







# Mr Darcy's Second Chance

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Mr Darcys Second Chance is a compilation of three previously published Pride and Prejudice Variations.

*A More Agreeable Man* by Jan Ashton

When Jane Bennet returns from a holiday at Ramsgate engaged to a handsome and charming young man, Elizabeth Bennet is astonished to find herself the only person at Longbourn questioning their attachment. Fitzwilliam Darcy arrives in Hertfordshire he discovers that George Wickham has impugned his character and is now betrothed to a lady whose enchanting younger sister has both decided opinions and strikingly beautiful eyes. Elizabeth and Darcys doubts over the misalliance lead them to set aside their mutual distrust and determine the truth about Wickham's true intentions, but the more they discover, the deeper they find their own hearts entangled.

*A Golden Opportunity* by J Marie Croft

Fitzwilliam Darcy longs to escape Rosings Park following his failed proposal of marriage to Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Alas it cannot be; both he and Elizabeth having been required to remain for an additional ten days for a private ball in celebration of the birthday of Miss Anne de Bourgh.

As the days progress, Darcy finds himself increasingly alarmed by the strange happenings that he sees, and that Lady Catherine reports, in Kent. His cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh has thrown off the meekness and ennui of her earlier years. Displaying unprecedented liveliness and rebellion, she has been visiting the master gardener's cottage, claiming she merely seeks his advice about her herbarium, but both Lady Catherine and Darcy suspect something more scandalous is afoot. To add to this, there seems to be some sort of thievery or vandalism occurring in the house, with precious items being pilfered or damaged. Darcy's days are further complicated when he realizes that he may have a rival for Elizabeth's affection, a young gentleman who is the owner of an estate near to Rosings.

There seems to be a potential scandal or heartache everywhere Darcy turns, but somewhere in midst of it all springs some hope. Can he and Elizabeth untangle all their misunderstandings or will some sort of disaster be their unravelling?

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

One

August 9, 1811

Elizabeth Bennet had never been parted from her elder sister for more than a fortnight, but any hint of dismay she felt for their imminent separation was overcome by her eagerness for adventure, for each was to embark on a holiday. Elizabeth's journey to the Lakes had been long planned; Jane's trip had been more hastily arranged, and it was unsettling to the calm sensibilities of the eldest Bennet sister.

Although Longbourn's breakfast room was rarely serene, today's departures had stirred emotions. As Mrs Bennet prattled on about the marriageable young men Jane would meet, Elizabeth eyed her sister's untouched breakfast.

"Jane, you must eat. The dining table is far preferable to a rocking carriage for eating toast."

Jane's answering smile was more nervous than amused, but she did manage a bite of ham.

"Lizzy, your own plate is in need of attention," said Mr Bennet from behind his newspaper. "If I am to be without you and Jane, do not let it be said I sent you off hungry."

Elizabeth smirked, and Jane looked easier when she replied, "We shall not damage your reputation or ours, Papa."

“Thank you, dear girl. Now do as Lizzy says and eat something.”

A few minutes later, their plates somewhat less full, Elizabeth patted Jane’s hand. “I order you not to miss me, nor to feel any guilt while you enjoy your view of the sea.”

“I shall miss you, and I expect letters reporting on all that you see travelling with the Gardiners.”

“You will make me quite jealous if you grow to be an excellent swimmer.”

“Oh, I do not intend to try sea-bathing, it is too?—”

“Jane, I shall not forgive you if you do not try sea-bathing,” cried Lydia. “I wish to go sea-bathing. I would be excellent at it.”

“As would I,” agreed Kitty, “if the water were not too cold.”

Mr Bennet set down his paper and reached for his teacup. “Alas, dear girl, the sea is always cold. It keeps the fish fresh for us.”

Lydia was undeterred. “I would never eat fish again if I could go sea-bathing!”

Elizabeth did not return her father’s sardonic smile. He was not pleased to be losing his two eldest daughters for the next few weeks, and he had made an odd comment or two about his own desire to travel. She suspected the prospect of the four little Gardiner children at Longbourn, supervised only by her mother and three younger sisters, gave him pause; young Henry had been too fond of pulling out books and running off with them on their last visit.

“Jane, you must be careful not to take a chill,” said her mother. “Do not swallow the sea water, as it is harmful to your lungs. And you must rinse your skin and hair after

bathing! You cannot allow the salt to affect your complexion!”

“Mary King is foolish for choosing Jane as her particular friend,” said Lydia, stabbing unhappily at her egg. “Jane is far more handsome and a full three years older than her. No one will bother with dull, freckled Mary.”

Elizabeth, eager to spare Jane more of Lydia’s invectives, glanced at the clock and was relieved to find it was nearly eleven. The carriage owned by Mary King’s uncle soon would arrive.

“Come, Jane. We must see that all is ready with your luggage.” She tugged her sister from her chair and into the hall, where a small trunk, a hatbox, and a valise sat waiting. “Do you promise you will write to me every day, telling stories of the pirates and mermaids you meet and the astonishing sunsets you see?”

“Of course,” Jane replied, laughing. “But you must write to me of rocks and lakes and dashing highwaymen!”

“The lakes are nothing to the sea, but I am quite eager to see them.” Elizabeth was a little envious of all she imagined her demure older sister would experience at the sea—if only Jane would allow herself to be a bit more open and daring.

“You will be in the best company with the Gardiners,” said Jane. “I know Mary but a little?—”

“This is exactly what you need, dearest. Meryton has grown dull. The seaside offers opportunities to meet people and enjoy new sights and experiences.” Elizabeth clasped her sister’s hands.

“You will have a wonderful time in Ramsgate!”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

Two

Ludley House, Ramsgate

August 15

Dear Brother,

I continue to enjoy my time here, much of it due to having made two new acquaintances in the most unexpected circumstance. Two days ago, Mrs Younge and I were enjoying ices on the promenade when we heard a scream from the direction of the bathing machines. Alarmed, we moved quickly to the rail to discover it was merely a young lady's shocking encounter with the cold sea water. She soon calmed, although her shrieks continued. We began to laugh with another young lady, a red-haired girl slightly older than myself, and her friend, truly the most beautiful lady I have ever seen.

Do not be uneasy—they are gently bred, properly chaperoned by one lady's uncle and her lady's maid, and enjoying a short holiday away from their families.

Pleased that his sister was doing the most unexpected thing—talking to strangers, who, blessedly, were somewhat similar in station and age—Fitzwilliam Darcy tucked the letter into his book. He would pen a reply this afternoon, offering up questions and praise for Georgiana while providing his own desultory news on events at Pierce Hall. It was among the dulllest house parties he had attended, lacking stimulating conversation, well-stocked ponds, and intelligent young ladies. Worse, his rooms retained a musty smell no matter how often he had them aired. He would be pleased

to return to Pemberley the following week and host a small party of his own, more compliant, friends. Two days later, another letter arrived.

Dear Brother,

I must again thank you for sending me to Ramsgate for the month. I am happy here in the sea air, and our little house is quite comfortable. My new friends have brought me such joy. Miss Bennet encourages my sketching and has agreed to pose for me in our sunny sitting room. She is truly beautiful, and it will be a challenge to capture it. Miss King is equally kind and has a lovely voice. Her uncle is a great enthusiast for the opera; she attends with him when in town.

Not since she was eight years old and caring for a new puppy had Georgiana written to him with such joy. These ladies may be strangers to him, but they were providing his sister with better company—and perhaps truer friendship—than she had enjoyed in years. Pray, let them be sincere feelings of friendship. Mrs Younge was a capable companion, if, in his opinion, rather austere; she remained in grey half-mourning gowns nearly four years after her husband's death. It gave him relief to see Georgiana finding pleasure with ladies closer to her own age.

As it rained for the following three days, Darcy managed to find entertainment in the library and billiard room and at the stables, where he spent most of an afternoon with a groom discussing the bloodlines of Richardson's two thoroughbreds.

After enduring a long night of cards and charades, Darcy sat at the breakfast table drinking coffee to fight off the headache stirred by the generously shared—but highly questionable—offerings from the wine cellar. A footman approached; the sun glinting off the silver salver made Darcy's pain worsen but he reached eagerly for his letters. Pleased to see another missive so soon from Georgiana, he withdrew from the breakfast room and walked to the terrace to clear his head in the fresh air. Settling onto a bench, he opened the letter.



Dear Brother,

The weather has taken a turn. The sea no longer attracts my notice, nor do the people I have met. My new friends no longer have time for me, and my old acquaintances appear to be less interested in my company than even a day ago.

The sense of helplessness that had beset Darcy months earlier, when he had taken Georgiana from school after one too many lonely letters, surged within him.

The ladies I mentioned previously, who were kind and intelligent, have taken up with more captivating company than I provide; their attention is diverted away from me. I am pained by it yet can blame only myself for being a dull friend.

Darcy cursed. These ladies were no better than the school friends who had turned their backs on his sister. Shyness did not equate with dullness!

From the start, Mrs Younge was suspicious of their motives in befriending me. She is angered on my behalf, though perhaps it is that she wishes for better conversation than I am capable of offering.

Cursing, Darcy wondered whether Mrs Younge truly had Georgiana's interests at heart; did these genteel young ladies turn away because they felt unwelcomed by his sister's severe companion? Why would she not encourage a friendship?

Fitzwilliam, I now must make a confession to you and ask whether you have suffered from a betrayal common to what now affects me. The object of their mutual fascination is your old friend George Wickham. Days ago, he was all friendliness and warmth to me; he called me as beautiful as our mother. Yet since he begged I introduce him to my friends, he has revealed a fickle nature which may be known to you. He treats me as a child and prefers the company of Miss Bennet. As kind as she remains to me, Mr Wickham now occupies her time, and I realise the insincerity of

everyone ? —

Darcy shook his head in disbelief. Wickham? Bloody hell! How dare he—! As fear rushed through his veins, he rose to his feet, almost shaking with dread as visions of the man's past debaucheries rose in his mind. My dear girl!

With luck and good roads, he could arrive in Ramsgate by tomorrow morning.

Elizabeth spent the first fortnight of her trip to the Lakes marvelling over the beauty of the vistas, first to her aunt and uncle, then in missives to her family. Of those remaining at home, only Kitty proved a diligent correspondent, surprising Elizabeth with her own observations—and complaints—about life at Longbourn. Jane was proving more dilatory with her replies, though her first few letters had proved her enjoyment of the pleasures she found at the seaside. Although she lacked Elizabeth's skill in describing people and events, she mentioned attending an assembly, conversing with neighbours, making new acquaintances with other young ladies, and enjoying the unusual feel of sand on her stockinged feet. It was the most shocking thing Jane had ever done, and Elizabeth was glad for her.

Her own holiday turned less adventurous when Mrs Gardiner, who had endured the rattling of the carriage despite carrying her fifth babe and fretted over the children she had left in Mrs Bennet's care, could no longer feel comfortable. The trio began their journey back to Hertfordshire six days early, then—with the roads muddy—remained two days longer than planned at an inn in Stoke-on-Trent.

On their second afternoon there, Elizabeth let out a happy cry when the maid delivered two long-delayed letters from Jane. They had been sent to the inn at Keswick, where they had earlier stayed, before their new direction was given and the letter forwarded on.

“Thank goodness we are here, rather than travelling,” Elizabeth said to her aunt as

she curled up in a chair by the sitting room's large window.

"Indeed," Mrs Gardiner replied, groaning slightly, from her seat. "But as I have no letters, please pass on any news from Jane not given in confidence."

Elizabeth nodded in understanding; Mrs Bennet preferred to receive letters over writing them, requiring them to depend on letters from Kitty and Mary to know of the children's welfare. Her aunt was understandably anxious not to have news from Longbourn. Jane's letter could prove a happy distraction.

"I shall reveal all," Elizabeth said, smiling mischievously, "even if Jane has now walked in the sand without her stockings."

"Not our Jane," Mr Gardiner said, chuckling from behind his newspaper.

Ramsgate, August 23

Dear Lizzy,

I hope my letter finds you well and as happy as I. While the seaside has brought me many pleasures and new experiences, I have refrained from telling you the true reason for my joy. Among my new friends in Ramsgate is Mr Wickham, the most agreeable man of my acquaintance. He is of good character and great charm—Lydia would agree that he is very handsome—and has eased my way into society here. He even claims a connexion with my other new friends and thus was introduced to our company. We have enjoyed happy hours together in conversation, taking in the views from the paths and sea walks.

Such a letter, more effusive than any Elizabeth had ever received from her sister, sent a frisson of anxiety through her. Jane never kept secrets from her. And to keep secret a gentleman caller, one who brought her joy? Where was her cautious Jane, the Jane

whose emotions lay quiet and unseen except by those who truly knew her and understood her heart?

Elizabeth stared unseeing at the letter, her mind filling with questions. Mary King was a shy, sensible girl; she and her uncle were fine chaperons for a few weeks by the seaside, but not if the society had broadened beyond teashops and strolls on the promenade to include a gentleman caller.

No one deserved happiness more than her sister, but Elizabeth was torn between astonishment and concern. Who was this man? She returned her attention to the letter and found no more mention of Mr Wickham, only Jane's questions for her and her thoughts on the sea. She quickly unfolded the second letter, dated three days after the first. There it was again, Jane's most concerning declaration of feeling.

