured you into an elopement without any true intent of marrying you.”

“Nonsense, Wickham loves me! He told me so. And we did get married in the end.”

“Only because Mr Darcy paid him to do it. Were it not for my betrothed, you would not be Mrs Wickham.”

Mrs Bennet and Jane gasped as one and Elizabeth instantly regretted divulging the truth of Darcy’s role in the Wickhams’ elopement in such a brusque fashion. It ought to have been handled with more gentleness, but she supposed there was no helping it now. She would be sure to apologise to her mother and elder sister later and beg Mrs Bennet, in particular, to keep her own counsel on the subject.

Not perturbed in the slightest, Lydia waved her hand dismissively. “Please. I am sure we would have been married at some time or other, even without Mr Darcy’s

interference. We might have been married sooner if he had done as he ought and supported his friend! The money Mr Darcy put out was owed to my Wickham, though I daresay he should have given more—'tis not as if he cannot afford it.”

“You believe that, if it gives you comfort.” Elizabeth sharply turned her head from her sister lest she be provoked to say worse. She clenched her jaw and breathed deeply to calm her temper.

However, Lydia was far from done. In a shrill shriek, she cried, “You are just jealous because I made it to the altar before you! And your Mr Darcy, for all his money, is not half so handsome as my Wickham. Do not deny it, he was a favourite of yours once.”

“Even were that the case, which I do not in any way concede,” replied Elizabeth, her voice deadly calm, “I would never have risked my own reputation and that of my entire family for the sake of something so trivial. When a woman marries ought to matter less than whom she marries. You might have had a small triumph, in your own mind, in marrying before the rest of your sisters, but you have sentenced yourself to a lifetime with a man so bereft of morals, decency, and consideration that I cannot see how you might ever truly be happy with him. Indeed, Lydia, I pity you for your foolish choice because it is likely to cause you much misery.”

Elizabeth turned her head again and refused to acknowledge Lydia’s furious bawling further.

When the ladies reached Longbourn, Elizabeth descended from the carriage first, her nose pointed high in the air as if she were the Queen of Sheba. No doubt she was already feeling her consequence as the future Mrs Darcy, which only nettled Lydia all the more. She disappeared round the side of the house, headed in the direction of the garden. Lydia was not sorry to see her supercilious sister go, even if she was not entirely done defending Wickham against Elizabeth’s defamation.

After she saw Jane following Elizabeth—hardly surprising; Jane and Elizabeth always took up for one another—Lydia stomped after her mother into the house. There she would have a sympathetic ear! “I cannot believe Lizzy said that!” she cried as she angrily stripped off her gloves and threw them in Hill’s direction. “As if her Mr Darcy is so perfect, so wonderful, so?—”

“Enough , Lydia!”

Lydia’s diatribe halted at the harsh tone of Mrs Bennet’s voice, albeit more from surprise than chagrin. To her utter shock, her beloved mother, the one who had petted and cosseted her all her life, was scowling at her.

“It is well and good to stick up for your husband, but enough is enough! The plain facts of the matter are that Mr Darcy is ten—no, fifty—times Wickham’s consequence and is deserving of our deference. Not only is he wealthy, but he apparently helped bring about your own marriage. We owe him a great debt.”

“But—”

“No! I will hear no more against Mr Darcy. Another word and I shall go to your father about it.”

Lydia would have loved to say that her father no longer had any authority over her actions, but Mrs Bennet turned on her heel and marched up the staircase before she had the chance, leaving her youngest daughter fuming in the vestibule. So much for being Mama’s favourite! She has been beguiled by Mr Darcy and his riches.

A muffled titter called Lydia’s attention to the nearest doorway, which happened to be the music room. Mary and Kitty ducked back inside quickly, though not quickly enough to mask their laughter at their youngest sister’s expense.

Impotent to do anything else, Lydia stomped her foot and screeched, long and loud. When she finished, panting as if she had run all the way from Meryton, there was no response, only empty silence.

Nine

Darcy returned to Longbourn with his shooting party feeling a mix of anticipation and relief. Anticipation for seeing Elizabeth, of course, and relief to be out of Wickham's tiresome presence. He would not be loath to bid a temporary farewell to the surly Mr Bennet, either, but any bitter grumblings from that quarter were easily ignored. It was Wickham who set his teeth on edge with his smirking and unwarranted boasting. Only Bingley's company had made the hunting trip at all bearable, but his peaceable friend had fallen into anxious silence some time ago in deference to the animosity brewing between his three companions.

How Darcy longed to bask in Elizabeth's sole company! She would soothe his tattered nerves, he was sure of it. A few smiles, a wry quip or two, and his mood would be set entirely to rights. And a kiss would not go amiss, either, should the opportunity present itself. He bit his lip to disguise the roguish smile which threatened to expose his inner thoughts.

The gentlemen had parted ways at the kennels, with Mr Bennet announcing his intention to retreat to his book-room and Wickham wandering off to parts unknown in the direction of Meryton. No doubt he meant to while away a few hours at the inn, though he was in for a rude surprise when the proprietor demanded coin up front for any libations. The town's merchants had learnt their lesson upon the removal of the regiment in the spring and Darcy doubted that even Wickham would be able to charm his way into free food and drink.

Much as he would have taken petty satisfaction in seeing Wickham's expression when denied his intended enjoyment, Darcy felt a greater pull towards Longbourn.

He and Bingley made for the manor, and the expected interlude with their preferred ladies, on feet quickened with anticipation.

As they approached the house, however, a glimpse of rapid movement beyond the garden gate captured Darcy's gaze. Even from a distance, he would recognise that rich plum pelisse; he bent his steps in his beloved's direction, leaving Bingley to follow or not as he chose.

It was clear to Darcy by the taut set of Elizabeth's shoulders and the fitful motion of her hands as she spoke to Jane that her spirits were agitated. It was difficult to follow her harried speech, but when he caught the invocation of her youngest sister's name Darcy was able to guess the source. Lifting the latch, he let himself in and made directly for his betrothed.

"Elizabeth, are you well?"

Throwing her arms up into the air, she exclaimed, "I hardly know! I am so absolutely furious with Lydia! Do you know what that ungrateful girl said about you?"

Whatever Lydia Wickham had to say was not likely to be particularly amusing, but he huffed out a laugh. "I can only imagine. Why do we not take a walk? It might help to work out your frustrations."

Elizabeth agreed and slipped her arm through his, allowing him to lead her back through the gate and away from Longbourn. Bingley, who had apparently chosen to follow him into the garden, escorted Jane similarly, though the other couple's leisurely pace allowed Darcy and Elizabeth to outstrip them easily. It was not long before their whispers were entirely inaudible.

Darcy allowed Elizabeth to rail against the presumption and stupidity of her youngest sister for some minutes until it appeared she had spent most of her vexation. "I do not

know how I shall ever see her the same way again. At first, I thought that Lydia had simply made a foolish choice and that she would regret it once her folly became plain, but she will not see that she has done anything wrong. Worse, she has the temerity to insult the very person to whom she owes her salvation! What can she be thinking?" Elizabeth closed her speech and sagged against Darcy's shoulder.

He took the opportunity to press a kiss upon the crown of her head. Darcy might have wished her bonnet were not in the way, but indulged in the sweet lavender scent of her hair even so. "I hate to say so, knowing that she is your sister and that you love her in spite of her faults, but I think she and Wickham are much alike. Neither has any seeming awareness or care for others; they can only see their own needs and desires. In a way, they are spectacularly matched, though I doubt it will lead them to much happiness."

Elizabeth sighed. "I wish I could say that you were wrong, but I cannot. I had thought that all Lydia required was a modicum of maturity, but now I worry there is something so substantially lacking in her character that she can never become more than she is—vain, idle, silly, and entirely devoid of understanding."

"She is but sixteen, perhaps she can still improve."

"With Wickham as her husband?" Elizabeth scoffed. "No, even without him, I think Lydia was already too spoilt by my parents, my mother especially, to turn out well. She thinks of nothing but her own wants and cares nothing for anyone but herself. She said as much to my aunt while she was still in London."

Yes, Mrs Gardiner's letter to Elizabeth was explicit on the topic of Lydia's horrid behaviour. Darcy himself had seen a piece of it when he played the role of witness at their nuptials. If Lydia were not demanding congratulations from every passing stranger, she was complaining that her frock was neither new nor ornamented enough for her liking. And then he had endured a four-hour carriage trip with her to

Longbourn.

“She is my sister, and I will always love her, but I cannot help but believe she does not, perhaps can not, return the sentiment. I worry what that means for our future relationship.”

Darcy paused in the lane and turned Elizabeth to face him. “Whatever it means, I am certain that you will handle it with grace. Your eyes are now open to her character and she will not be able to impose upon you. She may be your sister, but you must not feel beholden to more than is sensible where she is concerned. She has made her own bed and it is not unreasonable for you to allow her to lie in it, especially when she shows no true understanding of her own faults. We will see her only as much as you wish, whether that be frequently or never. I trust your good judgment.”

Darcy’s heart did a merry jig when Elizabeth rewarded him with a tender smile. “You always know what to say to make me feel better.”

Laughing, Darcy gathered her closer and bent his head so that their lips were mere inches apart. “I think we both know that you flatter me on that score.”

“Perhaps,” was Elizabeth’s impish reply, “but I find you improve as time goes on. You will be a great proficient at pleasing me if you continue to practise.”

They walked along in companionable silence for some minutes before Darcy felt compelled to speak again. He posed a question to her which had been niggling at him for some time, ever since Mr Bennet had approached him in London. “I have been wondering, why did you keep my letter?”

Elizabeth, who had been resting her head against his shoulder, lifted it and fixed him with a quizzical look. “Is it not obvious?”

“Not to me. After our...unpleasantness in Hunsford, I was frankly uncertain whether you intended to read it before pitching it into the nearest fire. Even in the best case, I thought you would burn it for all the bitterness it contained. Why did you keep it?”

They continued to ramble, dead leaves crunching beneath their boots in time with their steps, while Elizabeth took the time to ponder his query. “The letter, perhaps, began in bitterness, but it did not end so. The adieu is charity itself. More than that, however, it was a glimpse of you I had never thought to receive and I was fascinated by all it contained. I will not claim that I was pleasantly surprised, for it taught me what a fool I have been, but...”

“But?”