Lizzy, I know you will wonder whether the sea air has addled my thinking, but it is my heart that is stirred by Mr Wickham's kindness and goodness. I enjoy his company so much and will tell only you that his comely appearance makes it even more pleasant. Mr Wickham says he has not felt such affection for any other lady. He tells me I am the most beautiful creature he has met, even on his travels to the Continent.

Elizabeth's heart pounded as her thoughts raced. Such compliments—but is he sincere or merely another bad poet, charming you with words?

Her eyes fell back to the letter. She gasped as she read Jane's next words.

He wishes to marry me.

Elizabeth could not believe it. The acquaintance was far too short—her sister had left Longbourn three weeks earlier as a single, and very sensible, young woman. How could Jane move from admiration to the brink of matrimony so quickly, to a man

none of them had heard about, let alone met? Had infatuation turned her artless? What was she thinking?

Elizabeth sat stunned, almost lightheaded, fully unaware of the distress emanating from her. Mrs Gardiner called out. “Lizzy, are you well? What does Jane say? You look quite ill.”

Much as Elizabeth may have wished to keep her thoughts her own, her aunt and uncle were not disinterested parties. Their affection for her compelled Elizabeth to disclose Jane’s news. They shared her unease, although voiced it less violently, and put forth the same questions as Elizabeth before ceding cautiously to their eldest niece’s good sense.

“Jane is of age,” said her aunt, “and she is a rational creature, unlikely to give her heart or her virtue”—here she exchanged a frank look with her husband—“to a man who is not her equal in kindness.”

Elizabeth would not stand for it. “What kind of man woos a lady far from home and speaks of marriage with an acquaintance of ten days?”

She saw her aunt wince, though whether it was from worry about Jane or a new pain in her belly was unclear.

“Jane is not stupid and is mindful of propriety,” said Mr Gardiner, although his frown deepened. “Does she give any indication she has written to her father?”

Jane had not, and Elizabeth could hardly fault her when she herself had given no thought to his response. Her mother would be overjoyed, of course, with Jane returning to Longbourn as an engaged woman, especially if her prospective husband was all that she claimed. But Jane could see no bad in anyone; she could forgive poor manners in her younger sisters and boastful assertions by her neighbours. She was

good and kind and deserved the best in her choice of husband—a man who would court her and respect her family.

Was no one to shout that such a hasty union was unthinkable? Recognising her own impotence until she could talk to her sister, Elizabeth resolved to reply immediately to Jane's letter with all her questions and urge her to write to their father. After taking a deep but trembling breath, she said quietly, "Jane has a tender heart and has always seen only the best in people. But she is sensible as well, and although she may trust easily, she has never given her heart easily."

Mr Gardiner agreed. "Mr Wickham must come to Longbourn and meet your father. Bennet will give his blessing when he is certain of the man and his worth and intentions."

Elizabeth could not be so hopeful about her father's actions. How she wished the Gardiners would meet Mr Wickham, for astuteness and judgment were in short supply at Longbourn. Preoccupied as her aunt and uncle were with their own family and with Mrs Gardiner's condition, they would make the enquiries that were most important: How was Mr Wickham to support himself and Jane? Where were they to be settled? Did he understand Jane brought little to the marriage beyond herself and her innate kindness and sensibility? Would he love her as much if she were not so beautiful?

Hours later, her letter to Jane written, sanded, and posted, Elizabeth lay in her bed, unable to sleep. Her mind pulsed with one thought: Who was Mr Wickham and could he be trusted with Jane's heart?

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

Three

October 4, Netherfield Park

“Mr Darcy! At last!”

The door had scarcely closed behind him when Miss Bingley moved swiftly into the hall; her sister, older, married, and far less shrill, trailed behind. “Thank goodness you have arrived! We are in desperate need of your advice! Would that my brother spoke to you before signing the lease for this estate. There is but one well-appointed room in the house, and the town itself is?—”

Darcy handed his hat and coat to the butler and did his best to appear interested as Miss Bingley clutched his arm and continued her narrative.

“—and we have been here scarcely a se’nnight, and already my brother has become enmeshed in misadventure!”

Darcy maintained a stoic expression. Gambling with the officers or insulting a neighbour’s cattle, no doubt.

Mrs Hurst took a step closer. “Of the romantic kind.”

Of course, he sighed . It is Bingley. Darcy had no intention of being pulled into another of his friend’s romantic imbroglios. Was it not enough he had left Georgiana with their relations, uncertain of her own appeal after Wickham’s fortuitous desertion and ashamed that her actions had led to the dismissal of Mrs Younge? After a week

of Lady Matlock hectoring him to find a wife to help ease Georgiana's way into society, Darcy lacked the patience for any conversation on love, marriage, duty, or obligation. Shaking his head to dispel his drifting thoughts, he realised Miss Bingley felt more urgency to complain to him than to see to his comfort, and he requested a few moments to refresh himself.

Sometime later, after he had sent his man to unpack his trunk and was sitting in a striped maroon chair on a maroon carpet in a maroon drawing room, he looked at his expectant hostesses and asked where Bingley and Hurst could be found. Miss Bingley waved her hand impatiently. "My brother busies himself all over the county. They are visiting the officers or shooting or some-such. While Charles is out, we must speak on a matter of urgency."

Sighing, he reached for his tea. "Your brother is a sociable fellow. You believe his amiability has led to some dire situation?"

Miss Bingley exchanged a look with her sister and leant towards him. "Charles is besotted with a local chit."

Darcy looked at her over his cup; he had lost count of the number of times Bingley's sister had complained he was 'besotted', and the man's feelings had never lasted more than a few days. "Do you mean he admires her looks, or has he expressed his infatuation openly?"

"He speaks of her kindness and beauty!"

This was a little alarming. Bingley was usually more guarded with his thoughts on a woman—at least around his sisters or when he was sober. "You arrived here less than a week ago. He speaks so openly of a woman, in front of the servants?"

Mrs Hurst glanced at her sister. "Not exactly. He was talking to my husband?"



“—and could be clearly heard through the door,” Miss Bingley concluded, her expression triumphant.

“I see. A private conversation between brothers—this is what we must discuss in confidence?” He could not help himself; such brazen eavesdropping to glean gossip was unworthy of his attention.

Miss Bingley softened her tone to something less than imperious. “Mr Darcy, you are his friend, the wise gentleman he counts on for guidance. We felt you could dissuade him from taking notice of her and counsel him to return to town, where more suitable ladies are found.”

“I know of one or two local estates—Haye-Park, Lindon Hall. This lady...she is a lady?” At their grim expressions, he frowned. “She is not the daughter of a shopkeeper or such?”

The women looked at him, clearly horrified at his misunderstanding. “No! She is the daughter of a gentleman, but she is a country girl and not of our circle,” cried Miss Bingley. “And she is engaged! It is scandalous!”

“Engaged?” Bingley, what are thinking, you sapskull? Darcy assured the ladies he would seek out their brother immediately and advise him to cease his attentions.

Seizing his hat from the footman, he strolled to the stables. After learning from the groom that officers were encamped on the other side of Meryton, he determined to ride through the town and gain a better sense of whatever temptations it offered; if he saw a decent book-shop or lending library, all the better. He had scarcely reached the end of Netherfield’s drive when he encountered Hurst trotting up on his mount.

“Darcy! Finally, a man who knows how to shoot and fish!”

Darcy bit back a smile. This was as effusive a greeting as he had ever had from Hurst. “Is Bingley’s jabber scaring away any chance of success?”

“The birds can hear him two counties away. We have not bagged one all week!”

Hurst was an avid sportsman and enjoyed a good partridge pie; Darcy could understand his frustration. “Where is Bingley? Does he not accompany you?”

Hurst gestured to the road behind him. “He finds the company in Meryton more pleasant than that of his sisters. Imagine that!” He chuckled before turning serious. “Talk some sense into him. Bingley has always had a soft eye for a beautiful, fair-haired lady, but never have I seen him so quickly enthralled.” He shrugged. “Perhaps he enjoys the chase of the unattainable, not to mention—as Caroline so often does—the unsuitable.”

Darcy spurred his horse and rode off towards Meryton. It took no time at all for him to spot Bingley, standing by a stationer’s shop with a small group of young ladies. Their bonnets concealed their hair and most of their faces, but he could see one lady’s mirthful expression. Bingley was gazing happily at the taller figure next to her. Blonde locks of hair framed her face—a very handsome face, he could see. He walked his horse closer.

“Bingley?”

His friend looked round. “Darcy! You have arrived!”

The bonnets slowly turned, and five shocked faces stared up at him. The lady who had been laughing paused, her lips falling into a frown; her dark eyes held some cool curiosity as she surveyed him. The blonde beside her now appeared anxious. Another gazed at him solemnly, and two younger women—girls, really—were whispering to each other as their eyes swept his person. Their manners were appalling; what kind of

rough country folk so engaged Bingley in conversation?

He was accustomed to some deference in society—in any type of society—yet he could not but perceive some derision in their collective gazes. It was an odd manner of greeting a gentleman clearly above their station in life. Darcy considered whether their behaviour was adversely affected by Flyer, who was, after all, an impressively large horse. He dismounted slowly and, holding the reins, closed the few steps separating him from Bingley.

“I arrived perhaps an hour ago and desired to move about a bit and see the countryside. Hurst said I might find you here.”

“Indeed! Netherfield is a fine estate, is it not?” Bingley smiled broadly, as animated as Darcy had ever seen him when not half in his cups. “And Meryton is full of friendly people.”

A pair of birds flew overhead cawing at each other as Bingley continued beaming and nodding like the town idiot, and five sets of eyes continued staring as if they had never seen a gentleman in a jacket cut and tailored on Bond Street. A long moment of apparent insensibility passed before, finally, he surrendered. “Would you introduce me to your friends?”

“Of course, excuse me! I have just been telling them all about you, and here you are. Mr Fitzwilliam Darcy, these are my neighbours, the Bennet sisters of Longbourn, the estate bordering Netherfield.” Bingley smiled at the lady beside him and began the introductions. “Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth?—”

Miss Bennet, the obvious object of Bingley’s fascination, smiled serenely. Miss Elizabeth, whose eyes he would call luminous in friendlier circumstances, were well-nigh glowering at him. He would call it rude were it not oddly intriguing. Beautiful, even. He wondered whether she too was concerned about Bingley’s interest in her

sister. Bingley went on, presenting the three younger girls, but Darcy no longer cared for the particulars. His fatigue fled and his mind sharpened as he turned again to the eldest of the sisters.

Bennet! Miss Bennet! Surely it cannot be the same Miss Bennet who was in Ramsgate—likely there are hundreds of Bennets in England. But she was blonde. Georgiana had said her Miss Bennet was more than merely handsome; this Miss Bennet was a stunning example of classical beauty who would turn any head in town and, if highborn, be the prize of the Season. Of course, Wickham would be drawn to such a face, at least briefly. But if she had no fortune, he would take whatever pleasure he could and move on.

No , Darcy assured himself. It cannot not be her . This Miss Bennet is engaged to another man and beguiling Bingley. What kind of creature is she?

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

Four

So, the ‘cruel and proud’ Mr Darcy is here .

Elizabeth walked impatiently towards Longbourn. When Mr Bingley had announced the impending arrival of his good friend, she had doubted he could be the same man so reviled by Mr Wickham. How could one man be described so differently? Yet only moments ago, she had seen both of those men—the Mr Darcy described as generous and clever and the Mr Darcy called cruel and proud—in the same tall, striking presence. Although he had greeted Mr Bingley with genuine warmth, when he was introduced to them, his countenance turned unpleasant, almost disgusted, as if a rotten smell surrounded them.

Until he looked at Jane! He stared at her as if he had seen a ghost!

If Mr Darcy proved as arrogant and disdainful as his expression hinted, it would give credence to all that Mr Wickham had said when he visited Longbourn. But his change in expression—his shock—made her wonder what he knew of Jane’s attachment to Mr Wickham, and what, exactly, he thought of it. For good or ill, Mr Darcy had known Mr Wickham far longer than had the Bennets, and no matter how confusing her first impression of the former, Elizabeth was equally uncertain as to the character of the latter.

She had never imagined having such doubts in any man. No matter if it marked her as a terrible sister—she could not yet put her full faith in Jane’s choice of husband.

It was not yet two months since Jane had shed her reserve and proclaimed her depth

of feeling for a man she had barely come to know. While it was unlike Jane to reveal her feelings overmuch, her quiet happiness had been heartily embraced and echoed upon her return home. Since she had come back from Ramsgate, her head and heart filled with the joy of a handsome, kindly young man professing his love for her, the Bennets could speak of little else but Mr Wickham.

A week after Jane's return to Longbourn, Mr Wickham came to Meryton. He was as she had described him: tall, handsome, warm, and amiable. He had courted them all, presenting flowery words and perfectly phrased compliments, and made them promises. After he completed business at his future estate and the settlement was arranged, he would return so the banns could be read, and he would dance with all the Bennet ladies at the next assembly. When he advised Mrs Bennet to acquire a large trousseau, for he wished to show off Jane in London, the lady was speechless with joy.

Mr Wickham's smile wavered only when he gazed intently at Jane and his eyes darkened. For her part, Jane beamed and blushed, listening to her lover's drolleries and stories and compliments to Mrs Bennet on her table and her five delightful daughters, to Mr Bennet on his forbearance and wisdom, and to Cook, Mrs Hill, and anyone one else within earshot. Mr Bennet winked at Elizabeth. If he found Mr Wickham too ingratiating, his wife and youngest daughters found him charming. Jane seemed overwhelmed by his attentions.

He had not a disagreeable bone in his body—at least not until he explained meeting Jane in Ramsgate through a mutual acquaintance: a Miss Darcy, who was sister to the cruellest man in England. Cruellest to George Wickham, anyhow. Although Mr Wickham expressed fondness for the young lady whom Jane had so admired, he spoke with pained bitterness of the slights and petty cruelties shown him by the man who had been his boyhood friend, claiming his jealousy of Mr Wickham's ease in society and closeness to the elder Mr Darcy had turned him sour.

No matter that an inheritance promised to him was withdrawn when his godfather died and that he had been forced to rely on the benevolence of others to make his way in the world—Mr Wickham proclaimed that since he had found his own success, he could not say an unkind word about young Mr Darcy and besmirch the memory of the man's father.

And yet, Elizabeth noted, he did, and with no small reluctance. Mr Darcy's character had been thoroughly sketched in bold lines by a man who had not a harsh word for anyone else and who made Jane very happy. Thus, if she was bothered by the haste her beloved sister showed in giving over her heart to a man so recently met, Elizabeth attempted to set it aside in the face of such felicity.

Jane had shown her a letter he had written to her—missives Mr Bennet allowed as they were engaged, but which he may have halted in disgust had he read the flattering words and flaming panegyrics within them.

My dearest Jane,

How dull my days are without the hope of seeing your lovely face, of touching your soft hand, of feeling your sweet breath upon me. I shall never love another as I love you, nor cherish another as I cherish you. I shall always love only you. How I wish I could hear the sweet sound of your voice telling me you feel the same...

Elizabeth thought the letter overwrought and treacly, but her once-retiring sister clutched it to her breast. Mr Wickham seemed to know how to touch Jane's heart in a way Elizabeth had never expected. All of it was unsettling.

More than a fortnight after Mr Wickham had left for London, the effects of his lovemaking on the Bennet family and their neighbours had not lessened. However, his claim on Jane appeared especially unfortunate when, only days after departing to secure his estate, another young man arrived in Meryton. Mr Bingley's fortune was as

obvious as the sincerity in the happy smile he bestowed upon everyone he met, and he was a good friend—‘like a brother!’—to the man disparaged by Elizabeth’s own future brother.

It made her head ache.

“Lizzy, do slow down!”

Jane’s breathless voice broke through Elizabeth’s thoughts; she slowed her step and turned round to see her sister, arm in arm with Mary, a few paces behind her. Meryton and the gentlemen they had encountered there were well in the distance.

“I apologise. My mind was elsewhere.”

“It certainly was,” said Jane. “You could not rid yourself of Mr Darcy fast enough.”

“You are too patient,” murmured Elizabeth. “Were you not shocked to meet him?”

“Yes, Jane,” said Mary. “Mr Wickham was quite voluble about the sins committed against him by his childhood friend. Mr Darcy may have come to create more trouble.”

In spite of the flaming character Mr Wickham had assigned to Mr Darcy, Jane showed no concern that the man had come to Meryton to meddle in her betrothed’s affairs. As much as Jane sought to see only the good in everyone, was it possible she doubted Mr Wickham’s charges against Mr Darcy? Elizabeth glanced at her elder sister, surprised she appeared the only one among them who was not agitated. Perhaps Miss Darcy’s avowals of her brother’s goodness prevailed over the complaints aired and injuries alleged by Mr Wickham.

“Did you see how Mr Darcy looked at us,” Elizabeth said carefully, hoping to



provoke some response, “judging the Bennet sisters as beneath his notice? He behaved just as Mr Wickham claimed—measuring our worth in one short gaze and determining his friend must stay away. What did Mr Wickham call him? ‘A puffed-up prig’?”

Jane gasped. “He did not mean it, Lizzy! They merely misunderstand one another!”

Elizabeth sighed, wondering whether goodness could mask obtuseness. “Perhaps misunderstanding is the root of it.”

“I shall snub the hateful Mr Darcy! He has been a terrible friend to Mr Wickham,” Lydia cried.

Kitty nodded her agreement, while Mary exhibited her understanding that Jane would be distressed by discourtesy, however warranted, to anyone. “No, we must not embarrass Mr Bingley, no matter what his friend deserves.”

“Come, Lizzy.” Jane tucked her arm under Elizabeth’s. “Mr Bingley has welcomed his friend to Netherfield. He likes Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham does not, but how is that different from how Mama and Aunt Philips differ in their opinion of Mrs Goulding? I am certain Mr Darcy cannot be as bad as one man says nor as wondrous as says the other.”

Elizabeth gazed at Jane in astonishment. “Mr Bingley calls him ‘wondrous’?”

“‘A man of wondrous intelligence and generosity’.”

Smiling with incredulity, Elizabeth said laughingly, “I could believe such praise from Miss Bingley. Her brother’s admiration would be for Mr Darcy’s tailcoats and horses.”

Lydia erupted in laughter. Jane's contentment—or more likely, the male admirers she drew—enlivened Kitty and Lydia's spirits.

“Neither of them is so handsome as Mr Wickham, are they, Jane?” said Kitty.

“La, I wish I had three suitors wishing to court me,” cried Lydia. “Mr Darcy may be awful, but he is very rich!”

The two sisters raced up Longbourn's drive, where Mrs Bennet stood, waving goodbye to Lady Lucas in a curricule driven by her youngest son. She turned in their direction, clearly having heard their words over the sounds of the wheels on the gravel path.

“Mr Darcy?” she cried. “Wickham's Mr Darcy?”

“He is at Netherfield,” confirmed Kitty.

If it were possible, Elizabeth was certain her mother would swoon where she stood. Without the comfort of any soft chair or couch nearby, Mrs Bennet instead reached for Jane's hand and swore to protect her from the interloper.

“Mr Darcy dares come here to ruin our dear Wickham again! I shall not have it. Your father will have him run out of Meryton. He will not be welcome at Longbourn!”

Jane moved quickly to lead her mother inside to the small front parlour, where Mr Bennet occupied a corner chair, undoubtedly having hidden himself from his wife's company. “Mama, he is Mr Bingley's friend and is visiting Netherfield.”

“That man should not be anyone's friend,” she cried.

“We have only just been introduced to him,” reasoned Jane as she settled Mrs Bennet

into a comfortably padded chair. “Mr Wickham was injured by Mr Darcy, but Mr Bingley is all kindness and calls him a friend. No one man can be all good or all bad, and perhaps Mr Darcy presents himself differently dependent on the society.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. Much as she could agree with her sister, Jane’s determination to find the best in every creature was exasperating. This is how Mr Wickham won her heart so quickly! Her mother waved her handkerchief furiously, in sure warning of forthcoming indignance. “Mr Darcy is the very definition of a man who thinks himself above his company. Unlike his friends, who exhibit charm and kindness to all, this Mr Darcy will find little welcome in the neighbourhood, and none at Longbourn.”

Mr Bennet looked up from his newspaper. His eyes twinkled, giving his daughters fair warning he was in a teasing mood. “Ah, Mrs Bennet—suppose he calls here with Mr Bingley?”

“His tea will be cold and his cake a day old.”

Lydia and Kitty whooped with laughter. Mr Bennet seemed genuinely amused by his wife’s vow of inhospitality and, with a wink at Elizabeth, proposed his own battle plans.

“Perhaps our Lizzy will be the one to sit by the dastard and keep him from our Jane. She has done well with the challenging Bingley sisters.” Mr Bennet’s drollery was lost on Elizabeth, but her mother quickly found the wisdom in it.

“Yes, Lizzy, you must do as your father says!”

“Mama—”

“Jane is too kind to those wishing for a sympathetic shoulder. Mr Darcy must have no

opportunity to bend her ear. Lizzy, you must fend off his villainy and not fall prey to his wiles.” Looking well satisfied with the plan, Mrs Bennet continued her praise of Elizabeth’s conversational skills. “You must rally your wits to insult Mr Darcy as well.”

Concern for Jane overrode Elizabeth’s instinct to laugh, so she said, “We know very little of Mr Darcy beyond what we have been told by his friends at Netherfield.”

“And by Mr Wickham, his former friend,” supplied Kitty.

What does Mr Darcy think of Mr Wickham, and should we not find out? Elizabeth was certainly curious about the man. However, proposing such a rational idea to her family would likely lead Lydia and her mother into some sort of scheming and spying, and insult Jane, who had fended off Elizabeth’s gently probing questions with smiling assurances that she was ‘beyond happy’ with Mr Wickham.

“Mama, whatever their differences, I am certain Mr Wickham would not wish us to abuse Mr Darcy,” said Jane. “Mr Bingley and his sisters would be pained if anyone insulted their guest. Miss Darcy is genteel and kind. I knew her only briefly, but she was my friend, and to injure her brother would be to injure her.”

Although she pressed no further invectives, Mrs Bennet’s eagerness for the advantages, present and future, presented by Mr Bingley’s presence only three miles away proved too strong. She was certain he might mistake Lydia’s brashness for charm and turn his attention to her. “We shall suffer his friend, but Mr Darcy will not be a guest at Jane’s wedding breakfast.” She smiled at Jane and turned her eye to Lydia. “Nor at any future weddings.”

Kitty may have felt overlooked, but she was unwilling to accept the end of romantic drama. “I shall never dance with Mr Darcy at an assembly.”

“La, why should he dance with you?” Lydia assumed the role of sage. “Of course, Mr Wickham would dance with us all, even Mary.”

Rather than feeling any slight, Mary turned to her eldest sister. “Jane, perhaps you or Papa should write to Mr Wickham, if you feel yourself endangered by his proud and avaricious enemy. I would hate to imagine a brawl.”

“An event certain to fill the imaginations of many,” said Mr Bennet. “Let us say nothing and see how events turn out.”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

Five

Darcy struggled to settle his mind as he and Bingley rode slowly back to Netherfield. His meeting with the Bennet sisters had left him perplexed. The eldest of them could not be the same Miss Bennet as was in Ramsgate. It was too great a coincidence that the lady Wickham had flirted with, the lady who had abandoned Georgiana's friendship, would be here.

"What do you think, Darcy? Is Miss Bennet not the handsomest woman of your acquaintance? If only I had come to Hertfordshire earlier." Bingley heaved a great sigh.

Pulled from his thoughts, Darcy glanced sideways at his friend. Steering his horse down the path towards Netherfield, he considered whether he had ever seen him so morose.

"Here now, you have had your little heartbreaks over the years."

"Not like this. She is perfect, and I am too late. She is engaged."

"Well, you must be sensible. If Miss Bennet is not free for your consideration, you must be a gentleman and devote your attentions elsewhere."

"She is the one for me."

"Bingley, you have been here a week."

“The banns have not been read.”

“Do you wish to be called out? You are behaving irrationally.”

Bingley grimaced and shook his head. “Love is irrational, Darcy, but you must not worry. My ‘attentions’, as you say, are not so pronounced as to be alarming.” His brow wrinkled, giving him the appearance of a small boy. “We have never been in company outside of her family. I have called at Longbourn and enjoyed conversing with her and her sisters.”

Darcy turned and gave him an almost scathing look. “You call alone, without your sisters?”

“Just the once. Um, twice.” Bingley shrugged. “I sought out Mr Bennet for any knowledge he had of Netherfield. Hurst accompanied me. I called alone a second time. Caroline and Louisa do not much care for the Bennets. Mrs Bennet is kindly, but she can be rather effusive, especially when welcoming gentlemen callers.”

“She what? Welcomes gentlemen callers?”

“Having five daughters out requires ready hospitality,” parried Bingley, clearly annoyed by Darcy’s disgust. “Truly, she is a charming lady, who retains the beauty and spirit of her youth. Miss Elizabeth and Miss Lydia most favour her. Both are lively girls who love to laugh, though I dare say Miss Elizabeth is far more astute in her humour.”

It came as no surprise to Darcy to hear that the girl whose dark eyes had flashed at him was both clever and spirited, as well as observant; he had noticed it in the few moments in which they had been in company. London was as full of fools as the country; it was fair that a similar measure of intelligence should be found in either place. Of course, the same could be said of the number of scoundrels. Determined to

rid himself of worry over the Bennets' connexion to Wickham, he affected disinterest. "Five daughters out also require five husbands. Meryton is not a large town. Is Miss Bennet engaged to a local gentleman?"

Bingley made no reply as his horse sped up, jumping over a moss-covered jumble of tree branches. Then he laughed, though it lacked any humour. "A gentleman? I suppose you must be the judge of that, for while I am not a gentleman, I do not believe him to be one either." His expression darkened. "In fact, I recall your acquaintance with him to be rather disagreeable. You find many people disagreeable, of course, but?—"

"I know him? What is his name?" Darcy's impatience was overtaken by dread.

"She is betrothed to George Wickham."

Bloody hell. Stunned and almost unable to comprehend such news, the air left Darcy's lungs. This is the same lady who abandoned my sister when Wickham turned his charms on her? He turned away from Georgiana for the daughter of a country squire? He shook his head in disbelief. Blessed as Georgiana was for being spurned, why would the heartless debaucher wish to marry Miss Bennet? He was ill-formed for settling into the duties and obligations of marriage, even if a fortune was attached to it. What did Miss Bennet bring to the marriage?

Had one of them entrapped the other?

Unconsciously, as he fought to maintain his composure, he jerked on his reins, and Flyer began to trot.

"Darcy!" Bingley and his mount were swiftly at his side. "You have rarely mentioned him, but Wickham was at Pemberley, was he not? Son of the steward? Is he worthy of Miss Bennet?"