“But it was a lesson I dearly needed to learn. Until I read your letter, I never knew myself. I thought myself so very clever, yet it transpires that I was blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd. I discovered that you were not the only one between us who suffers from excessive pride, except I have less cause for it. You wounded my vanity and I used that as an excuse to blacken your character unduly.”

Darcy had to disagree with her there. “No, you are too hard on yourself. You might have been suffering under mistaken premises, but on the whole, you have no true cause for regret. I treated you abominably from the start of our acquaintance and still considered myself worthy of your hand. Why should you not believe me capable of every sort of villainy? I never showed you aught but the worst of my character. I cannot think back upon my behaviour with anything less than abhorrence.”

“You cannot take the whole of the blame upon yourself, I will not allow it. We both, I believe, have a tendency to carry the guilt of others upon our shoulders, so might we agree in this instance to share the culpability between us equally? A burden shared is a burden halved, as they say.”

Though still inclined to absolve Elizabeth of her part in their past misunderstandings, Darcy supposed she was correct. “If I must. However, you still have yet to tell me why you kept my letter.”

Her shoulders lifted in a sigh. “I cannot explain exactly why I kept it other than to say, at first, my curiosity overcame my caution and I felt compelled to read it. Then, I found it to be a source of much needed education for my character. Once I had learnt from it all that I could, it became a talisman of sorts, a reminder to reserve my judgments until I was certain of them. Finally, after we met again at Pemberley, it became the singular token of a chance I believed I had lost.”

The late summer wind rustled through the trees and they were caught in a colourful maelstrom of falling leaves. Elizabeth huddled nearer, shivering, though perhaps not from any chill. Darcy’s heart clenched. How close we came to never seeing one another again...

He halted them on the path and drew Elizabeth to him. Her hands slid up his chest and tangled together behind his neck, bringing his head closer to hers until their foreheads touched. She was close enough that Darcy could count the gold flecks scattered across her verdant irises; he was sure he had never seen a jewel so magnificently faceted.

Through a ragged breath, he managed to say, “I am glad you kept it, but even more glad that you misplaced it. It has brought us together again.”

“I like to think that our reunion was inevitable,” she said, cupping his cheek with one hand. He leant into her palm and kissed it. “That we will always find our way back to one another, no matter the odds. Just look how often we have crossed paths since the beginning of our acquaintance. Even the calamity of my sister’s elopement could not separate us for long.”

Now that he considered it, Elizabeth was entirely correct about the astonishing number of times the pair of them had come together in improbable fashion. Darcy had never expected to meet with her again after fleeing Hertfordshire in November, only to encounter her in April at Rosings while she resided with her friend and cousin. Then, a day earlier than he was meant to arrive, they crossed paths once more at Pemberley. He had all but convinced himself that his hopes were at an end when Wickham had run away with her sister, only to have Mr Bennet arrive on his doorstep less than a week later demanding that he marry her. Had these events been collected together into a novel, he would have ridiculed its implausibility.

And yet, here she was before him, the woman Fate had apparently decreed was to be his wife. Simply wondrous.

“How I love you, dearest, loveliest Elizabeth.”

Her reply was a whisper which ghosted across his lips. “As I love you.”

Oh, that I had better withstood Mrs Bennet’s caterwauling; I shall never again capitulate to her nonsense.

Regrets were of no use by this juncture, of course, as the lot of them were already suffering from the effects of excessive exposure to the Wickhams and their entitled demands for money, for praise, for every last shred of patience any of them managed to retain. Bennet ought not to have allowed them to so much as pass through the village, much less dine at his table where they smirked and congratulated themselves on their infamous behaviour, yet here they were. Curse my abominable weakness.

“...I wish I could have taken all my sisters to Brighton, for that is the best place to find husbands...”

Glancing about at each of their faces while Lydia, once again, boasted of her success

in wrangling herself a husband—such as he was—before all her sisters, Bennet could see that he was not alone in his opinion. Jane and Bingley squirmed uncomfortably in their seats; Mary and Kitty exchanged derisive looks; Elizabeth appeared to be biting her tongue to the point of pain; and even Mrs Bennet, the greatest proponent of the Wickhams' visit, seemed ready to interrupt Lydia and institute a new subject. And that Darcy, towards whom Bennet supposed he must feel some gratitude for recent events, glowered down the table at his intended father-in-law as if he expected Bennet to do something. What that might be, Bennet could hardly fathom, but the accusation was a veritable slap to the face.

He scowled at Darcy in return before he resumed sawing at his meat, this time with some vehemence. Sanctimonious prig. I suppose he wants me to cast them out of the house and banish them from my sight forever. The notion was tempting, but hardly one he could enact without causing an unholy uproar. And have we not had enough of that for a lifetime? Still, I shall be glad to see the back of the Wickhams and would not be sorry to see them gone sooner than expected.

As it was, they need only endure the Wickhams for a little while longer—could there still be another eight full days to go?—and then they would be sent as far as possible from Hertfordshire while still remaining in England. They would be close to Scotland, as a matter of fact, an irony Bennet appreciated with dark amusement.

“...but perhaps Kitty might come with us to Newcastle! There will be plenty of soldiers there to entertain us.”

Bennet nearly dropped his knife at Lydia's suggestion. He fixed her with an incredulous glare, to which she seemed entirely immune. “Absolutely not!”

Lydia continued on, speaking directly to Kitty as if her father had not already denied his permission. To Kitty's credit, she did not appear even slightly enticed by the prospect. “You shall be the belle of every ball—I will see to it myself! I daresay that I

can find you a husband before your first week is out. I cannot promise you one so handsome and dashing as my dear Wickie”—at this mention of his pet name, Wickham sneered at his oblivious wife—“because that is impossible, but we might find one or two who are reasonably attractive. And, as you know, any man is distinguished in regimentals.” Lydia ended her speech with a titter.

“I, ah, thank you for your invitation, but I believe I would rather not,” replied Kitty, avoiding Lydia’s expectant gaze by looking to her plate. “Our sisters’ wedding day is coming up and I would hate to miss it.”

Lydia made an awful snorting noise. “Nonsense! What is some dull old wedding to a camp full of officers? No, I am determined, you shall come with me to Newcastle. It is quite a settled thing.”

Kitty flushed a bright red and clenched her fork and knife tightly while Mrs Bennet took up her defence. “Lydia, dearest, I do believe your sister is right to stay for the wedding. Officers are well and good, but the sort of gentlemen to whom Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley might introduce her are of a different sort entirely. Kitty will remain here with us for now, though if she is invited to travel to London or Derbyshire in a few weeks...we shall see.”

Bennet was amused to see Darcy baulk at Mrs Bennet’s suggestion, but some silent communication from Elizabeth urged him to hide it quickly. He cleared his throat before saying, “Indeed, I am certain my new sisters would enjoy a Season in London. Once Elizabeth and I have properly settled in, of course.”

Splendid. Another expense for my depleted coffers.

“In any case,” Darcy continued, his air haughty and disapproving, “I cannot see that sending a young lady off without the proper chaperonage has ever done anyone at this table any good. I believe it best not to risk it and to keep Miss Catherine—and Miss

Mary—at home.”

The silence which followed Darcy’s proclamation was palpable. Bennet, who knew of Miss Darcy’s near disaster, could detect some self-censure in it, though of course he felt the slight against himself like the thrust of a blade. Elizabeth afforded her betrothed more sympathy, if the light brushing of her fingers against Darcy’s fisted hand was any indication, but Bennet was incensed. Arrogant arse.

Puckering her face into the sort of configuration which always boded an impending tantrum, Lydia whined, “Why should Lizzy get to take Kitty and not me? It is unfair! She shall have a much better time in Newcastle where there will be dances and officers enough for anyone.”

“Aye,” agreed Wickham with a wink for Kitty which nearly made Bennet launch from his seat and throw him from the house that moment. “I can guarantee that my lovely sister will have her pick of amusements where we are going. Newcastle is not London, of course, but the company will be...lively.”

“There, you see? What sort of fun would she have with Mrs Darcy ? Nothing but dull old tea parties and?—”

“Enough!” Bennet barked, bringing his fist down hard enough to rattle the dishware. “As I have already said, Kitty does not have permission to go to Newcastle. In fact, nothing could ever induce me to allow it; she would be fortunate to go as far as Eastbourne! No, I have at last learnt to be cautious and none of my daughters, so long as they remain under my protection, shall ever stir from home till they prove themselves able to behave in a rational manner. Am I rightly understood?”

There was a general murmur of assent from his daughters, excepting the pouting Lydia, and for some time there was not another sound save for the scraping of cutlery on china. At length, Mrs Bennet ventured a tentative comment on the weather and

conversation resumed at an uneasy pace from there.

Ten

“Her behaviour is entirely disgusting. Even Mama is beginning to grow weary of her, which I could never have imagined a week ago!” Kitty fell back against her pillows, her exasperation temporarily spent.

Mary, seated at the end of the bed with her knees drawn up, was shaking her head in commiseration. “Lydia has always taken her status as Mama’s favourite for granted. She does not see that even lifelong partiality has its limits.”

“Did you see the look on Mama’s face at dinner when Lydia had the temerity to disagree with Mr Darcy over the pheasant? As if she would be pleased to hear that not everyone thought it was roasted to a turn.” Kitty rolled her eyes. “What could she be thinking?”

“I doubt she was thinking at all, merely attempting to make Mr Darcy look foolish. She achieved the opposite aim.”

The sisters giggled softly, and somewhat guiltily, at Lydia’s expense.

“Can I assume, then, that you genuinely have no interest in going to Newcastle?”

Kitty wrinkled her nose at Mary’s suggestion. “I should say not! Good Lord, can you even imagine how horrid it would be? Trapped in a carriage for days on end with those two, and then living with them for weeks?—”

Both of them jumped when the door suddenly was flung wide open. Over the

threshold stepped the object of their shared derision, dressed for bed and loudly making demands. “Kitty, you must help me—oh! Mary, what do you do here?”

Kitty, irritated that Lydia barged into her room without so much as a knock, crossed her arms and glared at the intruder. It might once have been Lydia’s room as well, but not since she had deserted them for Wickham. “I invited her here. Mary is our sister too, you may recall.”

Lydia groaned with apparent exasperation. “Yes, yes, I know. Now leave, Mary. I must speak to Kitty in private.”

Kitty bristled and was about to tell Lydia that she should be the one to leave when Mary stood. “Goodnight, then.”