He is unworthy of any decent woman.

“I-I cannot say.”

Of course you can, he chastised himself. Wickham was a decrier of responsibility, be it a broken vase or a ruined innkeeper’s daughter! Rage and revulsion pulled within him to leave this place, to get away from any possible reunion with the despicable man. Only a month earlier, Wickham had been filling Georgiana’s mind with romantic fantasy; now he was to marry the ‘kind and gentle lady’ to whom she had introduced him?

He could not believe it.

That evening, Darcy’s astonishment was supplanted by darker musings when, aided by a healthy amount of the good port he had brought with him from his London cellars, he sat in his room, sprawled in a capacious—albeit hideously upholstered—chair and attempted to sort his thoughts. Quickly he discovered the chair was as uncomfortable as the state of his mind, and he rose to begin pacing instead.

Wickham had never tied himself to a woman or shown more than a passing interest in any lady but those out of his reach. At university, where he was free from the oversight of Pemberley’s butler and housekeeper and his godfather, he occupied himself with all manner of decadence. Darcy could not imagine any alteration in his habits. Wealth would only worsen his behaviour; destitution would only make him desperate.

He stared down at his feet, encased in the finest velvet slippers, on a carpet as thick as any found in a bedchamber at Pemberley. The folds of his silk banyan draped around his shoulders; the half-empty bottle of fine port sat on his table. His riding boots were freshly polished and awaiting him come morning. This was his life—one of wealth

and privilege but also of work and duty. Wickham had cared only for the first of those and shirked any sense of obligation and responsibility for his actions. Had he changed? Had his fortunes changed? Was he in fact in a position to marry—of a mindset to marry?

It was stupid to care. Stupid to involve himself. He is nothing to me but the past. The Bennets are nothing to me.

Much as Darcy could tell himself not to be involved, to avoid the risk of entanglement in concerns that were not his own, he had to seek answers. He needed to know whether Wickham's interest in Miss Bennet was sincere or if?—

If what? If I must assure her welfare? Rescue her from the swine? Georgiana is safe—must I worry about every lady that scoundrel charms?

Staring out of the window onto Netherfield's dark lawn, Darcy searched his memory of the fateful day. He had arrived exhausted, packed up and removed Georgiana from Ramsgate within hours. What had she told him through tears on the carriage ride back to London?

Mrs Younge had seemingly guided her towards Wickham, then abandoned her while he had ingratiated himself into her company. Then came the day he found her with her new friends, and soon after introducing them, Georgiana was deserted. Darcy had not cared a whit about these unknown friends; if they had abandoned his shy sister for Wickham, they were either unsavoury society or gullible heiresses, ripe for the plucking. He directed his ire at her companion, dismissing her without explanation. Still, he was careful not to disparage the two women to Georgiana, who had treasured their company.

In the leather pouch packed with his travelling desk, he found the letters his sister had written to him over the past few months. 'A bit of your voice to always have with

me', he had told her years ago, when she asked why he held onto and travelled with what she then considered childish scrawling. It was as his father had done, keeping close his wife's last letters and those from his son, so that in moments of loneliness, he would feel closeness to his loved ones, whether here or gone.

He studied the plaintive words of his sister, feeling rejected by her new friends and by Wickham:

After George endeavoured to gain an introduction to my friends, he commanded their company, and my connexion to the ladies was at an end. I saw George yesterday afternoon, while Mrs Younge and I sat near the sea wall, sketching. He gave us such a look; whether he was pained or angry, I could not know, but I did not see him again.

It was through the luck of an encounter with a near stranger that Georgiana escaped an appalling fate. Wickham would have loved to revenge himself on me and take her and her dowry away. My sister escapes him, but another lady becomes his target.

Yet it did not add up. Wickham only seeks pleasure, gain, and advantage. What would he gain in marrying Miss Bennet? Longbourn hardly appeared the most prosperous estate, and Bingley had been quite loud in professing that Netherfield Park was second in size only to Haye-Park. That meant the boundaries of Longbourn must be far less than a hundred acres. There must be some fortune, somewhere. Perhaps Mr Bennet was elderly and there was no heir; yet why would Wickham position himself to inherit a small estate in a market town a few hours' ride from London? It was far below the ambitions he once had held, and in opposition to his customary debauched behaviour with women. More than one girl in Lambton had been left with child, and dozens likely despoiled since they had gone off to Cambridge.

Wickham might not know the fates of the girls he ruined, but neither had he cared to

ensure their names and innocence remained unsullied. No. He was not a man who could change his ways. No woman was safe in his company. Until he had finagled his way into her life and likely compelled her to abandon the connexion, Miss Bennet had been kind to Georgiana. Was her naivety so profound? Else why would she lower herself to him, for he most assuredly would not improve himself for her. Perhaps the marriage was not the ideal for any party: Had Wickham taken liberties with Miss Bennet that left her family desperate for a wedding? That would be the likeliest—and worst possible—reason for such a doomed alliance.

The lady may have passed her holiday without notice if not for her friendship with Georgiana. Did that not make her situation his responsibility? Did I rescue my sister only to leave the unknown Miss Bennet as prey to Wickham?

Regardless of Miss Jane Bennet's ill-mannered family, Wickham was unworthy of her. I shall have to acquaint myself with the Bennets.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

Six

Elizabeth clutched the letters Hill had handed her and paused at the door to her father's book-room, uncertain he would welcome her and the questions she had conjured up overnight. Mr Bennet had found folly in the news that Mr Darcy had come to Meryton. Did he not wonder why the nemesis of Jane's future husband—his own future son-in-law—had come? Would he seek out Mr Darcy to learn more about his erstwhile friend and find out the truth of their history ? Would he write to Mr Wickham and reveal the man's presence here? Should he?

She knew little of the business being conducted between them. A letter for Jane would arrive from Mr Wickham, often with a short note inside requesting she remind her father to reply to a letter sent a few days prior. If Mr Bennet were writing to Mr Wickham, Elizabeth had no knowledge of it. He was frustratingly silent about it all. Hill would likely know, but Elizabeth was wary enough of the situation that she would not ask her.

Mr Darcy's presence at Netherfield offered an opportunity to learn more about Mr Wickham—the man on whom Jane's future welfare depended. Mama may see Mr Darcy as a cruel pariah, but he is the only acquaintance of Mr Wickham's we are likely to meet before he returns and the engagement is made official.

Elizabeth lifted her hand to knock. "Papa, I have today's post for you."

To her surprise, he opened the door, frowning when he saw what she held. "Put them on my desk, Lizzy. I wish to breakfast in peace, without your youngest sisters' quarrelling or negotiating Jane's marriage."

“What?” She touched his arm as he moved past her. “What do you mean, negotiating? Have the details not been settled?”

Sighing, he patted her hand. “Nothing to concern you. But do promise me at least a half-year’s acquaintance with any gentleman before you consider him as a husband.”

Mr Bennet disappeared down the hall towards the breakfast room. Elizabeth watched him for a moment, thinking how creased his brow had become, and stepped closer to the desk. It was uncommonly neat, not at all covered with its usual clutter of books and notes and unanswered letters. Each of her parents had a habit of tidying up when most agitated; it was one Jane and Kitty also shared. Clearly her father was out of sorts, and Mr Wickham was the likeliest culprit.

Bingley took one look at Darcy’s tired countenance and suggested they ride out after breakfast. Although he partook of little besides coffee and toast, Darcy was eager to be out of doors and clear his head. They rode without conversation, cantering across the fields and jumping over stiles. Hertfordshire was a flat land, with few hills of any difficulty for a good horse. Only one rise of any note was to be found; Oakham Mount, Bingley told him, was a steep climb he had not yet attempted by horse.

“Miss Elizabeth recommends the views. She walks up there a few times a week.”

Darcy turned from his observation of the hill—an impressive rise for such an area but meagre compared to what was found in the Peaks. “To the top? That is an arduous climb for a lady.”

“She says she prefers walking to riding, though it may be her only choice, as Longbourn has but two horses.”

That the lady with the flashing eyes and slim but pleasing figure undertook long and demanding rambles had Darcy in wonder, but that Longbourn had only two horses?

What kind of estate had so few? An impoverished one. Unless Mr Bennet was miserly or his wife spent all his wealth on their five unmarried daughters' wardrobes. "Bingley?—"

"It is a fine estate, Darcy, albeit one with a thin stable. I believe there is a mule as well."

Darcy had not meant to exhibit disapproval, but he was not ashamed of it—Wickham's connexion to Longbourn commanded his interest. Heedless of the reasons for Darcy's curiosity, Bingley continued defending the Bennets.

"Not every landowner can boast of your stables and fields and woods. Mr Bennet is a fine gentleman, but not one inclined to ride out to see tenants or inspect his lands as you like to do."

Darcy's doubts about Longbourn grew, as did his curiosity about what Wickham knew of it. "Has Mr Bennet a steward?"

Bingley shrugged. His lack of estate experience showed in his reply. "Must he?"

Darcy's scowl prompted Bingley to sit straighter in his saddle. "I have not heard mention of one, but I am certain he does."

They arrived back at Netherfield to find a carriage in the drive. Bingley's face lit up in delight, and he took the steps two at time. Darcy followed, pausing only when he heard a loud screech emerging from the direction of the drawing room.

"Good lord, have you ordered an aviary? What is that noise?"

"That, my friend, is laughter—a sound you make all too rarely." Bingley chuckled.

"My sisters have surprised me by finally seeing fit to return the Bennets' hospitality. I

believe that was Miss Lydia.”

Darcy slowed, reluctant to engage in any niceties with the Bennets, at least not until he had changed from his ride. Too late, Bingley had pulled him through the door and into the room, where one was welcomed with cheerful smiles and the other with solemn civility.

The young women he had met in Meryton the day prior were arranged on chairs and sofas; Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst sat primly on a delicate settee near Miss Bennet. Her expression was serene, which he found unreadable, but it certainly displayed her flawless beauty. Few men would not be drawn to such a lady, even if only to claim the right to stare at her and parade her as theirs. Wickham did enjoy being envied—was the attraction and the attachment so shallow for him?

The lone stranger to him was, he immediately knew, the mother of the five Bennet sisters. She was a handsome woman of some forty years, with large dark eyes similar to those of Miss Elizabeth and the younger one who had been cackling like a pecked hen. Mrs Bennet’s eyes narrowed when they were introduced, and his gaze moved quickly to Miss Elizabeth. She had been staring at Miss Bingley but turned to look at him when he and Bingley entered. She appeared to be suppressing some emotion. Anger? Amusement? Her lips quirked, an eyebrow rose, and he wondered what they had interrupted; if Miss Elizabeth were as intelligent as Bingley claimed—and as she appeared to him—she and Miss Bingley would rub together poorly. What did she think of Wickham? Perhaps she would not be fooled by him.

“Mr Darcy, you have met my eldest, Jane, who will be known as Mrs George Wickham after she marries your friend.”

He turned again to Mrs Bennet, who was gazing at him with as much smugness in her expression as any lady of the ton. “Ah, yes.” It was an inadequate reply but all Darcy could manage on hearing that man’s name spoken aloud. At least Miss Bennet



appeared unconcerned by his brusqueness; she offered him a warm smile, making him wonder whether Wickham had refrained from defaming the Darcy name to her.

That hope was dashed when Mrs Bennet addressed him once more, in an arch manner that presumed superiority. “Mr Wickham has shared some stories of growing up at your family estate. We would be eager to hear more childhood tales.”

Darcy stared at her, as surprised by her direct address as he was by her insouciant tone. Much as he wished to stalk about the room, provide them a full telling of Wickham’s shameful life, and demand to know Miss Bennet’s heart, he merely nodded politely. “The usual gambols and games of boys in the country.”

Clearly bewildered by the exchange, Miss Bingley began stating her usual praise for Pemberley. “The finest house and gardens in all of England?—”

“Poor Mr Wickham, losing your friendship and his childhood home,” Mrs Bennet said in a lofty voice. Before he could reply, or even sit down, as he did not wish to do—he was windblown and uncomfortable and wished to leave the room, leave Netherfield, leave these people—another voice spoke out.

“Now, Mama, no man remains exactly the same as he was as a boy.” Miss Bennet was looking earnestly in their direction. “Just as a girl might enjoy climbing trees and catching frogs with the boys in her neighbourhood, she is unlikely to continue those pursuits when she is a young lady, is she, Lizzy?”

The two sisters exchanged a glance that exposed some deep understanding of each other. Although still seeking to extricate himself from the company before he insulted one or more Bennets—or worse, demanded Miss Bennet account for her ridiculous gullibility—Darcy could not help but admire the intimacy of their sisterly connexion. Surely Miss Elizabeth knows her sister’s heart and has some understanding of Wickham .

“Indeed, a child is innocent and his character forms early, but it is life’s events and circumstance and those around him that determine the shaping of it.” Miss Elizabeth smiled mischievously. “I once took three apples from Mr Lamb’s basket and fell ill with a bellyache after eating them. I could not confess what I had done and thus suffered through a number of Mrs Hill’s potions. From this I learnt to be honest, to never steal, and to certainly never eat apples meant for livestock.” Shrugging, she added, “Some, however, would only have learnt the last of these.”

As the others laughed, Darcy bit back a smile. He felt more certain that Miss Elizabeth questioned Wickham’s character, and he tried to form a response worthy of her witty reply. Before he could speak, Miss Lydia—who shared Miss Elizabeth’s lively expression but not her manners—claimed his attention.