Kitty grasped Mary’s hand and attempted to pull her back to the bed. “You do not have to go because she says so.”

“I do not mind, Kitty,” Mary said with a soft smile. Throwing a sharper look at Lydia, she continued, “I suddenly find the company in here not to my tastes. Shall we attempt that new song after breakfast?”

“Of course. Then a walk to Meryton?”

Mary nodded and brushed past Lydia. She gave their younger sister a final sniff and exited into the hall, closing the door behind her.

Lydia huffed and slumped her shoulders. “Finally! I thought she would never leave. I cannot believe you are willingly spending time with her, though I suppose Jane and Lizzy cannot spare you any attention since they became engaged.” The last was spat with palpable animosity.

Kitty chose not to respond, knowing that Lydia would not listen anyway. She had never had any use for Mary before and likely never would—unless their middle sister suddenly showed promise in something Lydia valued, like becoming a seamstress. Even at that, Lydia’s only interest in Mary would be cajoling her into making her a few frocks here and again. Kitty had never before considered it, but that was how Lydia treated everyone; they were only as important to her as whatever they could provide for her selfish wants. Kitty herself had only ever been a convenient dupe, someone to follow wherever Lydia led. No more—she had seen beyond her sister’s jolly veneer and into her self-centred heart.

Lydia flounced over to Mary’s abandoned place at the foot of Kitty’s bed and collapsed there with enough drama to delight audiences on Drury Lane. “I have never been so ill-treated in my entire life! It is intolerable.”

“What do you mean, ‘ill-treated’?”

“Why, surely you must have seen the way that everyone has taken Lizzy and Mr Darcy’s part against mine! Even Mama has been convinced that he is the most admirable gentleman who ever lived and my Wickham nothing but a piece of dirt upon his shoe. It is unfair, I tell you!”

Kitty thought this was a wild exaggeration, but again held her peace. It was her hope—a vain one, most likely—that Lydia would finish her tirade quickly and be off to bed. To move this possibility along, she made a great show of yawning; Lydia did not seem to notice.

“In any case, I aim to do something about it.”

Freezing in the middle of a feigned stretch, Kitty stared at Lydia with a creeping sense of foreboding tickling her brain. “Do something? Like what?”

Lydia leant closer and winked, a wide grin unfurling across her cheeks. Kitty shuddered. “Like teach them a lesson. Mr Darcy and Lizzy need to be taken down a peg, if you ask me. Look at them, thinking themselves so above us all—and Lizzy not even married yet. Where is the deference I am owed as a new bride? Mama does not even force her to go lower when we sit down to dinner.”

“Lydia—”

“I have the perfect plan, though I require your assistance.” Lydia’s eyes narrowed. “You cannot tell Mary, for she would spoil our fun. I need you to?—”

“No!” Kitty cried, startling Lydia into an upright position. “No, whatever you are planning, I shall not be part of it. I think it despicable that you would wish to hurt our sister and future brother.”

“Why are you being so missish? Has Mary been reading you too much Fordyce?” Lydia let out a braying laugh.

“No, I do not wish to be a part of whatever awful scheme you have concocted. You are jealous that Lizzy has picked a better husband than you.”

Lydia drew herself up and glared at Kitty. “That is not true! Mr Darcy is nowhere near as wonderful as my dear Wickie. He is dull and haughty and cruel. He stole my husband’s rightful living.”

“Oh, please. Even if that is true, which I rather doubt, I cannot imagine your ‘dear Wickie’ as a clergyman, can you?”

“No, but?—”

“Further, I am not inclined to help you with anything, given how you have betrayed

us all.”

Lydia tilted her head in a quizzical fashion. “What do you mean?”

An incredulous scoff dropped from Kitty’s lips. “You did not think of your family at all before you eloped with Wickham, did you? I admit that I had not realised how serious the situation was until Lizzy explained it, but you put all of us, myself included, at great jeopardy when you ran off from Brighton. You cared nothing for the fact that your actions might have prevented any of your sisters from ever marrying, that we might be shunned by society! You are selfish and unfeeling, Lydia.”

“Lizzy has made me out to be the villain, but she is exaggerating. Nothing so very bad would have befallen you, I am sure.”

“I can assure you, it already had. No one would solicit our company in the wake of your infamy. Mama took to her bed. And the letter Mr Collins sent to us was awful! If it were not for Mr Darcy, our misery would be unending.”

Lydia stood and jabbed her finger at Kitty. “Would all of you stop worshipping Mr Darcy for supposedly saving me and my wretched reputation? All he did was lay out some money—money he owed to my husband—to bring my marriage about quicker. It is not as if he galloped in on his noble steed and rescued me from the jaws of certain doom!”

Kitty smacked away Lydia’s hand and, climbing to her feet, stretched to her full height. She was still shorter than Lydia by a good bit, but she felt as tall as a mighty oak. “As a matter of fact, that is exactly what he did. Except he did not merely rescue you, he rescued us all. Simply because he loved Lizzy that much and it was the right thing to do. I will not ever assist you in hurting either of them, not when I owe them so much and you so little.”

Apparently taken aback by Kitty's speech, Lydia gaped at her, mouth open as she appeared unable to form a reply. After several long moments of this, she snapped her jaw shut, turned on her heel, and stalked from the room.

Kitty, much relieved by Lydia's retreat, fell back onto her bed in exhaustion. She would speak to Mary in the morning on what should be done about Lydia's plot against Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. Perhaps they ought to involve their father, too.

"Can you believe that?" Lydia hissed, pacing back and forth at the end of the bed she and Wickham were sharing during their stay at Longbourn. She had been ranting to him about Kitty's defection for the past quarter hour or so and had yet to run out of ire.

Wickham's responding grunt was muffled by the pillow he had clutched over his head.

"As if Kitty has any right to speak to me that way! I am a married woman and deserving of more deference than that. Has she found herself a husband? I think not!"

Wickham, at last throwing off the pillow, sat up and barked, "For the love of God, be silent, girl. I care nothing for some stupid spat you have had with your sister."

"I was defending you against Mr Darcy!"

"And? Darcy is always the one most esteemed, the one everyone falls over themselves to please. Even your sister, who hated him at first, has come over to his side of things, though I cannot imagine how he managed it. Wasted on him, she is." Wickham grumbled something here which Lydia did not catch. "Regardless, you ought to get used to it because the Darcys will be unfairly admired wherever they go." So saying, Wickham plumped his pillow and collapsed down into it.

Lydia glared at his back for this show of disrespect. He was always doing things like that now that they were married; it was as if he abruptly stopped being fun once his ring was upon her finger. He was no longer even interested in what they did between the sheets, either, though he had been eager enough prior to their wedding day when the act had been illicit.

An ingenious plan of revenge sprouted in Lydia's mind and a smirk curled to one side of her mouth. If her mother would not make everything right, if Kitty refused to help her, perhaps her husband might be willing. Given the right incentive, of course.

Lydia climbed onto her side of the bed and announced, "I need you to seduce Lizzy."

Suddenly, Wickham was more alert.

Eleven

September 2

Parting from Darcy at the garden gate was becoming more difficult by the day. Elizabeth was being entirely ridiculous—she knew it herself—but it could not be helped. Saying farewell even for the hour or two they would spend apart was such sweet sorrow that it created an ache in her breast that would not be denied, though she laughed at herself for it.

Shaking her head at her own silliness while at the same time admiring the late blooms with much wistfulness, Elizabeth approached Longbourn in a reverie. It was broken by someone unexpectedly calling her name.

“Lizzy?”

Ahead of her, arm in arm, were her middle sisters. It warmed Elizabeth to see them becoming close of late and she felt that each could benefit from closer association with the other. Mary might encourage Kitty to deeper thinking, and Kitty might draw Mary out into society more frequently.

“Kitty, Mary, you startled me. What do you do here? I thought the pair of you would be at the instrument.”

“We wished to speak to you,” said Mary, darting a glance and a nod at Kitty.

Kitty replied silently with a nod of her own before clearing her throat. “Yes, about

something important.”

Though Elizabeth could not fathom what subject her sisters jointly wished to canvass with her, she could tell by the tight lines of their expressions that it was serious. “Of course. You may speak to me about anything.”

Kitty breathed in deeply. “It is about Lydia.”

Naturally. “What has she done now? You ought not to pay her any heed, whatever it was. She is feeling spiteful of late and has no care for the feelings of others.” Elizabeth strongly suspected that Lydia’s attitude sprang from a sense of envy, but that need not be said amongst the other Bennet sisters. They well understood Lydia’s ways and character after sixteen years of bearing the brunt of them.

Mary merely rolled her eyes, an acknowledgment of Elizabeth’s unnecessary observation. Kitty, though, pressed on with fretful fervour. “Yes, of course, but that is not what I mean. That is, I am speaking not of what she has done, but what she is planning to do. I do not know what it is, exactly, but she means to do whatever it is and I am sure it will be absolutely awful.”

“I beg your pardon?” Elizabeth’s brow creased. Kitty’s conjectures are as nonsensical as Lydia herself!

Kitty turned to Mary, who provided a more succinct explanation. “Apparently, Lydia is plotting some sort of calumny against you and Mr Darcy. We are unclear as to what, precisely, this entails, but we wish to put you on your guard.”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to roll her eyes; she accompanied it with a scoff. “I cannot imagine what she intends to do, but I am certain it will amount to nothing in the end.”

“Lydia can be determined when she sets her mind to something,” Kitty cautioned.

“Do you recall that time Maria Lucas made some disparaging remark about one of Lydia’s frocks? The very next evening Lydia spilt her glass of claret on Maria’s favourite gown. She said it was an accident, but I know she did it deliberately.”

Elizabeth was inclined to quip that Darcy would not be frightened away by a stain upon his trousers, but seeing Kitty’s genuine concern stilled her tongue. “Even so, Lydia has no recourse in this instance. I promise to be careful, but there is nought she can do to cause any more misery than she already has.”

“I hope you are right...”

“I am certain that I am, Kitty, but I thank you for the warning. Come, let us return inside where we might warm up with a cup of tea. It is growing chilly out here.”

With her younger sisters in agreement, she began the march towards the house only to stop short by several yards. There, framed in the doorway, was Mr Wickham with his expression fixed in a sly aspect. His gaze was trained upon Elizabeth, particularly, and she felt an unpleasant shiver tickle up her spine.

“Good morning to you, sisters. I see you have been enjoying the lovely weather.”

Kitty and Mary merely glowered at him in silent suspicion, so it was up to Elizabeth to respond with the social niceties. “Indeed, we have, sir. Now we are looking forward to a cup of tea. If you would excuse us.”

Elizabeth shooed her sisters before her into the house, following closely on their heels. They were allowed to skirt round Mr Wickham, but Elizabeth was not so lucky. Before she could cross the threshold, her elbow was caught in his firm grasp and she was brought to a standstill.

“A moment, if you please, dear Lizzy.” Wickham addressed her with the same sort of

light amiability that used to characterise their interactions. Far from setting her at ease, which she supposed was his purpose, his pretended geniality only further unsettled her.

A glance beyond Wickham showed Elizabeth that her sisters yet lingered in the vestibule, watching their interaction. Emboldened by their support and the desire to shield them from whatever unpleasantness Wickham had in mind, she calmly replied, “Mary and Kitty have demanded my presence in the music room this morning, Mr Wickham. Perhaps we could speak later when we are all gathered for tea.”

The grip on Elizabeth’s arm tightened incrementally before loosening again. “I would much prefer to speak with you now, sister dear. I have something particular I wish to say to you and it is best done in private.” He leant in close enough that his breath disturbed the curls spilling down her forehead. “Perhaps you might show me the hermitage I have heard so much about.”

“Forgive me, I cannot accommodate you at the moment. I am sure Lydia will be happy to tour the gardens with you.” She tugged at her arm, which Wickham relinquished easily. What else could he do when she might raise the alarm otherwise? “Do enjoy the lovely weather.”

Elizabeth quickly stripped off her bonnet, gloves, and spencer and ushered Mary and Kitty down the hall towards the music room. On the way, she fully intended to pay her father’s book-room a visit, now that she had a sneaking suspicion what Wickham—presumably on Lydia’s behalf—was up to.

Darcy had long held the ungentlemanly ambition of punching Wickham squarely in his pretty nose, but never had his restraint been tested as severely as it was presently. If the libertine did not cease his attentions to Elizabeth promptly, Darcy could not be held responsible for the action he had oft dreamt of taking.

There he was, the smug bounder, seated as close to Elizabeth as a separate chair would allow and bestowing her with every ounce of his oily charm. If he was not calling her ‘my dear sister, Lizzy’ with disgusting presumption, he was winking at her as if they shared some naughty secret. He had even showed the galling nerve to touch her once with a light, supposedly accidental brush of his fingertips against her knee, but a growl from Darcy—seated next to Elizabeth on the settee—had prevented him from attempting that much again. A good thing, too, else Wickham might not have left the room with the same number of limbs he could claim upon entering it.

Darcy’s only consolation was that Elizabeth was no longer swayed by Wickham. If the puckered expression on her lovely face was any indication, she was nothing less than disgusted with him. Darcy shared in her revulsion; not only was she full aware of Wickham’s past misdeeds, the reprobate was married to her own sister and flirting with Elizabeth who, herself, was betrothed elsewhere. On top of that, this coquetry was occurring before the very eyes of her intended, to say nothing of the rest of her family! Darcy had not believed himself capable of being astonished by Wickham’s audacity any longer, but clearly he had underestimated his former friend’s capacity for outrageous behaviour.

Though Elizabeth herself parried Wickham’s attempts at flattery, his wife showed no concern for what was occurring on the other side of the parlour from herself, where she sat ostensibly speaking to her mother about wedding plans. Darcy had believed at first that she had yet to notice—Lydia Wickham had never struck him as a particularly observant young lady prior to this vexing day—but at least twice he had caught her making surreptitious hand signals at her husband, ones which appeared to be designed to encourage him. What the devil are they about?

If their plan was to needle Darcy, it was working with spectacular effect. Rarely, if ever, had he been this close to losing his temper in a room full of people. However, he had a sense that something deeper was afoot. He could not, as yet, determine exactly what, but he was put on his guard all the same.

A sharp yelp followed by a pained hiss and bumbling clatter tore Darcy's ponderous gaze from Lydia to Wickham. He had leapt from his seat and sent it skittering behind him, his panicked attention drawn to the wet splotch staining his breeches. Darcy could appreciate Wickham's distress, given the sensitive location of what could only be scalding hot tea seeping into tender skin.

"Oh, do forgive my clumsiness, Mr Wickham!" cried Elizabeth, doing a creditable job of sounding horrified by her blunder.

Wickham's grimace was pained as he said, "Think nothing of it, dear sister." He then hastily excused himself and waddled in an undignified manner out into the hall, whereupon a loud and filthy curse burst from him as if it could be contained no longer.

Mrs Bennet and Lydia both jumped up and followed Wickham from the room while the rest of them watched in a mixture of alarm and disquiet. Bingley and Miss Bennet appeared concerned, Miss Mary astonished, and Miss Catherine chewed mercilessly upon her lower lip. With a quick whisper from one to the other, the latter pair also made a swift exit.

For his part, Darcy was torn between dark amusement at Wickham receiving his just deserts, anger at himself for leaving Elizabeth to defend her own honour, and curiosity as to what, exactly, had just occurred. Most importantly, he needed to know, "Are you well, dearest?"

"Perfectly, I thank you."

"What happened?"

Elizabeth leant close enough to whisper, "Mr Wickham's hand did not know its place and so I was required to remind him of it."

Darcy was on his feet the next instant. “That unconscionable—! I shall call him out for daring to impose himself upon you in such a manner!”

A tug on Darcy’s hand from Elizabeth was enough to force him to resume his seat. She cast Miss Bennet a swift look and a shake of her head before addressing him. “There is no need for that, Fitzwilliam. The matter has been handled and I doubt Mr Wickham will make the same presumption twice. Please, let us not make more of this than necessary.”

Taking care to lower his voice, Darcy countered, “He has no right to touch you and I cannot allow this to stand while saying nothing!”

“No, he does not, and yes, you shall. There is no profit in confronting him at this juncture other than to cause a family rift and further scandal. He and Lydia shall be off to Newcastle soon and we shall not ever have to be in company with him again. I understand your frustration, but do not allow it to overrule your reason.”

Inhaling a deep, calming breath, Darcy allowed that Elizabeth was correct. Much as he longed—ached, really—to teach Wickham a lesson he would not soon forget, it was more important to maintain family harmony. Calling out one’s future brother-in-law would not be conducive to this lofty goal, nor was it a legal redress to an insult. More important, the Bennets of Longbourn could not withstand yet another disgrace so soon after the last. He would contain himself.

Bringing Elizabeth’s hand to his lips, Darcy kissed her fingers. “You are perfectly right, my love. I promise to do nothing untoward, however tempted I may be. That said, we should at least alert your father to the situation.” Though I suppose Mr Bennet will continue to do nothing to curb the Wickhams.

Elizabeth patted him on the hand. “I went to him this morning, but he was out tending to some tenant complaint. I suspect Mary and Kitty have gone to see whether he has

returned.”

“Why did you seek out your father?”

Elizabeth’s eyes darted about the room before she declared, “Come, I should like to show you something out in the garden.”

“Elizabeth.”

“I shall explain all once we have achieved a modicum of privacy.”

Of late, an invitation to stroll in the garden with Elizabeth meant he was in for a sampling of a few of her earthly delights. On this occasion, Darcy rather suspected that he could anticipate something quite different. “I am at your disposal.”

As the day had grown warm, they paused only to don their hats before escaping outdoors into the familiar landscape about Longbourn. In the same fashion as Pemberley, it was allowed to flourish largely as nature had intended it, albeit on a smaller scale. There was some slight artifice in the rose gardens and the artfully rendered ruins off to one side of the lawn, but otherwise it was a small Eden. He thought it an appropriate setting for achieving the paradise which was Elizabeth’s love.

Once they were away from the house and anyone who might be listening at its windows, Elizabeth breathed a deep sigh and broached the subject at hand. “You ought to know that Lydia and Wickham are up to some sort of scheme to mortify us.”

“Yes, I had gathered as much what with that vulgar display in your mother’s parlour. If Wickham’s sudden forfeiture of self-preservation had not alerted me, your sister’s seeming nonchalance at her husband’s flirtation would have done it. There is not a woman alive who would stand for that sort of humiliation and keep her countenance

the way she did unless she were part of the plot. Even then, it still astonishes me that she would be party to it.”

“I wish I were more surprised, but with all she has done lately...” Elizabeth emitted another sigh. “Honestly, I am more weary than shocked.”

“Tell me what happened this morning.”

Before Elizabeth related the incident in question, she reminded him of his promise to rein in any desire for vengeance. It was a good thing, too, for Darcy experienced such a surge of violent rage that he immediately revisited the notion of calling the cad out. The presumption of approaching Elizabeth in that manner...

“You said your father has not yet been informed of this?” Not that Mr Bennet could claim much proficiency in curtailing his wife or daughter’s worst impulses, but he had been firm with Lydia in London and unhappy about allowing her to visit Longbourn at all, proving his indolence had its limits. Surely, with this latest outrageous breach of conduct, he could be convinced to send the Wickhams on their way early.

Elizabeth shook her head. “I went to his book-room myself, but discovered him absent. According to Mr Hill, there was some to-do amongst the tenants regarding the harvest this morning and he was required to attend them. He has not returned as yet, as far as I am aware.”

“When he does, I should like to have a word with him myself.”

Halting in place, Elizabeth turned to Darcy and placed her palm to his chest in a staying motion. “I beg you would not. Papa’s pride has already been deeply wounded by being forced to turn to you for assistance and I believe having you bring this matter to him would only provoke his vexation further. I shall tell him myself as soon

as I am able.”

Darcy tightened his jaw against the compelling urge to inform Elizabeth that her father’s pride ought to be wounded for events unfolding as they had, but he would not wish to harm her sensibilities for all the world. Besides, he had learnt much from his previous experience of insulting her family; she was not unaware of their flaws, but was in fact deeply conscious of them, and did not appreciate having them flung in her face. “Fine, but I must insist upon your making this disclosure without delay.”

Elizabeth promised him faithfully and they resumed their walk at a strolling pace.

“I am afraid that I must further insist that you avoid being alone with Wickham at all costs,” said Darcy. “He has never been known to force himself upon a lady, but then he is rarely met with one who has rebuffed his advances so...emphatically.”