“Mr Darcy, we have heard much of you from Mr Wickham.”

“Indeed.” Darcy scarcely heard her words, as he was preoccupied wondering how much of the cream cake the slovenly girl was balancing on her plate would end up on her skirts.

“He may not have his inheritance, but soon he will be rich and it will not matter,” Miss Lydia continued.

Rich from whatever schemes he is perpetrating. He kept his eyes on the cake, silently wagering on its remaining time on the porcelain plate. “I am happy for any honest man’s good fortune.”

“Brother, will you and Mr Darcy join us for tea?” Miss Bingley’s desperation for relief from the Bennets was clear, but neither man had a chance to refuse, as Mrs Bennet had more opinions to share.

“We are quite fond of Mr Wickham and anticipate his return to us soon. In spite of

his many hardships, none of his own making, he has been so good to us and to dear Jane.” Mrs Bennet nodded at her blushing daughter and, returning her attention to Darcy, continued in a cool voice. “Are you to stay long at Netherfield, Mr Darcy?”

His lips twitched as he watched a dollop of cream fall onto the carpet. As his eyes rose, they met the fiery gaze of Miss Elizabeth. Had she seen him amusing himself at her sister’s expense, or was she angry at the girl’s clumsiness? Either would do; he was finding the ever-varying intensity of emotion on her countenance to be fascinating. More than fascinating—it held an allure he could not explain.

“I am uncertain as to the duration of my visit.” It was a reply sure to alarm Miss Bingley, who counted on Darcy to remain a month in full. “Of course, my friends may wish me to leave immediately if I traipse further on their hospitality and rugs so soon after a ride. Truly, I, and the scent of my horse, shall trouble you no longer. A pleasure.”

He bowed and began edging towards the door. The coward’s way out, yes, but truly, he did smell of the saddle.

“Darcy is correct. I suppose we are intruding, but we did so wish to greet our friends.”

Bingley made to follow him. Now there was a good fellow!

“Nonsense, do stay!” cried Miss Bingley. “My brother and Mr Darcy enjoy their sport. He is a dear friend to our family, and we wish for him to remain with us at Netherfield for as long as he wishes,” she stated, her chin rising as she spoke. “We wish for his sister to join us here as well, do we not, Louisa?”

Mrs Hurst nodded vigorously.

“I thank you, but as I stated before, my sister is occupied with my aunt and uncle.”

Despising that Georgiana had been mentioned, Darcy dipped his head and disappeared into the hall. He was halfway up the stairs, desperate for a bath, when he heard Bingley’s hasty footsteps behind him.

“I apologise, old man. Apparently, Miss Bennet’s betrothed has shared his dislike of you with the Bennet family—well, truly with all of Meryton.”

“That was made plain,” Darcy replied sourly, “particularly when Wickham’s kindness and friendliness were emphasised.”

Bingley exhaled heavily as they reached the last stair and turned towards the family wing. “Come now, Darcy. The people here are friendly and inquisitive. Make some effort to show them you are not the tyrant Wickham has portrayed.”

“‘Tyrant’? I thank you for clarifying how I am seen.”

“No!” cried Bingley. “I apologise. You are a wonderful friend, and like many, I rely on your advice and ability to manage things. Some may misunderstand?”

“Wickham enjoys charming the ignorant and unknowing with his falsehoods,” Darcy muttered. “I am long used to his slanders.”

“It seems to me that any man worthy of a lady such as Miss Bennet should be a gentleman and keep his unpleasant opinions about another man to himself.”

“Well said. Would that the Bennets and their neighbours understood that kindness.” Darcy reached his rooms and turned to Bingley. “I shall see you at dinner.”

“Wait.” Bingley’s earnest expression meant more questions; Darcy hoped they were

finished with the topic of Miss Bennet.

“I know little of George Wickham, but if you would confide in me what exactly he has done to earn your scorn, I would be happy to know of it. Despite your exacting standards, you are fair. You are not a man to easily disparage another.”

Darcy gripped the door handle, nearly sagging in his eagerness to get inside his rooms and be alone with his thoughts. “He has betrayed my friendship and the trust of my family, and if I could, I would wish to never speak of him again.”

Bingley paled. “He is to marry Miss Bennet! Is she at risk from him?”

Cursing himself for causing unease in a man already agitated about the lady, Darcy sought to reassure him. “You heard what Miss Elizabeth said downstairs. People change, albeit a grown man rarely does. Let me learn a bit more about what he has said of me, and of what he is up to—wherever he is. Much as I despise this, I am still not free of responsibility for him.”

An hour later, smelling of soap rather than horse and leather, his mood an equal mix of dread and fury, he began a letter to his cousin.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

### Seven

That afternoon, trapped inside by rain, Elizabeth took her book and sought refuge in her room, safely away from her family's spirited conversation in Longbourn's drawing room. Curled up in a yellow chair that gave her at least a semblance of the sun's warmth, she went over in her mind, for at least the third time, the mortifying events at Netherfield hours earlier. There, as a guest of the Bingley sisters, her mother had baited Mr Darcy by raising his past association with Mr Wickham and gloated as if Mr Wickham's fervent courtship of Jane had not been rushed and perhaps improper! Her family had exhibited no dignity—they had embarrassed themselves and embarrassed Jane. The Bingley sisters' disgust had been clear; they could not wait to rid themselves of the Bennets.

Worse, it was obvious that after the spectacle her mother and Lydia had performed, Mr Darcy felt only contempt for her family. Whether that extended to his feelings on Jane's engagement to Mr Wickham was unknown to her. However, he had not appeared either scornful or curious about it, and he was courteous to Jane. Whatever he knew of her came from Mr Bingley and the young Miss Darcy whom Jane had met in Ramsgate.

Mr Wickham would have them believe Mr Darcy to ooze malevolence and spite, but he had been well-mannered and reasonably pleasant under uncomfortable circumstances.

We cannot behave so ill towards a man we know only through contrary opinions. Mr Bingley calls on him for guidance and offers only praise for his character, while Mr Wickham refers to his cruelty, negligence, and conceit?

Elizabeth kicked at a spot on the rug. Much as it troubled her to doubt the word of her sister's soon-to-be husband, she did doubt it. She doubted him.

This morning's conversation with her father had given her little satisfaction. He had met her idea of a private conversation with Mr Darcy with stupefaction, if not a little anger. "Why, Lizzy, should I seek the word, let alone rely on it, of a man despised by Mr Wickham? You so little trust the good sense of both Jane and your father to think we have not sought to better understand the man she will marry?"

She withheld comment only to enquire, "Have you written to Mr Wickham and his solicitor and gained the detail needed for the settlement?"

Mr Bennet waved her away. "I should think I would have your trust as father to five young ladies who will seek to marry. All is in hand."

She kicked again at her carpet. It was an ugly green thing, laid in her room because Lydia had pitched a fit that she preferred blue and only Elizabeth had green eyes! Mrs Bennet had commanded a swap, and Lydia was pleased for a week—until she needed new hair ribbons to match her carpet.

It stood to reason that her mother and Lydia would be equally ridiculous in not understanding that speaking to Mr Darcy, and refraining from insulting him, was essential to learning more about Mr Wickham. But her father as well? Would he not wish to investigate such deep grievances, especially as they may affect Jane?

What had Mr Bingley said of Mr Darcy? 'A good friend, better to me than nearly any other of his station, and a man I would entrust with my life.' He also complained—in a merry voice that made clear he was mocking himself—that Mr Darcy was too clever, with a plenitude of deep thoughts and long words. She had heard few words—long or short—from Mr Darcy, but this morning, he had gamely withstood being the subject of many less-than-gracious ones aimed at him.

Elizabeth was not drawn to Mr Bingley for more than light-hearted conversation, but he was pleasant company, open and eager to have others think well of him. In that, he was no different from Mr Wickham, but otherwise the two men were dissimilar. Mr Bingley exhibited a genuine, heartfelt manner, while Mr Wickham was quick-witted and preferred to lead a conversation or be at the centre of it rather than sit back and listen. In his quiet moments, he gazed adoringly at Jane. Yet as much as Mr Wickham enjoyed his own voice, Elizabeth realised she knew much more of Mr Bingley than she did of the man who would be her brother. Mr Wickham's name and particulars had been known to her for a month, but did she know him only as he wished to be known? More importantly, did Jane know and understand him? Mr Bennet, who had long enjoyed Sir William's puffery, had rolled his eyes a bit at Mr Wickham's admittedly melodramatic tales, but if he had hesitations about the man's intentions and his future, he was keeping them well hidden from her.

Jane's reputation rested on Mr Wickham's goodness and the sincerity of his intentions—and whatever had occurred between them.

A few kisses, professions of love and assurances of security, a proposal...is it enough? Does he love Jane as a husband ought? Does she love him, or is she simply as overwhelmed by him as Mama seems to be?

That last worry brought Elizabeth back to her ruminations on Mr Darcy. He was, in looks, the opposite of both men. Where Mr Bingley and Mr Wickham were fair, with light eyes and quick grins, Mr Darcy was dark haired and dark eyed and appeared averse to levity—except when it came to the toppling of Lydia's cream cake. He had watched its progress with the same amused distraction as she had. While her own anticipation was overlaid with horror, Mr Darcy simply seemed diverted. She frowned, recalling Miss Bingley's expression of revulsion, before the memory of Mr Darcy's mirth-filled gaze returned. He had looked at her, hiding a smile, as if he knew she shared his amusement. How forward of him to think so—even if he was right. Elizabeth could then not help recalling how often in their two short meetings



Mr Darcy's eyes had been fixed on her. She hardly knew how to suppose that she could be an object of admiration or interest to him, and yet that he should look at her because he disliked her was still more strange. No, perhaps he senses my curiosity and doubts.

Tapping her fingers on the never-opened book on her lap, her mind drifted towards an unfamiliar feeling she had yet to examine. When Jane had first met Mr Wickham in Ramsgate, had she felt the sudden tug of awareness towards him that Elizabeth felt upon setting eyes on Mr Darcy? A frisson of heightened sensitivity to his being, his words, his expressions? Elizabeth felt compelled to watch him, to notice his movements and gauge his thoughts. It was as if his very presence drew her attention. She could not help but worry she was as susceptible as her sister to a handsome man. She should be cautious. Whether he was a villain or a hero or an ordinary man, she could not be comfortable with it.

Mr Darcy knows far more of Mr Wickham than Papa or Jane may have learnt in their meetings and letters. Much as he may despise us, we need his help.

After two years with nary a handsome young gentleman arriving in Meryton, Mrs Bennet could not stop expounding on their good fortune. Jane had found her betrothed in Ramsgate, and now Mr Bingley's arrival had put Mrs Bennet in mind of further possible matches.

The arrival of Mr Darcy did not dampen her pleasure, but neither did she add him to her list of eligible young men, especially after the morning's less-than-admirable encounter. In fact, it appeared that meeting him and Mr Bingley unexpectedly had only heightened her own appreciation for the latter gentleman, for having set her mind on Kitty or Mary for the as yet unseen heir to Longbourn, she was decided on the future Mrs Bingley as well.

That evening, as most of the Bennet family settled in the drawing room after dinner,

she turned her attention to Elizabeth, eyeing her speculatively, before finally resting her gaze on Lydia. “You are most like Mr Bingley. He is a lively sort of man who laughs easily but will give way to his wife, I think.”

Relieved to be away from her mother’s scrutiny, Elizabeth agreed quickly. “Oh yes, for he is well-practised ceding to his sisters’ opinions.”

Lydia protested her inclusion as a marital prospect. “Mr Bingley is jolly, but he is not for me. I wish to meet one of Mr Wickham’s friends, especially those in the militia or the navy. They are likely as handsome as he, and a man in uniform is much more interesting than one who stands about and worries over his ledgers.”

Kitty appeared prepared to argue the point, but Mary spoke first.

“A steady man with a steady income makes the best sort of husband,” she intoned.

“Netherfield is only three miles away, Lydia,” insisted Mrs Bennet. “You would be settled so near to us.”

Jane coughed, drawing a worried look from her mother. “Perhaps Mr Bingley would prefer to choose his own wife, Mama.”

“A month’s engagement, and you are the expert,” said Mrs Bennet. Her voice softened when she enquired whether Jane knew more about Mr Wickham’s intended return to Longbourn. Jane shook her head and looked at her father, hidden behind his newspaper.

“No, my dear,” came a muffled voice.

“Well, I wish to ensure the finest roast is prepared when he arrives. Mr Bingley says there are no birds anywhere. Mr Bennet, have you heard about a shortage of

partridge?”

“No, my dear.”

Elizabeth observed Jane, intent on embroidering a handkerchief for Mr Wickham. She had grown quieter these past few days, especially on the topic of Mr Wickham or his arrival. Her sister’s thoughts seemed far away as she jabbed a needle into the cloth to create a badly formed ‘G’. Or was it a ‘C’?

A small suspicion unfurled: Does Jane have feelings for Mr Bingley? She likes him—she feels easier in his company than in Mr Wickham’s. Who would not—Mr Bingley is exceedingly pleasant.

There was a sense of panic with the realisation. Jane was engaged. She was neither feckless nor faithless. It was incredible that she had met a man who so quickly professed love and wished to marry her. Had now she met another—far too late—in Mr Bingley?

And why is Mr Darcy the man who knows them both?