A chagrined titter burst from Elizabeth at Darcy’s euphemistic reference to scalding Wickham’s nether parts with her tea. He chuckled himself before sobering and concluding his speech.

“I know not what he will do in order to achieve his aims of cuckolding me and shaming you, but I urge you to exercise great caution. Much as it pains me, I feel we ought to put off our morning walks until they are gone off to Newcastle.”

“No! Absolutely not.”

“Elizabeth—”

“No, I will not hear of it. I shall not allow my life to be dictated any further by either Mr Wickham or Lydia. It is the only amount of privacy we are afforded and I am of no mind to give it up. Besides, you shall be with me and so there is nothing to fear from either of them.”

“I am honoured that you value our time together so much, but I cannot risk your safety.”

“I have no intention of risking my safety, I am proposing a slight alteration to our usual arrangements. Instead of each of us walking a mile or so and meeting in between estates, you might simply ride over to Longbourn and stable your horse here before we set off on our constitutional. It is not much different from what we do now, except we will forgo any pretence of you postponing your visit until after breakfast.”

Darcy tugged at the knot in his cravat which suddenly felt too tight. “But what will your family think of my arriving so early?”

Fixing him with a look which was at once incredulous and amused, Elizabeth teased, “They will think it a good thing you no longer consider them so stupid as to believe we were not already cavorting about the countryside without proper chaperon. Really, Fitzwilliam, it is no great secret that you meet me on my walks.”

“They know?”

“Of course they know! My mother might not be considered a great intellect, but it does not take one to realise that engaged couples often seek a bit of solitude, or that I am often away from the house for above two hours when previously I would return within one. She has even taken to suggesting a few flattering accoutrements to my walking gowns to better please you.”

He paused, storing away that piece of intrigue for future questioning. “Your father does not object?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “He is usually only just woken when I arrive home, but I am sure it has not escaped his notice. As we are safely engaged, and Papa has never been one to exert his authority when indifference will do, I doubt it bothers him overmuch. All

of this is beside the point, however. Will you meet me here at Longbourn?"

"You know I could never deny you anything, especially when my own interests align with yours. I shall meet you at the gate at our usual time. Do not venture further without me."

"To that I shall happily agree."

Twelve

After a most trying day arbitrating a lengthy and tedious dispute amongst his tenants—one which might have been prevented had he not spent so much time galivanting about after the concerns of his wayward daughters—Bennet was exhausted and ready for solitude. He could not stomach anything to eat, much less the company he would be forced to endure with his meal, and so retired immediately to his chambers upon finally returning to Longbourn. He managed to pen Mrs Bennet a note reassuring her that he was not yet inclined to shuffle of this mortal coil and thus she need not kick up a fuss on his behalf before donning his nightshirt and going directly to bed.

The following morning, he woke earlier than his usual wont, no doubt due to the extra hours spent in repose the evening before. There was still an ache in his hip and a slight pounding in his head, but he was rested enough to face the day.

He dressed quickly and ventured downstairs to his book-room. Upon crossing the threshold, he stopped short. “Mary, Kitty, what do you do here?”

Both girls turned at his entrance and he noted signs of strain upon their features. It was Mary who spoke first. “We needed to speak to you on a matter which cannot be delayed. Since you were unwell last evening, we decided to wait for you to wake this morning.”

Bennet waved his hand towards the pair of chairs placed before his desk and took his customary seat behind it. “What is the matter?”

It was Kitty who answered him. “It is about Lydia and Mr Wickham. They are up to no good.”

Sighing, Bennet sank more deeply into his chair. He ought to have suspected as much. “What have they done this time?”

“It is not about what they have done,” continued Kitty, “more about what they are intending to do. I suppose they have done a bit of something already, but Lizzy managed to pour tea upon Mr Wickham, and then Mr Darcy was there to look after her for the rest of the evening, and Lydia?—”

Bennet held his hands aloft in a pacifying gesture. “Kitty, my dear, I do not understand you. What has Wickham done? Or not done, rather, that has got you so upset.”

Mary took over for her younger sister and, in her concise style, managed to convey the problem with more clarity. She recited the facts of the case, including Lydia’s declaration of intent to Kitty and Wickham’s untoward behaviour to Elizabeth the day before; by the end of her speech, Bennet was thoroughly ready to throttle the couple. I never should have allowed them to visit Longbourn, no matter how much my wife begged. They have brought nothing but trouble with them.

“Girls, I thank you for making me aware of these events. I assure you that I will address the problem.”

Mary and Kitty exchanged glances and, simultaneously, exhaled with visible relief. He sent them on their way and soon had the dubious pleasure of hearing Kitty’s amateur attempts at the pianoforte drifting into his sanctum from down the hall.

Bennet listened to his daughters’ collaborative efforts distractedly as he pondered his next steps. The Wickhams had to go, that much was certain, but it would cause a

mighty furore in the household. Lydia, of course, would object, but so would Mrs Bennet. He did not know or care for Wickham's opinion on being ousted, but he had Mr Hill, the stableboy, and a footman to deal with him if necessary. As little as he looked forward to yet another day of strife, it was the only way. The Wickhams would be sent on their way to Newcastle as soon as a carriage could be hired to take them.

The most bothersome aspect would be dealing with Darcy. Bennet had no doubt that his future son-in-law was champing at the bit to dislodge the Wickhams from their lives, and chafing at his own lack of authority to do so. He could not simply dismiss guests from someone else's estate, after all, though he would surely try if he thought he might get away with it. The man was all officiousness and apparently inclined to arrange the affairs of others when it suited him.

Removing his spectacles and rubbing his eyes, Bennet banished the lingering bitterness he felt over Darcy's prowess. It was not the younger man's fault that Bennet's daughters required the occasional rescue from their own mistakes—it was his own. The person he was most angry with, if he were to be completely honest, was himself. He had patronised and ignored Elizabeth when she had offered him her dire predictions of Lydia's inevitable infamy. He had failed to set proper boundaries for his children. He had allowed his silly wife to fill their heads with nonsense about catching a husband at any cost. Look at where it had got him.

Bennet rested his head against the back of his chair and blinked away the spots dancing before his vision. At least with Elizabeth, he had managed to rectify some of his errors. It was far too late for Lydia, but then it was probably already far too late once he allowed Mrs Bennet to bring her out at such a tender age. It had not seemed a great matter at the time, what with four other daughters out already, but he should have seen that Lydia lacked the maturity for society. She was nought but a spoilt child, remained one still, and he had overlooked it for his own convenience. Now she was married to a man as selfish and unprincipled as she and Bennet did not know

what would become of them.

Regardless, he would no longer risk the welfare of the rest of his family in order to indulge Lydia's hedonistic whims. He would do what he must, what he threatened to do in London, and cast her out. She was now Wickham's responsibility and, for Lydia's sake, Bennet hoped they could manage some semblance of respectability. He loved his youngest child and it pained him to do it, but send her off he must in order to protect the rest.

Thirteen

September 3

As summer began its shift to autumn, early mornings were growing cooler by the day, requiring Elizabeth to bundle herself in more layers for her walks with Darcy. She was far from resentful of this necessity, however, being unusually fond of the combined scent of late blooms, woodsmoke, and a hint of damp. It was an excellent time of year for walking, being neither too hot nor too cold for the exercise, and the air was redolent of apple trees. Today, the third of September, the effect was perhaps a touch marred by the cacophony caused by her younger sisters' music lesson, but she would be away from the house soon enough.

Elizabeth exited Longbourn through the garden door and paused on the step to inhale a deep breath. September was a lovely month, full of vibrancy and plenty, but it was also one of great change. A change in weather, a change in habits, a change in the very world about her. This particular autumn would bring the greatest change of Elizabeth's life so far: marriage and removal from the home she had always known. She greatly looked forward to her life as Mrs Darcy, but her anticipation did not lessen the slight sadness of leaving behind all she had ever known. As the leaves died and drifted away on the wind, so too would her former life as Elizabeth Bennet.

"Good morning, dear sister."

Any likely pleasure in her morning stroll withered away at the sound of an unwelcome voice. Elizabeth's head snapped in the direction from whence it came; she discovered Wickham leaning against the far brick wall, partially obscured in

shadow. What on Earth can he be doing here? I have never seen him rise before noon!

“Good morning, Mr Wickham. You are up and about early this morning.”

He pushed away from the wall, stifling a yawn. “As you had no time for me yesterday, I had hoped to catch you at an hour when there were fewer demands on your time. Shall we walk?”

As Wickham prowled closer, Elizabeth shuffled back an inch or two. The closed door was behind her and through that the main corridor of the house. She had passed Mary and Kitty in the music room and waved on her way past, but with the noise generated by Kitty’s clumsy fingers it was doubtful that anyone would hear her calling out for help should she need it. This, essentially, left her entirely at Wickham’s mercy.

“I am afraid that I am already engaged to walk with Mr Darcy this morning, sir.” She glanced over Wickham’s shoulder to the gate, but espied no assistance incoming through its scrolled iron bars.

Wickham persisted in his approach, a smirk curling at one corner of his lips. “I am sure you can spare me a few minutes of your time. We were always such good friends, and now we are better.”

“Truly, I expect Mr Darcy to arrive at any moment.” Elizabeth felt the door against her back and began grasping blindly for the latch.

“I should never leave you waiting,” Wickham said, resting his forearm against the doorframe above her head and leaning in close. Elizabeth could smell brandy on his breath. “A woman such as you ought to be closely guarded lest some other man attempt to snatch you up.”

“Ah...” Her gloved palm could find no purchase on the latch. “I shall pass along your advice to Mr Darcy when I see him. If you would please excuse me.”

Elizabeth’s attempt to dart round him into the garden was foiled when Wickham blocked her escape route. With one hand on each side of the door, he had neatly trapped her; his grin showed that he knew it. “Trust me, he shall see the error of his ways.”

Wickham lowered his head and lunged for a kiss, but Elizabeth’s short stature gave her an advantage. She ducked beneath his arm and sprinted away down the flagstone path, headed towards the gate. If she could manage to get through it, she would find a myriad of better places to hide than behind a few thorny rose bushes. Darcy was also on his way and she could turn to him for protection. First, however, she needed to get away.

Unfortunately, where Elizabeth’s height had been a boon in wriggling free of Wickham, it was a detriment in a foot race with a taller man. She was also hampered by the weight and drape of her skirts, and so made it no further than a few yards before he was upon her. He grabbed her by the arm and forced her to the wall, where he turned her about and pressed her into the same shadows from which he had earlier emerged.

Elizabeth’s heart pounded in her throat. “Let me go or I shall scream.” And pray that someone hears me! She was even further from potential rescue than before, and there was no guarantee her cries would be heard in time.

Wickham was panting from his exertions, yet still managed to appear smug. “Come now, Lizzy . We are brother and sister, you know. Do not let us quarrel when we might employ our time more pleasurably.”

She opened her mouth, intending to follow through with her threat, but found herself

muffled by Wickham's palm. He shushed her and leant in close, pressing the length of his body against hers.

“This need not be unpleasant. In fact, I can promise that you shall enjoy my attentions far more than Darcy's. I would wager he has no idea what to do with you.” Wickham then plucked free the knot in her bow, allowing the ribbons of her bonnet to dangle freely, and buried his face in the crook of her neck. There, he breathed a deep inhale and shuddered in satisfaction. “You do smell delicious, Sister.”

Before Elizabeth could so much as gag in revulsion, Wickham was wrenched away by an unseen force. The loss of his weight caused her to stagger forward a step, but she retained her balance with some quick footwork and the steadying presence of the brick at her back.

A sharp yelp drew Elizabeth's gaze and she was in time to see Wickham crumple to the ground at Darcy's feet. Darcy's back was to her and she could not see his expression, but it must have been something awful for Wickham to scurry backwards on his hindquarters, begging for clemency. “We were only having a bit of fun! She wanted it?—”

Wickham's pleas were cut short by a swift kick to his gut and he curled in on himself like the worm that he was.

“You dare lay a hand on my betrothed and then besmirch her name?” Darcy's voice was low and dangerous and Elizabeth could hear the strain in it as he wrestled with his control.

Wickham, either too distracted or stupid to recognise that his former friend was a hairbreadth away from bloody retribution, gasped, “If she is turning to me for satisfaction, you have only yourself to bl—” This statement, too, was terminated by the toe of Darcy's boot.

“You loathsome, disgusting...”

Elizabeth rushed forward and grabbed Darcy’s arm, tugging him away from Wickham before he could cause irreparable damage. He attempted to shrug her off, but Elizabeth held firm and leant all of her weight into the endeavour. Had Darcy sincerely wished to, he might have prevailed, but Elizabeth had faith that he would never deny her. At length, he did capitulate and allowed her to lead him out of easy reach of the vile snake writhing on the ground.

When Elizabeth at last managed to separate the men, she grasped Darcy’s face in both of her palms, turned it to her, and nearly stepped back herself. Even during their regrettable interlude at Hunsford, she had never witnessed him look so fierce! Upon meeting her gaze, however, his mien softened and her alarm subsided.

Darcy lightly grasped her wrists where they dangled from his jaw, closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. Upon releasing this breath in a whoosh, he looked at her again, his gaze probing. “Did he hurt you?”

She shook her head. “No, not that I know of. He merely frightened me.”

“Thank God. I do not know what I would have done if...”

“I am well, Fitzwilliam. I am well.”

“You are shaking.”

So she was. Elizabeth had not realised it before he pointed it out, but she was trembling from head to foot and did not think she could stop. Darcy gathered her more fully into his arms and drew her to his chest where she burrowed into him and fought against the urge to sob .

Darcy shushed her and rocked them both back and forth. "There now, you are safe. You are safe, my love..."

"How romantic." Wickham's mocking voice shattered the moment into thousands of tiny shards. He had managed to scrabble up onto a nearby bench while their attention was elsewhere and lounged there looking unkempt and bitter. "She has well and truly caught you, has she not? The great Fitzwilliam Darcy, who looks down upon the rest of us like something he has stepped in. Tell me, Elizabeth, was it his money which ultimately turned your head? Or merely the opportunity to live above a hundred miles from your lamentable family?"

Darcy turned towards Wickham, his face once again set in that terrible scowl. Elizabeth clung to his jacket, ready to intervene anew. "Hold your tongue, else I shall give you another thrashing!"

Wickham obviously was of no mind to heed this profitable advice. With a sneer, he baited them, "It was entirely too easy to make her despise you, barely any effort at all. She already disliked you long before I arrived and it only took a word or two whispered in her ear to make her believe you the blackest soul in Christendom."

Darcy moved to approach Wickham, but Elizabeth held fast to his lapels. To preserve them all from further violence, she attempted to cut Wickham to the quick. "Save your breath to cool your porridge, sir. While Mr Darcy improves upon further acquaintance, I have found that you sink lower in my estimation daily. Now that I know the truth of you both, there is no question as to who is the better man."

Wickham wiped a dribble of blood from his lip and smirked at Elizabeth. "If you had put up less of a struggle, you might have discovered once and for all which of us was the 'better man'."

Darcy was free from Elizabeth's hold before the last vile word had dropped from

Wickham's tongue. His fist connected with the scoundrel's jaw the next instant, sending Wickham tumbling to the ground. Darcy followed and began raining blows upon his foe's cringing body.

“Fitzwilliam, no !”

Fourteen

A loud scream rent the air, jolting Bennet from a light doze. He catapulted from his seat and was across the room in moments, peering out the window where he could see the estate's back garden in its entirety. To his utmost shock, he discovered Darcy and Wickham scuffling on the ground while Elizabeth stood aside, calling for them to stop. With a fleetness of foot Bennet was not aware he still possessed, he dashed from his book-room and traversed the length of the house in mere seconds.

As he darted past the music room, Mary and Kitty poked their heads out into the corridor. It was Kitty who asked, tremulously, "What is happening, Papa?"

"Nothing to be concerned about, girls. Stay inside." So saying, Bennet flung open the garden door and rushed outside.

"Stop that immediately!" he shouted, waving his arms about as he rushed towards the ongoing fracas. "Stop it! What is the meaning of this?"

Though Darcy spared him a glance, Wickham did not and it cost the former his footing. Wickham rolled them over so that Darcy was on his back and began dealing him blows from above. Elizabeth, to Bennet's horror, leapt to her betrothed's defence and attempted to pry Wickham away, but her strength was no match for the task. Wickham flung her off and she stumbled backwards and fell to the ground.

This provided enough distraction to allow Darcy to regain the upper hand and he planted Wickham a facer the moment the blackguard turned back round. Wickham cried out, clutching his face as blood began spurting freely from his nose. Before

Darcy could give Wickham more of what he deserved, Bennet was there and pulling his vexatious son-in-law up by the back of his coat.

“Good Lord!” cried Bennet, heaving Wickham away from Darcy and dropping him unceremoniously to the flagstone path. The lout whimpered and sobbed over the ruination of his pretty face, forcing Bennet to raise his voice as he commanded them to account for their execrable display. “What are the pair of you about? Brawling in the back garden where there are ladies about—what can you be thinking?”

Darcy, rising to a sitting position with Elizabeth’s plainly unnecessary assistance, pointed a finger at Wickham’s squirming form. “Defending your daughter’s honour! I caught that cur manhandling Elizabeth. Had I not arrived when I did, you can be assured that something yet more foul would have befallen her.”

Bennet’s heart seized in an icy grip and his gaze flew to where Elizabeth crouched at Darcy’s side. Now that he looked closely at her, it was clear she was more overcome than he would have expected in the given circumstances. She shook like a leaf caught in a breeze, her bonnet was missing, and half her hair had fallen from its pins. Her eyes were also red-rimmed, as if she had been crying; his brave, bold Lizzy rarely cried. “Is this true?”

Elizabeth swallowed and nodded her head. Darcy clasped her hand where it gripped at his sleeve and she leant into him.

Full of the deepest rage he had ever experienced—far more than he had felt upon learning of Lydia’s recent escapades—Bennet clenched his fists. Whether he meant to restrain himself or use them to pummel Wickham, even he could not say, but first he demanded an explanation from the coward at his feet. “What have you to say to this accusation, Wickham?”

Wickham kept one hand over his freely bleeding nose and used the other to point at

Elizabeth and Darcy, who were presently rising to their feet. “They are lying! I was merely talking to Elizabeth when Darcy attacked me for no reason. I have half a mind to call the magistrate!”

“If anyone is to face justice, it shall be you,” growled Darcy, still cradling Elizabeth to his side.

“I swear to you, I meant no harm! Darcy is only out to ruin me, much as he always has.”

“He is lying!”

The entire party turned to find Mary and Kitty, against Bennet’s expressly given orders, standing next to the back door of the manor with Jane and a gaggle of servants peering into the garden. Kitty had a trembling finger raised and pointed at Wickham in accusation.

“He meant to do something awful, I know it! Worse, Lydia put him up to it! She confessed it herself.”

Attention returned to Wickham, whose eyes were darting from face to face as if searching out a sympathetic supporter. He found none. “I...I swear, it is not as it appears. We were only having some fun.”

Bennet scoffed. “Forgive me, but I believe my family has suffered enough from your sense of fun for one lifetime. I cannot say I care for it myself, nor do I wish my daughters further exposed to it. You and Lydia are no longer welcome here.” He turned away from Wickham and called to the maid who was skulking behind Mary and Kitty. “Sarah, go to the stables and bring John and Robert here immediately. I want this miscreant watched over until we can send him on his way.”

Sarah scurried off to do as bid, disappearing round the corner of the house.

“Mrs Hill,” Bennet’s gaze shifted to the housekeeper, who paled at being addressed. “Go wake Mrs Wickham and assist her in packing their trunks. Our visitors will be departing from Longbourn shortly.”

“I will go with her, Papa,” Jane said, looking grimmer than Bennet could ever recall. “Two may be necessary for this task.”

“Thank you, Jane. Perhaps you can keep Lydia’s likely fury to a minimum.”

As the two women strode off into Longbourn, Bennet turned to face Darcy and Elizabeth, standing together near the gate. “Darcy, if you would please take Elizabeth inside, I would be most grateful. I shall meet with you in my book-room as soon as I have seen to some necessary business.”

Darcy nodded and guided Elizabeth towards the house where her sisters waited to embrace her. While this occurred, he and Bennet exchanged a glance and a nod, cementing their unspoken understanding. They might not agree in every instance, nor were they ever likely to be great friends, but they were united in their care for Elizabeth.