As was often the case, before Elizabeth could think further, her mother interrupted with a course of conversation far more vital to be shared.

“Lizzy, if Lydia is for Mr Bingley or one of Wickham’s friends, then you could take on the larger, and obviously repellent, task of charming the disagreeable Mr Darcy. You have the will and the wits to handle such a difficult man, and your reward would be a large estate and a house in town.”

“Mama, while I appreciate your trust in my charms and hope for my fate, we must treat Mr Darcy with courtesy. He is a gentleman and a friend to our new and very generous neighbours.” Although her cheeks burned, Elizabeth added, more calmly,

“You were perceptive to ask him about his long acquaintance with Mr Wickham.”

Mrs Bennet looked pleased by the rare, and quite deliberately aimed, compliment. “He has done a great wrong to Mr Wickham, and if you were to ingratiate yourself with him, perhaps he would make good on the fortune owed to Mr Wickham. That would be ideal for Jane.”

Underneath her white cap, Mrs Bennet’s face became animated. “Of course, if you married him, we could never all be together. You could not bring him to Longbourn, not when Jane and Wickham are with us. But if you could restore amity and ensure Wickham receives his missing inheritance...”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I could not bear anything that encourages such a separation from Jane.”

Mrs Bennet nodded and appeared to be thinking up some other ridiculous scheme.

“Perhaps, rather than forcing Lizzy into marriage, Mr Darcy could enlighten us as to his side of the story.” Mary’s voice, flat and reasonable, broke through the uncomfortable silence.

Elizabeth gave her a grateful look. “Yes, Mama. We should host the Netherfield party for dinner. You could provide them the finest meal in Meryton, and we could learn a little more from Mr Darcy about his connexion to Mr Wickham.”

Quickly enamoured of anything that allowed her to exhibit her excellent hosting skills, Mrs Bennet agreed. “Yes, perhaps it is best we warm to Mr Darcy and ensure he sees how well his former friend has done for himself.”

As her mother continued to prattle on, Elizabeth felt her father staring at her, bemused. He has said not a word, not even one gibe at my mother. Would that he

express any opinion or share any news of Mr Wickham!

An ensuing debate over Kitty's marital prospects drove Elizabeth to her chambers. The door soon was flung open; Jane entered, closed the door firmly behind her, and sat heavily on the bed.

"Oh Lizzy, can we all not be in harmony? Mr Wickham's former friend is Mr Bingley's good friend. How I wish they could all be happy companions."

Pistols at dawn is more likely. Knowing her sister's soft heart, Elizabeth suspected Jane's distress was prompted less by their mother's matchmaking schemes and more by the unhappiness and uncertainty her match had created within Longbourn.

Jane's pitying look only deepened Elizabeth's pique. "Truly, Lizzy, I am sorry for the troubles endured by Mr Wickham, but no man can be as bad as he claims of Mr Darcy."

It was an astonishing confession, and one Elizabeth was pleased to hear. She urged her carefully. "You believe Mr Wickham exaggerated the crimes against him?"

Jane looked bewildered before quickly shaking her head. "No...it is just... Miss Darcy was shy, but she spoke well of her brother and his many kindnesses to her. I believe they exchanged letters every day!"

That was uncommon behaviour; even Elizabeth had not roused herself to write a letter to Jane every day they were separated.

When Jane had returned from Ramsgate, Elizabeth had asked many questions about her acquaintance with Mr Wickham; she had cloaked her doubts and worries over the haste of the connexion with an uneasy joy. But she had made few enquiries about Jane's brief acquaintance with the young lady who introduced them; indeed, she had

not given her another thought. Her previous lack of interest now set her curiosity afire. Did Miss Darcy play matchmaker and lead Jane to Mr Wickham? What was her role in any of this? It was truly curious—Mr Darcy’s presence in Meryton, arriving so soon after Mr Wickham.

Elizabeth set down her hairbrush and leant closer to Jane. “Can you not ask Mr Darcy about his sister?”

Jane was emphatic in her refusal. “I believe Miss Darcy may not look fondly on our brief acquaintance nor wish her brother to know of it. After she introduced us to Mr Wickham, we were not in company with her. He said it was unwise to provoke her brother’s wrath.”

“His wrath? Surely that is an exaggeration!” Shaking her head in disbelief of her sister’s guilelessness, she asked, “Do you believe Mr Darcy is aware of your connexion to his sister?”

Jane sat up and smoothed the counterpane around her; her desire for tidiness often overtook her in fraught moments. “I do not know, but he would not look favourably on how our acquaintance ended.”

“Oh, Jane.”

“Mr Wickham would not wish me to say anything to her brother that could injure her character. He says Mr Darcy is severe on her.”

Elizabeth sat back and looked at Jane. “This is nonsensical. You told me only moments ago that Mr Darcy and his sister exchanged letters every day, and that she spoke fondly of him.”

Jane looked stricken. “I believe silence is in everyone’s best interest. Mr Darcy may

not be aware of the acquaintance, and Mr Wickham would not wish to expose it.” Her eyes dimmed, and she began to unpin her hair. “Mr Wickham called her proud, but I thought Miss Darcy’s manners were genuine and she was sweet and shy. Not all fifteen-year-old girls have the brashness of our Lydia.”

Elizabeth’s smile reflected as much amusement as relief. At last, some true understanding! An heiress of only fifteen is undoubtedly more discreet and better protected than Lydia. “Thank goodness for that! Do you imply that Mr Wickham misrepresented her character?”

“Surely not. He may not know, or remember, her well. He is a man, after all, and more than a decade her senior.”

“Her brother knows her best, and you will not address her welfare with him?”

“No.” Jane, sounding as exasperated as Elizabeth had ever heard her, pulled another pin from her hair. “As I said, I do not wish to injure her reputation in his eyes. Although he is more pleasant than Mr Wickham claimed, you know that Mr Darcy can look quite stern.”

Then, with an expression as close to mischievous as Jane could muster, she leant towards Elizabeth. “Did you see how he watched Lydia with her cream cake?”

Elizabeth smiled. “With the disgust curling her lip, I am surprised Miss Bingley held her tongue. I have no doubt she feels free to insult visitors and would have done so if not for the presence of Mr Darcy.” She picked up her brush and began working through her sister’s tangled tresses. “The only person who did not appear to notice the cream cake was Mr Bingley, as his eyes were on you.”

“Lizzy—”

“Your beauty is such that you will always catch the eye of gentlemen. It will be easier to disregard their gaze when your husband is sitting beside you.” Jane gasped as Elizabeth tugged at a snarl in her hair. “Will the settlement be complete soon? Papa says nothing to me—it is your marriage.”

“Soon,” Jane replied. “We shall be married before Christmas.”

The vagueness of such a reply discomfited Elizabeth.

“You are certain of Mr Wickham? Truly certain you wish to marry him after such a short acquaintance?”

Jane turned away, cloaking her expression in a fall of pale hair. “Of course, we are engaged.”

Elizabeth’s doubts and fears for her sister, never far away, returned in full.

“Dear girl, if you will not speak to the fierce and haughty Mr Darcy, I shall be brave! After all, do you not owe his sister your thanks for introducing you to Mr Wickham?”

And does he not owe us the truth about his old friend?



### Eight

Over the next few days, as Darcy was drawn further into Meryton society, he found himself plagued by the ghost of his former friend. More than a few askance looks and scowls came his way from those merchants and neighbours charmed by the nefarious Wickham, but others appeared merely curious about his arrival there so soon after the man. All, he noted, appreciated his coin.

“Three single men of fortune coming to Meryton in less than a month,” he heard whispered. “Ten thousand a year!” For once, Darcy cared less for their scrutiny of him than he did about being placed in any category with Wickham. How was the worm considered a man of fortune? The only things of worth Wickham had taken from his time at Pemberley, besides a squandered education, had been his clothes and a fine gelding; Mrs Reynolds had counted the silver and inventoried his mother’s jewellery to ensure it. Miss Lydia alluded to Wickham’s coming riches: Was it gambling wins, or had he charmed an inheritance from a rich widow?

Reflecting on his two brief meetings with Miss Bennet, he allowed that she was pleasant and serene but did not seem in possession of any great emotion—even when mention was made of her future husband. She appeared to be a woman easily satisfied. Miss Elizabeth, however, hid little of her feelings, or her intelligence; he was vindicated that his own estimation of her was maintained by testimonies from Netherfield’s groom and Meryton’s book-seller. He wished to talk to her—of her sister and Wickham—and saw his opportunity when an invitation to dine at Longbourn arrived. The offer was greeted happily by Bingley and Hurst. Miss Bingley took a dimmer view, but her efforts to pretend a headache or persuade Darcy to affect one were in vain.

“If you wish me to continue dissuading your brother from his fixation on Miss Bennet, I must witness their interaction and intrude upon it. I must, and pardon my words, judge the worthiness of the Bennets.”

Had the lady known his true mission, to determine whether there was any true worth in Wickham’s connexion to Miss Bennet—and to perhaps engage in conversation with her fiery-eyed sister—she would have pretended an apoplexy.

Upon their arrival for the event, Miss Bingley and the Hursts were greeted with civility, while Bingley’s genial smile was welcomed happily; Darcy heard his own name repeated without warmth. Mr Bennet apparently found some amusement in the spectacle and winked at Miss Elizabeth; to her credit, she looked, if not pained at his effrontery, at least somewhat uncomfortable. Any pleasure Darcy felt was gone when Mrs Bennet began babbling nonsense about the glories of the local game and Wickham’s fondness for Longbourn’s gravies. She was soon joined in her inanities by her youngest daughters.

Hurst is a genius to feign sleep so easily , thought Darcy, who, for the sake of his sanity, turned away and gazed absently through the south-facing windows at an overgrown garden. His interest in the conversation was renewed when he discovered Miss Elizabeth showing far greater interest than her father in the concerns of a tenant family over a blocked waterway and a broken fence.

“Now Lizzy, that fence is near the wood and unnecessary to the confinement of the Cowgills’ goats or their children. I should ask you to put on your boots and lead their eldest few into the water to kick away the branches and rocks obstructing the stream.”

She smiled when the others laughed, but Darcy could see her embarrassment. He tried not to display his disgust at her father’s dismissive jest and enquired about the books she preferred.

Although clearly surprised by his application, she answered readily. “Novels and poetry, though I enjoy history as well. My father ensures his favourite books are available to me so he has someone to talk to about them.” Miss Elizabeth gave her father a fond look Darcy did not think he deserved. “We are a small society here, and it is difficult to find anyone interested in discussing the Peloponnesian War.”

Miss Bingley’s snort nearly echoed that of Mrs Bennet. Darcy barely managed to refrain from scowling at them as his emotions roiled with some feeling he could scarce understand. He saw Miss Elizabeth shrug and thought of how admirable she was, reading books in order to provide her father with some intelligent conversation. He wished to defend her desire to learn more of the world beyond the borders and confines of her life in a small market town, but remained silent.

If he was staring in wonder, he did not realise it until Mrs Bennet’s braying voice cut into his thoughts.

“Dear Wickham is a great reader. He might not know much about the Romans, but he and Mr Bennet had a great many discussions about poetry. Is that not right, Mr Bennet?”

As he hid a scowl at the lady’s witlessness, he heard Miss Elizabeth laugh—a clear, light sound that erased some of the tension from her face. Darcy, finding himself almost uncontrollably drawn to her, wondered whether she was laughing at her mother or at Wickham’s pretensions of academic grandeur. Both merited derision; he hoped it was the latter. She met his gaze, and her smile faded. Chastening himself for showing interest, he looked away and told himself she was too intelligent to believe Wickham sincere and decent. He needed to confirm it, to learn what she knew and thought of the blackguard who sought to be her brother. She could give him answers.

With a start, Darcy realised he again was staring at her, and she was looking uncomfortably at the floor. He could only be thankful when dinner was announced.

Over a finer than expected meal, Darcy listened to Mrs Bennet crow about her future son, her anticipation for a grand wedding, and her sorrow that her eldest daughter would no longer be at Longbourn or even in the county.

“But Norwich is quite lovely, they say, so Jane will be well settled in Mr Wickham’s house near there, in Norfolk.”

Indignant as he felt over the lady’s loud and misguided boast and the embarrassed blushes she had brought to the cheeks of her eldest daughter, his mind was filled with more questions. He knew enough of Wickham’s family to be nearly certain there were no connexions in that part of the country. Unwilling to make the enquiries himself and reignite the antipathy the Bennets felt towards him, he extended his leg underneath the table and kicked Bingley’s foot. Bingley startled and, after swallowing a bite of potato, shifted his gaze from Miss Bennet to Darcy. Understanding developed quickly, and he turned to Mrs Bennet.

“Um, Mr Wickham has an estate in Norfolk? A lovely country there...some good game,” Bingley babbled haplessly. “I believe I knew a fellow from there...was his estate in Crostwick?” When no one offered him an answer, Bingley looked at his sister, who appeared vexed at being forced to address him, or anyone, at the table.

“Certainly, I have no idea about all these people with whom you claim an acquaintance,” said Miss Bingley. “It is the steady friendships, such as that of Mr Darcy, that are of greater consequence.”

Darcy was certain Miss Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Miss Bingley’s airs merited constant mockery, and he was glad she understood it as well.

“Mr Bingley is a friendly sort of man, and it speaks well of him that he maintains civility even with those who least deserve it,” said Mrs Bennet.

Darcy overlooked her slight and Miss Lydia's snickering; he was warmed by the exasperation he detected in Miss Elizabeth's countenance.