Though Darcy had intended to usher Elizabeth upstairs with her sisters to have a rest, she had insisted upon joining him in Mr Bennet’s sanctum. “I was the victim in all this,” she had argued, “and deserve to have a say in what happens next.” She was correct, of course, and so they sat holding hands, her head resting on Darcy’s shoulder, until Mr Bennet could attend them.

They did not have to wait long, for within a quarter hour, a harried Mr Bennet came into the room and headed directly for his chair. He all but fell into it, seemingly boneless in his exhaustion.

They allowed him a few moments to collect himself and, once he had, he got directly to the point, much to Darcy's satisfaction. "Wickham is being watched over by two stable lads until we can decide what to do with him. I have some ideas, though of course I desire your opinion."

"Of course," said Darcy. He was seconded by Elizabeth's nod.

"The first option is that we can call in the magistrate and see Wickham charged with assault. Are you injured, my dear?" Mr Bennet leant forward across his desk, eyeing his daughter keenly.

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, merely shaken up. He did not hurt me."

Mr Bennet unleashed a relieved breath. "Thank God for small favours. However, this does make any case against him far less likely to see him punished, for there is no apparent damage. There is plenty of testimony, of course, but with his own injuries, he can claim that it was all a misunderstanding or that he was the one under attack. He is a charming lout, one must give him that."

Darcy sneered. "I suppose we must."

"There is also the possible threat of scandal if we go that route. As much as I would love to see him rightly punished for attempting to harm Lizzy?—"

The three of them were startled by a loud shriek which reverberated through the room. This was followed immediately by an equally loud diatribe which was largely indistinct in its fast-paced vehemence.

"I suppose Lydia must have her part in the conversation," Elizabeth noted with a dryness reminiscent of her father. A bark of laughter burst from Darcy at the unexpected reminder of his querulous aunt. He hastily covered it with a cough, but

the quirk of Elizabeth's lips suggested she was unconvinced by his ploy.

Mr Bennet shook his head. "Where was I? Oh, yes. As much as I would prefer to see Wickham locked up, I do not believe it wise to open ourselves to further scandal. Should he actually be sent to gaol, not only would he bring us further disgrace, but we would then be saddled with Lydia's care."

Darcy refused to dwell on that possibility. "What is your suggestion?"

"That we send them both on to Newcastle where they can find their own way. I shall cut all ties and allow them to finally face the consequences of their own misdeeds."

"I would wish to call him out," grumbled Darcy. Beside him, Elizabeth drew in a sharp breath. "But duelling is, of course, against the law and would have even worse consequences than seeing him arrested. I think your plan is likely the best one we have available to us, however much I should prefer to exact my pound of flesh."

"I am of the same mind. 'Tis a shame there is not more we can do without first harming ourselves in the process. I dislike the notion of setting them free upon an unsuspecting society."

Elizabeth bit her lip. "Ought we not do something to prevent them preying upon others?"

"Fear not, my love." Darcy squeezed her hand gently. "I am in correspondence with Wickham's superior officer and rest assured that I shall send him a full report of his capacity for mischief. In addition, I have been collecting his debts for many years and can always call them in should he ever become too unruly. I shall be sure to inform him of that fact before they leave."

"That is a relief."

“Do we have an accord, then?” Mr Bennet held out his hand to shake, and Darcy took it.

An hour or so later, Darcy had the very great pleasure of shoving Wickham into a hired carriage. The reprobate had the gall to complain of mistreatment, but his squawking was blessedly dampened by the swelling of his nose and the carriage door slamming closed upon it. Darcy allowed himself a satisfied smirk when Wickham yelped and covered his mangled snout, which would likely never look quite the same again. He could only hope that the damage done would render Wickham less pleasing to the female eye in future.

“Let me go! Mama, do not allow them to do this to me— Mama !”

Lydia Wickham, hauled out of her childhood home by her arm, was not content to go as quietly as her husband. She dug her heels into the gravel path and threw her entire weight into resisting, but she was no match for her father’s will to see her gone. Mrs Bennet, though she sniffled into her lacy handkerchief, did nothing to assist her youngest; she merely leant deeper into Jane Bennet’s coddling embrace as Mr Bennet wrenched open the carriage door and thrust her inside.

“How can you do this to me, your own daughter?” she screeched in her father’s face.

Mr Bennet barked at her to sit down. Either from alarm or surprise, the girl collapsed onto the bench next to her moaning husband. “I went against my instincts and allowed you to visit your family before sending you off to Newcastle, and look where it has got me in merely a few days. Never again, do you hear me? Begone from here and do not return.”

“You are awful and I hate you!”

Darcy’s gratification at the scene ebbed at the stricken look upon Mr Bennet’s mien,

but his future father-in-law faltered only a moment. “It pains me to hear it, but such is the price I willingly pay to restore order at Longbourn. I cannot have you here attempting to harm your sisters or corrupting them with your immoral behaviour. What I do now I do to protect the rest of the family.”

Her face, red and twisted into an unholy snarl, bore no resemblance to the pretty, lively girl she had once been. Darcy thought they might be witnessing her true self, the one she ably hid within. “You are a weak, stupid old man and I hope I never see you again. You never cared a jot for me and now you are throwing me away because your precious Lizzy got what she so richly deserved. She and Mr Darcy are a perfect match with all their snobbery.”

Mr Bennet sighed, shook his head, and shut the door on his daughter. He ordered the driver to walk on and, with as little fanfare as possible, the Wickhams were gone.

Darcy stepped closer to Mr Bennet; together they watched the carriage until it had disappeared round the bend, leaving nought but a cloud of dust in its wake. They stared into the distance long after it was out of sight and the ladies had returned indoors, each introspective.

Clearing his throat, Darcy made an attempt to comfort Mr Bennet, though it was an awkward business. “You did the right thing.”

“Of course I did, but it does not make the task any easier. Lydia might be a hateful girl, but she is what she is because I did not take the trouble to check her sooner. Because I did not, my entire family was nearly brought to ruin.”

“You are too severe upon yourself.”

“Am I? Hardly. That girl has been spoilt since the day she was born and I did nothing to curb it. Is it any wonder she has turned out the way she has?”

Witnessing the despondency writ across Mr Bennet's features, Darcy clapped him upon the shoulder. "Elizabeth gave me some advice the other day which I believe applies here. She said that we—she and I, that is—have a tendency to burden ourselves with all the blame of a situation, regardless of it being shared elsewhere. I believe, in this instance, you take too much upon your shoulders."

Mr Bennet scoffed. "Who is to suffer but myself? This has been my own doing and I ought to feel it."

"By that same token, I ought to take responsibility for Wickham's misdeeds," said Darcy. "Perhaps not for his actions, but for not warning others of his proclivities. If I had, he would never have been allowed to prey upon your family the way that he did."

"The perfect Mr Darcy admits a fault? I should never have believed it had I not heard it for myself."

Ignoring the dig, Darcy continued, "The point is, I have just as much cause to castigate myself as you do, yet I do not believe that either of us is actually at fault. We speak of what we might have done to counter their abhorrent conduct, but they are the ones who have acted wrongly and shown no remorse. Yes, there are things we might have done differently, but in the end, the behaviour of the Wickhams is upon their shoulders alone."

Mr Bennet sighed and shook his head. "Come, let us return inside. I know we are both anxious to check on Elizabeth's welfare, and a cup of tea would not be amiss either."

Fifteen

“Are you well, my love?”

Elizabeth smiled even as she rolled her eyes. “Since the last time that you asked? Yes, I am perfectly well. I have not been injured, I have had more than enough tea to soothe my nerves, and I do not feel even the slightest bit chilled. Really, Fitzwilliam, you were the one engaged in fisticuffs this morning. How are your hands?”

“Since the last time that you asked?” He smiled when Elizabeth swatted him for his impertinent remark. “Truthfully, they ache a little, but not terribly so. I do not believe I am any worse for wear than that.”

Perhaps his derriere would sport a bruise for a day or two because of Wickham knocking him to the ground, but he could hardly say that in mixed company. After sending the Wickhams into exile, the day at Longbourn had largely returned to its usual routine. Mrs Bennet was more aflutter than usual, of course, but with Miss Bennet and Bingley about to cosset her, she was reasonably calm. Miss Mary and Miss Catherine had returned to their music lesson once the excitement had died down and Darcy’s horse, which he had abandoned to the fields beyond the garden wall in order to fly to Elizabeth’s rescue, had been easily rounded up and taken to the stables. Mr Bennet, after first checking on Elizabeth, had disappeared into his book-room for some well-earned solitude.

“Here, let me have a look.” Taking one of his hands and bringing it into her lap, Elizabeth peeled away his glove. Upon revealing the scrapes and purpling bruises underneath she gasped aloud. “Oh! Why did you not tell me you were in such pain?”

Darcy grimaced at his own stupidity. Had he realised the extent of the damage, he would never have allowed her to witness it. “Because I was not... It barely hurts at—ow!” He flinched when Elizabeth’s fingers skated across the enflamed ridges of his knuckles.

She quirked a knowing brow at him. “Oh, yes, I can see that you are perfectly well.”

“It is nothing, truly.”

“All the same, I would not like to see your wounds become infected. Come, I have just the thing in the stillroom.”

Without relinquishing his hand, Elizabeth stood and used it to tug him out of the parlour and down the hall. It seemed at first as if she were about to take him back out into the garden, a place he had no interest in visiting again that day, but she took a sharp left at the last moment and they entered a small room at the far end of the corridor.

This being more of a female domain, Darcy looked about him with interest; there was a large, rough-hewn table down the centre of the space, a shelf full of supplies against one wall, stained aprons dangling from a hook by the door, and various plants and herbs hanging from the ceiling. He thought he recognised one as lavender, but could not divine the others as he was no botanist.

“Sit here,” Elizabeth instructed, planting him upon a stool she pulled out from beneath the table. He acquiesced without complaint as she then bustled away, searching the shelf for whatever it was she needed.

She returned to him, a jar and a rag in hand, and pulled out a stool for herself. She then retook possession of his hand and began her ministrations.

Darcy, at first considering himself fortunate to be alone with his lovely Elizabeth, decided he had been too hasty. The ointment she was dabbing on his knuckles stung like the dickens and it took all of his manly restraint to prevent himself from crying out. He could not help a sharp hiss when she applied it to a particularly sensitive laceration.