"Mama," she said, "Mr Bingley is not acquainted with Mr Wickham but perhaps will visit his friend in Crostwick someday and could call on Jane and her husband. Jane, do you know where exactly you will be settled?"

As Darcy silently congratulated Miss Elizabeth on her acuity, he saw her sister's blush deepen. Whether Miss Bennet noticed Bingley's stricken expression was unclear, but Darcy could see her discomfort. "Mr Wickham has been there but once, but he tells me it is a fine house with an abundance of gardens, and there is a sitting room facing east for the morning sun. He assures me only a few rooms are in need of decorating. I cannot give you more information. Papa, you and Mr Wickham have exchanged letters." She looked almost pleadingly to her father. "Could you tell us more?"

Mr Bennet's eyebrows rose; he swallowed a bite of fish and frowned. "Mr Wickham writes letters much as he speaks—full of charm and plans and flowery praise. Indeed, much like my cousin Collins but without the details that, while dull, are useful to a man whose wife is eager to make plans."

In other words, the man had no idea, no particulars at all about the house his first-born daughter would make her home some one hundred miles away. A quick glance at Miss Elizabeth showed her to be as unsatisfied as he felt with such an answer. How many of Wickham's other promises had not been looked into?

Bingley broke the ensuing silence and turned his efforts to lightening the conversation with a question about the neighbourhood's partiality for card parties. Mrs Bennet and her youngest daughters were immediately engaged. Miss Bingley's opinions on town preferences were canvassed, and a discussion on fashion followed.

Darcy was content to observe Miss Bennet. Unless there was a fortune attached to her name—and nothing he saw at Longbourn hinted at such wealth—there was little that would attract a man with Wickham's tawdry tastes other than the notion of displaying her beauty in public and enjoying her flesh in his bed. It was cruel and unjust, but she appeared to have been taken in by abundant charm and false promises. Could she and her father truly be so naïve as to abandon caution and trust a man skilled in empty compliments? Longbourn was a fine house with fairly fashionable furnishings; its entirety was scarcely the size of one wing of Pemberley. Was it fine enough for Wickham? He thought not.

Feeling himself under scrutiny, Darcy discovered Miss Elizabeth watching him. He forced himself not to return her gaze, but sitting nearly opposite one another, his eyes kept straying to her. When she became engaged in conversation with Mrs Hurst, he was free to watch her. Her manners, while infinitely better than those of her mother and younger sisters, were decidedly easy. She conversed animatedly, even going so far as to disagree with not only Bingley but with her father. He could not help but enjoy the subversive nature of her impertinence and wondered how well she tolerated Wickham. She could not be taken in by him, and the failure of his charms on her would niggle at such a vain but worthless miscreant.

Dimly, he heard his name spoken and tore his attention away to discover Miss Bingley dismissing Mrs Bennet's raptures over Netherfield and lauding Pemberley as if she were its mistress.

"It is one of the grandest homes in all of England, with such gardens and a library to rival that at Cambridge or Oxford."

Mr Bennet's attention was quickly captured by such a compliment, and he enquired as to the size and depth of its collections.

"Oh no," cried Bingley. "This is a topic on which Darcy can converse for hours. You

are wonderful to provide him eager ears, for I am deaf when it comes to books and bindings and all the folderol of literature.”

Miss Elizabeth burst out laughing. “You must not insult books in this house, Mr Bingley! Even those bound to us by blood must show respect for my father’s library.”

Looking abashed, Bingley raised his hands in defeat. “Darcy is kind to tolerate me, for much as I enjoy a good tale, I prefer when it is read to me rather than?—”

“Rather than turning the pages yourself,” Miss Bingley acknowledged. “Mr Darcy is my brother’s superior in the world of understanding, for he is a great reader.”

Darcy swore he heard Miss Elizabeth snort in amusement. He turned to her. “A voracious and faithful reader may be the better description.”

“Mr Wickham also praised your stacks and said he spent many hours curled up in the red velvet window-seats in Pemberley’s library, lost in the written word.” She gave him a challenging look, which appeared less hostile and more truly curious.

He raised his eyebrows. Did the man lie about the smallest details? There were no window-seats in Pemberley’s library and not a scrap of red velvet. The vast room’s windows were surrounded by shelves; comfortable sofas and chairs and a chaise longue favoured by his mother sat beneath them. But Wickham spent few hours in that place of wonders; he would not know its volumes, let alone its furnishings. Should he correct the reprobate here, to an audience certain to receive his words with hostility? No, best to maintain the thin veneer of civility he had thus far managed when the scoundrel’s name arose.

He smiled at his inquisitor. “Window-seats in the library? He must have been thinking of some other room. There are no window-seats there, nor any red beyond that found on book bindings. My great-great-grandfather designed the library for

comfort—both for the books and their readers—and preferred a blue and green colour scheme that my mother maintained there.”

Miss Elizabeth nodded and looked directly at him; she was the only one at the table who appeared to understand that Wickham had either a very poor memory or a dubious command of the truth. Mr Bennet instead demanded to know more of the collection. “I care nothing for the fabrics on the chairs,” he said, “but tell me of the leather and bindings and whether every volume has been read at least once.”

Finally, a subject on which he was happy to engage. The discussion ended when Mrs Bennet pivoted to Miss Bingley with a query on the latest in sleeve lengths. Inanity ensued, and by the end of the meal, Darcy was more than ready to go home and abandon any of his concerns over Miss Bennet’s happiness. What was it to him, after all, if the eldest daughter of a country squire married Wickham? Do not be an ungrateful nodcock , he reminded himself. She saved Georgiana. It was a short-lived friendship, ended by Wickham’s machinations rather than Miss Bennet’s, her presence had kept his sister from whatever Wickham had intended.

Darcy gazed around the table as the ladies rose and excused themselves. His thoughts lingered on Miss Elizabeth, who did not seem to fit with the rest of her family, and her sister, who was too gentle to leave to her fate.

They do not deserve a connexion to Wickham.



## Page 9

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Nine

“Will you not remain with us, Mr Darcy?”

He turned to Mr Bennet and found the man looking up at him from his seat, smirking in amusement. Hurst was seated, while Bingley, looking abashed, quickly sat back down.

Displeased by his host's manners, Darcy stretched a bit before returning to his chair and accepting a glass of inferior port. The three other men began talking about the meal and the pleasure they had taken in it. They seemed in perfect unity; none was interested in discussing important matters between neighbours, such as water use, crop rotation, tenant issues, an impending marriage to a scoundrel...

“You are pleased with Miss Bennet's betrothed, sir?”

Darcy looked in amazement at Bingley. He had demanded his friend step back from his open admiration of Jane Bennet; he had not expected the most pleasant fellow he knew to ask an engaged woman's father a pointed question about her happiness!

In a display of shocking nonchalance, the older man shrugged. “He is as affable a man as God has made, and fully aware of his charms. Of course, I have met him only the once, when he joined us here at Longbourn for a se'nnight.”

What father would agree to the marriage of a beloved daughter to a man he scarcely knew? Darcy set aside his disgust at such paternal carelessness. “They did not meet in Meryton? Mr Wickham is not well acquainted with the family, nor with you or Miss

Bennet in particular?”

“They were introduced at the seaside and were swept away by love. Jane has inspired poetry in the past, but no man has professed such feeling for her as has Mr Wickham.” Mr Bennet’s mild expression betrayed neither disbelief nor humour, although Darcy could not miss the mocking tone in his voice. He lifted his glass towards Darcy. “I believe you know the man better than Jane or I. He speaks freely of your business.”

“And my character.”

“Would you care to enlighten me as to his? For I have welcomed you, the nemesis of my future son-in-law, into my home, and I am certain that if I write of it to him, he will not be pleased.”

“I imagine not.” Darcy’s eyes canvassed the painting hanging behind his host—an oil of what he supposed must be one of Hertfordshire’s finest views. Nothing like the seaside. He grimaced and once again thanked God he had not brought Georgiana with him to Netherfield. It was difficult enough to write to her of his doings here: How could he tell her that Wickham was to marry the lady she had befriended so briefly? He could not compound his sister’s embarrassment with feelings of guilt. She was young, too naïve to know better; Miss Bennet was a good seven years older than Georgiana. Had she never been exposed to a broader society, to develop discernment? Clearly her parents had been useless in their guidance, as well as distinctly incurious. Were they aware he was brother to the lady who had introduced the villain to their eldest?

Bingley coughed loudly, and Darcy became aware that Mr Bennet was awaiting the rest of his reply. He turned back to the room.

“Sir, I am aware of slanders made against me by Mr Wickham and can provide a

thorough refutation of his charges, as well as proof, if needed. Beyond the known fact he was raised at Pemberley, as the son of the steward, I advise you give little credence to a word he has told you.”

“Agreed!” cried Bingley. “Darcy is the best of men and has done Wickham a kindness by not expressing his own opinions and experiences of him. Perhaps you should allow him to defend himself—not that any defence is needed, of course.”

Darcy was too well-mannered to roll his eyes but wondered at his friend’s eagerness to speak up to Mr Bennet now rather than upon first hearing of Wickham’s lies. Still, he had spoken a needed truth—given real advice—to the father of his ‘angel’.

Mr Bennet sighed and nodded in Darcy’s direction. “I listened to little of what he said of you, although I must credit him for the fine detail of it all. He is far more exhaustive on your failings than he is on other subjects.”

Darcy was heartened the man had some small share of scepticism. “Wickham was raised at my father’s estate in Derbyshire, and my father—named as his godfather—sent him to Cambridge alongside me. He cared little for his studies or, to my knowledge, finding a career. As for the Norfolk estate... I have not been in contact with Wickham for more than a year, but I am unfamiliar with his connexion to that county.”

“As am I.” Mr Bennet was looking at him thoughtfully, tapping a finger against his chin as if weighing whether to make further enquiries. Then he shrugged, apparently lacking the intellectual energy for such pursuits. “I shall learn more when he next writes to me, eh?” He lifted his glass. “The mystery of it all.”

That is all? No interest in a private discussion, nor overt concern about his eldest daughter’s fate?

“Sir, much of what is a mystery to you?—”

The conversation went no further before it was made obvious, through loud resounding voices, that the ladies’ endurance for one another had worn thin. As he followed the others into the drawing room, Darcy felt unsatisfied, guilt and frustration pricking at the edges of his thoughts. He took the seat next to Miss Elizabeth and sat silently while Mrs Bennet and her youngest daughters discussed the assembly two days hence. Miss Bingley was scowling at her brother; obviously she was impatient to end the evening and displeased at his clear eagerness to secure a set with Miss Bennet. Alas, Bingley’s smile faded along with Darcy’s mood when their hostess declared, “Dear Mr Wickham promises he will arrive in time to dance with Jane.”

“No, Mama,” said the intended bride, looking—Darcy thought—more than a little flustered. “Mr Wickham will be another fortnight at least putting his business to rights.”

This was the first sign Darcy had seen of any concern about Wickham’s return, and questions as to the urgency of the marriage, which he had previously repressed, surged in his mind. Is Miss Bennet carrying his child? Her mother appears nonchalant—is she aware?

“If they allow me to, I shall dance with all the Bennet sisters,” declared Bingley.

As the younger girls clamoured to secure their places and Mrs Bennet drew Mrs Hurst into a conversation on shoe-roses, Darcy felt rather than heard Miss Bingley’s barely stifled groan. Curious as to whether Miss Elizabeth noticed it, he turned and found her watching him.

“You have found my sister Jane of great interest tonight,” she said quietly. “Do you wish her happy with Mr Wickham, or do you have concerns?”

“I wish happiness on those who deserve it.”

Her eyes widened. “Jane deserves happiness.”

“Of course,” he said quickly. “No one wishes unhappiness on a sister.” He bent his head closer to her and said quietly, “I have no wish to cause you pain, but I am curious about your sister’s engagement to my former friend. It has surprised me.”

“Surprise would describe much of the feeling here, albeit softened by his charming words and promises.”

He had rightly credited Miss Elizabeth with perception and intelligence. “I am sorry for it. He is never at a loss for charming words.”

“Except when it comes to you, sir. He is quite exhaustive in sowing doubt in your character. Are you equal to the task of sowing doubt in his?”

Uncertain whether he was being chastised, Darcy looked down to hide his expression. “More than equal, I would say.”

“I am glad to hear it, although it is my duty to stand by my future brother and have faith in his character.”

His character . In spite of the heat of anger he felt that the only person of worth he had thus met in this town could be taken in by Wickham, Darcy answered in a cool voice. “Do you believe him?”

“I hardly know what I should believe,” Miss Elizabeth said in a near whisper, “for I fear it may diverge from what I wish to believe for the sake of my sister.”

He turned to her, surprised and all too aware of how troubled her feelings must be.

“Lizzy, what are you going on about?” cried Mrs Bennet. “Kitty wishes to wear your green gown at the assembly.”

With that, a mutual sign of eagerness to end the evening passed between both parties, and within minutes, coats were collected and the five guests from Netherfield departed. Darcy’s head sank into the squabs of Bingley’s carriage, and he wished he had ridden over; the exertion and danger of such a ride would relieve some of his frustration at being interrupted from his conversation with Miss Elizabeth. He would not have dared ask the question most pressing, but was it wrong to wish to know whether her sister was coerced? If he could help?