“Men consider themselves so valiant in attaining an injury, yet are quick to complain once it comes time to tend it.”

“Easy for you to say.”

Elizabeth paused her ministrations to smirk up at him. “I am no stranger to cuts and bruises myself, sir. I was always fond of boys’ games as a girl and paid the consequences for it. Now hold still.”

Darcy grumbled an indistinct response and withheld any further complaints. “Tell me sincerely, are you recovered from your ordeal this morning? Ought I have called Wickham out? I was sorely tempted, as you know.”

Though she sighed, Elizabeth did not relinquish her task. “No, I cannot see how that would have helped anyone. You and my father were right in sending them away, in my opinion. As much as the Wickhams have injured us, I should not like to see them harmed in return, nor do I wish them to cause us any more trouble. Besides, I strongly suspect that they shall be each other’s punishment.”

“I had not thought of that.”

“Let me bandage this for you.”

Darcy protested the need, but Elizabeth was already rummaging through her stock of rags for a clean one. She brought it back amidst his protests and proceeded to wrap

his wounded hand.

“There,” she proclaimed once she had finished. “I shall be sending a jar of ointment back to Netherfield with you so that your valet can change out your dressings.”

“I believe I shall conveniently forget it here.”

Elizabeth chuckled and wagged a scolding finger at him. “I had already intended to pass it along to Mr Bingley. He shall see to it that it ends up in the correct hands.”

“Pain and treachery? I suppose this is the sort of treatment I can anticipate as your husband.”

“Only when it is called for.” Elizabeth punctuated her cheery remark with a kiss to his cheek before standing up and moving to tidy her things.

When she looked away, Darcy found the courage to speak what had been plaguing his mind since he first spotted Wickham accosting Elizabeth. “I owe you an apology for not arriving sooner. He should never have been allowed to prey upon you.”

Elizabeth did not so much as look up from her chore. “And I should not have left the house until you arrived, regardless of my surety that he remained abed. We both underestimated his determination to get me alone, so do not berate yourself.”

“But—”

“Fitzwilliam.” Darcy stilled at Elizabeth’s tone and the steely way she regarded him. “We have already spoken about our common tendency to blame ourselves when others are at fault. Let us leave it at that.”

Darcy exhaled a soft laugh, though he was hardly amused. “I said something similar

to your father not above an hour ago.”

“Good advice bears repeating. Now,” she clapped her hands together, “let us leave off this nasty business of the Wickhams, for I am tired of speaking of them. We need never see them again unless we should wish it, and I cannot fathom a time when that will come to pass. I am done with them.”

She turned her back to him, ostensibly to rearrange the items on her worktable, but Darcy distinctly heard a shuddering sob. He quickly stood, folded her into his arms from behind, and held her as her weeping intensified, transforming from small sniffles into wracking convulsions. She turned into him and Darcy cradled her head to his chest.

When the worst of her anguish had subsided, Elizabeth offered him a hiccupping apology. “F-Forgive me. I have told myself over and over that Lydia was never the girl I believed her to be, that I am better off without her, but...”

“She is still your sister.”

Elizabeth nodded against his lapel.

“I know it is not quite the same, but I have often felt likewise about Wickham. We were once friends, you know, though it has been many years since I could consider him so. I even believed him worth saving until he attempted to take advantage of Georgiana. It is why I gave him the money in place of the living. As much as I wanted him to be the boy I thought I knew, I do not think he ever was. Rather, I think he merely pretended to be whatever a person most wanted to see in order to fleece them for whatever he could get.”

“Do you think Lydia is the same?”

He shrugged. “Not exactly, no, but they both show the same sort of selfishness and disdain for the feelings of others. They are much alike in that respect.”

“And to think I once accused you of the same.”

Darcy winced at the memory. He had not intended to draw a comparison to her recriminations from that day in Hunsford, though her words would always taunt him at the back of his mind. “You were not wholly incorrect in your estimation. I did separate my friend from your sister and rejoiced in my success, to say nothing of the awful manners I displayed towards you.”

Elizabeth shook her head and tilted it back to look at him directly. “No, you are nothing like the Wickhams. Even then, your intentions were good, for the most part. I might take umbrage with you for your manner, but you never intended to hurt anyone—and that makes all the difference.”

“Come, let us return to the others.”

She held fast to his waistcoat and tipped her face up to him. “Not just yet. I am not sufficiently comforted.”

“Then allow me to correct that.”

Their lips met, at first, in a chaste fashion, but their intense emotions from the day quickly turned their embrace more fervent. They were on the cusp of indulging too far when they were called back to propriety by an embarrassed giggle.

Darcy leapt away from Elizabeth and removed his wandering hands to a more innocent position by his sides. In the open doorway were Elizabeth’s younger sisters, one of whom was badly concealing her mirth while the other scowled at them in disapproval.

“Mary, Kitty,” said Elizabeth as she slipped off the table and straightened her skirts. The only evidence of her embarrassment was the bright red stain upon her cheeks. “Are you finished with your practise?”

Miss Catherine snorted and covered her mouth with both her hands. Her elder sister replied, primly, for the both of them. “Yes, several minutes ago. I suppose you failed to notice.”

Chagrined, Elizabeth huffed a laugh. “I suppose we did.”

It was awkwardly agreed by all present that a walk to Meryton would be most refreshing at that juncture and so the ladies disbanded from the stillroom to collect their things. Darcy lingered behind a few extra minutes to cool his ardour before setting off to do the same.

Derbyshire, Autumn 1813

“The post, ma’am.”

Elizabeth flashed a quick smile at the butler and accepted the letters he presented to her on a silver salver. He then retreated to attend to his duties elsewhere while she flipped through the short stack of correspondence.

“Have you received word from the Gardiners, my love?” asked Darcy from the seat beside her as he buttered his toast.

It was their custom to break their fasts together before necessarily being divided for much of the day with their own concerns. For the master of Pemberley, there were always letters to be written, tenants to visit, and general business to conduct, while the grand estate’s mistress could often be found tending to the household accounts, writing menus, and seeing to charitable endeavours for the less fortunate. Though they spent many hours apart, the Darcys always began and ended the day in one another’s sole company.

“Yes, at last!” Elizabeth replied upon spotting her own name in the light, feminine hand of her aunt. “I do hope my uncle was able to arrange his business affairs so that he might travel with my aunt and the children. I hate the idea of him spending Christmas alone in Gracechurch Street.”

The missive did, indeed, contain welcome news, and Elizabeth noted she must alert Mrs Reynolds that all of the Gardiners would be spending Yuletide at Pemberley. The dear housekeeper was almost certainly mindful of it already, but naturally she would

wish for a confirmation.

“Kitty writes,” said Elizabeth as she scanned the contents of her next letter, “that the drawing master we engaged for her and Mary is wonderful. Mary is not so keen on him, but I suppose she prefers to focus on her music. Look here, they are learning carols!”

“I look forward to hearing them play. Does it say which songs they are currently practising? Georgiana will want to know when she arrives.”

“Mm, there are a few mentioned, I shall pass the list along. Of course, we presuppose that she and Mary have not already corresponded at length on the subject and prepared a full concert for us.”

Their younger sisters swapped letters so frequently, it would not surprise Elizabeth one jot if that was their intended plan for the holiday visit. She could easily picture Georgiana and Mary taking turns at the keys while Kitty warbled a pretty tune for company. It warmed her heart to see them all getting on famously with one another, especially for Georgiana’s sake; the poor girl had always wished for sisters and now had a surfeit of them.

“You are most probably right, my dear. Does your mother have anything interesting to say?”

Elizabeth stroked the curve of her slightly distended belly as she searched out Mrs Bennet’s latest missive. “No doubt more advice on begetting you an heir. She will be immensely pleased to learn that I have taken it to heart and?—”

She was rendered immediately silent upon beholding the direction of an envelope buried in the middle of her stack. It was sloppy and painfully familiar. She cracked the seal and read:

Dear Lizzy,

A little birdie told me that the entire family is gathering at Pemberley for Christmas. I have yet to receive an invitation, though I am sure it was merely misdirected because we have changed quarters again. I have included our new direction at the bottom of this page and you may send a carriage for me there at your convenience. My dear Wickie, I am sure, can shift for himself for a few weeks since this same birdie believes him to be unwelcome. Oh, but do also make sure to send me some money by return post, for I do not think I have quite enough to travel all that way in comfort and, naturally, I shall need a new gown for the festive season. A few pounds will do. Think of it as an early Christmas present.

Yours it was far too little, too late for clemency. She had long ago ceased to respond to any of Lydia's entreaties for it only encouraged her to make more.

Taking the note from her hand, Darcy carried it across the room and deposited it in the same place as all of Mrs Wickham's previous letters—the fire grate. He jabbed viciously at it once or twice with the poker and then resumed his seat at the breakfast table.

“I shall never understand where she finds the gall to come to us with her hand out after what she has done. Wickham, at least, seems to realise that avenue is closed.”

Sighing, Elizabeth took Darcy's hand and squeezed it, hoping to soothe his ire. “Lydia has never been known for learning a lesson. She might give up in a year or two, if we are lucky.”

Darcy shook his head and then took up Elizabeth's hand, bestowing a soft kiss upon it. “Forget the Wickhams and their nonsense. What does your father have to say?”

“Knowing him, his letter will be full of wild speculation about the library. I have been teasing him mercilessly and refusing to give him any details before he arrives.

He might remember to ask after our health in a postscript, but I would not count upon it.”

“You ought not tease a man over books, Elizabeth. ’Tis cruel.”

Elizabeth laughed at this ungenerous portrait of herself. “I recall a time not too long past that you and my father did not care for one another! Now you have taken his part against mine. For shame, sir.”

“Books are a serious matter.” A smirk curled along the line of Darcy’s lips.

In the year since their marriage, Darcy and Mr Bennet had reached a *détente* of sorts. They were very different men in many ways, but they were united in their love of books and Elizabeth. This created enough common ground for them to rub along together tolerably well, at least on those occasions when they must endure one another.

Tossing her head with dramatic flourish, Elizabeth rose from her seat and made as if to leave the room. “Betrayed by my own husband! This is not to be borne.”

Her escape was immediately hampered by Darcy taking possession of her hand and tugging her into his lap. Elizabeth giggled against her husband’s lips and squirmed in his hold, but eventually ceded to the lure of his ardent affections.

Fin