“You appear quite taken with the eldest Bennet girls, Mr Darcy. Your eyes never left them—particularly Miss Elizabeth during dinner—and I worried for your appetite.” Miss Bingley’s voice carried the affected intimacy that both amused and repelled him.

“It was a fine feast,” he countered. In the darkness of the carriage, he could not see her expression, but his pithy reply appeared to shock her. He had already shocked himself with how much he wished to alleviate the pain he saw in Miss Elizabeth’s eyes. He understood all too well the need to protect a beloved sister, and he would do what he could to determine whether George Wickham remained as much a rogue as in years prior.

It is nothing more than conferring assistance , he told himself, even as the memory of her expression lingered.

That was badly done. Insulting my future brother and challenging his enemy.

Elizabeth lay in bed in her dark room, staring blankly at the ceiling. Thoughts of chastisement and shame kept her far too alert to sleep, far too uneasy to read. The creaking floor prevented her from pacing about, so rather than risk waking anyone,

she remained abed, her mind repeating the previous hours in company with Mr Darcy and the Netherfield party.

Such staring! He could not keep his eyes from Jane and from me, whether to puzzle out Jane's feelings or to avoid further interaction with Mama and my sisters, I cannot say.

And yet, she had behaved no better. Sitting there beside him, occupying him so he would not speak to Jane, had been unsettling. He was there, large and intimidating, and curiously soft spoken. He had smelled not of horse or leather but of some rich scent and could boast the smartest knot in his cravat that she had ever seen. He was far more interesting, in a deeply knowledgeable way, than any other young man who had recently graced Longbourn's dining table. And in his brief comments and questions, he clearly was interested in learning about Mr Wickham's current situation in life. As am I, but I stupidly lost that chance!

Rather than using the opportunity to discover more of Mr Wickham, about whom she had growing doubts—doubts she had all but confessed to Mr Darcy—she had questioned Mr Darcy's character and reminded him of the slurs cast by Mr Wickham. Foolish girl!

She could not explain her behaviour and was grateful no one—except perhaps Miss Bingley, who rarely removed her gaze from Mr Darcy—had noticed. Had she seen his expression harden and heard his voice turn cold? Closing her eyes, she breathed in slowly. She was disappointed in herself. Mr Darcy deserved better than the behaviour served him at Longbourn, especially from her. She would apologise when next she saw him and apply to him to provide whatever information he could on Mr Wickham. If Papa will not do it, I shall.

Mr Wickham was wrong about the window-seats. Not just wrong about the colour but about their very existence. If he prevaricated about such minor details, what else had

he lied about?



Ten

The assembly two days later proved Elizabeth's first opportunity to again meet anyone in the Netherfield party. Heads turned quickly when the group entered the rooms, and Elizabeth saw at once that it was not the gowns and feathers—or proud frowns—worn by the Bingley sisters that drew their eyes, but the appearance of Mr Darcy in his finely fitted black coat and grey silk trousers. His tailoring alone would demand attention, but so would his height and his noble profile.

If the man himself felt the disdain and apprehension inspired by his presence, his stoic expression did not show it. He was, Elizabeth thought, almost the opposite of Mr Bingley, who laughed and grinned, his eyes always sparkling, and Mr Wickham, who smiled and smirked, his eyes always watchful. Mr Darcy is inscrutable, and his expression reflects none of the resentment he should feel from the scrutiny. It is quite admirable of him.

In the day and a half she had spent reflecting on their brief interaction at Longbourn, Elizabeth had decided that Mr Darcy was a man whose polite reserve allowed others to misunderstand him; certainly, he was not the ogre portrayed by Mr Wickham. Mr Darcy's conversation was undeniably preferable to that of Mr Wickham; he spoke little but his words were intelligent and serious, and he was honourable enough to leave his own estate to counsel his friend on his managing one.

Now, startled to feel Mr Darcy's eyes on her, Elizabeth managed a nod and the smallest of smiles; she remained too uneasy to do more. Although determined to apologise to him, she set aside such thoughts when the dancing began and she was kept busy by her partners. Halfway through the evening, she sat with Charlotte Lucas;

their mothers were not far away, heedless of their tone or the volume of their voices, especially since a tasty punch had been liberally served to them. Their daughters were accustomed to such behaviour, but Elizabeth could not be comfortable knowing that Mr Darcy might hear, yet again, her family's horrid opinions of him—this time voiced loudly amongst their neighbours.

“Mr Darcy has such a fierce expression even amongst ladies and strangers,” said Lady Lucas. “One can but imagine how much worse it may be for poor Mr Wickham.”

“Indeed,” said Mrs Bennet. “Mr Darcy would be a fine-looking man if his heart were kinder.”

“Mama!” the two friends cried, as each turned to hush their mothers.

Charlotte sighed and bent her head to Elizabeth's. “My mother has no reason to dislike Mr Darcy, yet she believes it au courant to pity a gentleman so high above her. It appears his dining at Longbourn did not soften your mother's opinion of him.”

“It did not, although she remains interested in spending his fortune.” Elizabeth's eyes searched for the man they discussed. He stood alone by a pillar, as he had much of the assembly, abandoned by Mr Bingley while he lent a constant and merry presence to the dance floor. Much as she had tried to avoid giving him notice, she had seen Mr Darcy deign to dance with each of his hostesses; otherwise, he appeared aloof. Or perhaps, she wondered, he had overheard the whispers around him. Deserved or not, who would not be ill at ease amongst such society; had she not proved a poor example of cordiality? Much as she wished to approach him with her questions and her apology, being seen by her neighbours as friendly to the man so disparaged by her sister's betrothed was unthinkable.

And I thought myself brave.

She watched as he scrutinised Mr Bingley, chatting with Jane and Susannah Goulding; the cheerful man was, if not always standing with Jane, often near her. Not too near, but his attention to Jane was notable. Her sister seemed to glow in his company. Despite having received a letter from Mr Wickham, Jane had been downcast the past few days, and Elizabeth was glad to see her happy.

How vexing that Jane had not met Mr Bingley prior to meeting Mr Wickham! While Elizabeth could not judge either man's faithfulness, she could be confident in the character of Mr Bingley. He is friends with Mr Darcy and avows his good character. What does that reveal?

Fortunately, the pair had danced only once, and others of the neighbourhood took their turns. Elizabeth's usual partners were neither practised nor graceful in their steps; when she had found herself leading Robert Lucas—attending only his second assembly—through the steps of a Scottish air, she wondered whether Mr Darcy was smirking at the amusing spectacle.

“My brother is determined to ruin another pair of shoe-roses,” said Charlotte drolly as they watched the young man's earnest pursuit of Kitty for the final set. Smiling, Elizabeth moved her skirt to inspect the condition of her own dancing slippers. A large pair of well-polished shoes appeared in front of hers, and she found herself addressed by Mr Darcy, who took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that, without thinking, she smiled and accepted him. As he led her to the floor, she looked back and saw in Charlotte's expression that she shared her shock, if not her apprehension, at the turn of events.

This was her chance . I must speak, learn what is needed, and, perhaps, apologise for my lack of grace.

Five days spent dwelling amongst the inhabitants of this country town, and Darcy had found but a handful of people with any discernment or refined manners. Only

Elizabeth Bennet displayed those as well as a lively humour and intelligence. If she had been discourteous at times, was she not only protecting her sister? Showing her concern? Darcy knew he had provoked her with his questions; he could not fault her for revealing her heart.

Watching her tonight, he saw that even without words, her sparkling eyes reflected those traits he admired. Equally admirable was the picture she made, in an ivory gown flocked with green flowers, a matching ribbon threaded in her hair. Simple and elegant on her slim, pleasing figure.

Despite startling her with his request for a set, he hoped she would help him better understand the engagement of her sister. Dancing with her, gaining information from her, would be the saving grace of this godforsaken assembly. The musicians' frenetic but floundering melodies kept the evening lively, and the punch was merely tolerable; still, he preferred passing an evening here than at Netherfield, listening to Miss Bingley dissect the 'abhorrent manners of disgusting country folk'. Tonight's event would provide the lady with a week's worth of complaints; it certainly had delivered him more odd looks and whispered calumnies than he could recall suffering in a decade amongst the ton .

Paying no attention to the murmurs as he led Miss Elizabeth to the floor, he gave her a brief smile as they took their places in line. When the music began, her attention was fixed anywhere but him; he followed her gaze and saw her sister—Miss Catherine, he recalled—dancing with the young man Miss Elizabeth had recently endured. She had shown more patience with his clumsy steps than did her clearly mortified younger sister. The girl's weak smile could not hide her embarrassment, but it was still an improvement over the vulgar behaviour of the youngest, loudest sister, who had but once left the dance floor, and then only to drink punch and laugh loudly with a group of redcoats. Their mother was laughing just as loudly, gossiping with the other town matrons as they drank freely and set their eyes on making matches and mischief. Mr Bennet was nowhere to be seen, obviously preferring a quiet house to

himself to exerting any supervision over the conduct of his family—or the men who beguiled them.

Of course, Wickham would feel at ease among such gullible, boisterous, unprotected young women; they were to his taste and entirely undeserving of his malevolence. Thinking of him at Longbourn made Darcy shudder.

“Has dancing always caused you pain, or is that affliction peculiar to Meryton?”

Miss Elizabeth was staring up at him, her eyebrows raised. Dash it, what a fine, provoking expression!

“Truly,” she continued, “I shall understand if you wish to step away. My own toes are often sore by the end of an evening.”

“No, no,” he said, forcing a small smile. “I am well. Meryton does not afflict me with pain but instead impels some sort of wool-gathering. It is quite unlike me, I assure you.”

His reply prompted a frown, but her eyes lit up with mischief—it was astonishingly becoming, especially when she said, “I am more often accused of exasperating others with my liveliness than sapping them of their clarity of mind.”

“Liveliness is not in my nature, but I would not disparage it in others.” Darcy grinned, overlooking the gasps from the group of dowagers sitting to his right. He realised he was enjoying himself; he was an excellent dancer, and Miss Elizabeth had a wonderful grace and agility to her movements. Despite her small stature, their steps were in total harmony, much like their repartee. As he mused on how well they moved together—how well he imagined they looked together—the lady in question spoke.

“Best hide your smile, Mr Darcy. I believe you are shocking the neighbours.”

His true shock came from how warmly she said it. “No more than you, by deigning to dance with me,” he replied. “We did not part as friends at Longbourn.”

“We did not, and I hope you are willing to overlook the words we exchanged.”

Relieved, he nodded.

Her lips quirked. “As for dancing, Mr Darcy, I enjoy it, and I have no cause to insult you. One should not judge a man or-or a hat or book simply on another’s opinion.”

“A hat?”

“Bonnetts are the cause of many arguments at Longbourn.”

The thought of that prompted him to smile again. “As befits a household of five daughters.”

“Yes,” she said as their hands joined again. “Five daughters. One soon to leave us, and I believe you know my future brother better than any of us can boast. Your acquaintance with him is of far longer duration.”

The delicacy of her statement made him understand they had reached a truce, and he was careful to speak in a similar tone. “I have known him since I was a boy. He was raised on my father’s estate, where his father was steward.”

“He esteems your father and can speak only in his favour,” Miss Elizabeth said as she dipped.

“Yet he tarnishes my father by the tales he spins of our acquaintance.” He had tried

not to growl his reply as she glided round him, but her answering frown made it clear she had heard.

“I do not disagree, sir. I live amongst twenty-four families who talk and marry and gossip,” she said quietly. “His arrival, and his stories, provided entertainment for us all. You are as much—more—a stranger to us than he. Are we to trust your truthfulness over his or his over yours?”

“We are not to be compared.” Darcy was pleased his anger showed only in his voice, not in his expression.

She blinked and seemed to acknowledge her own conclusion. “To think one could mistake blue sofas for red window-seats in a library.”

Heartened by her perception, he said, “I assure you, George Wickham is not afflicted with colour blindness, merely a proclivity for exaggeration and untruth.” Among other things.

At her nod, he replied to her previous question. “I am familiar with his complaints about me, and although I do not know all he has claimed to your family, his assertion of a fortune and estate are new and perhaps...”

She looked up sharply, her eyes wide with what looked like comprehension. Dash it, her eyes were striking. A man could be compelled to say anything to a woman with such beautiful eyes. By good fortune, he was saved from his own stupidity by Miss Elizabeth’s urgent question.

“Sir, much as I wish to know whether Mr Wickham can support her, I must know whether he is genuine in his feelings for Jane, and whether he will care for her.”

“Is—I wish to ensure...do they marry because they wish to, or because they must? I

do not doubt your sister, but as for Wickham...”

It was painful to see understanding overspread her pretty face, and Darcy could see by her furrowed brow that he had angered her. “How dare— No, my sister is all that is good. She will marry for love and nothing else. Few men are worthy of her kind, gentle soul, and I fear she was besieged by a man well-practised in compliments and charming endearments.”

“By that description, I surmise you have learnt his character.”

“I have wondered, certainly. He was at Longbourn for a brief time, all gaiety and compliments but little intelligence on the future he promises. I suspect we were presented with only one side of Mr Wickham.”

He considered how to proceed as he stepped forwards and back. “Wickham thrives where his lies go unchallenged. What I must tell you cannot be spoken of here, in company.”

Pain swept briefly across her expression. “Sir,” she said in a hushed voice, “if you have something to tell me of Mr Wickham that will open his character further, then you must do so immediately. You are our only source of such information. Sharing it with us would be the greatest act of friendship shown to my sister.”

Grimacing, he began to speak, but paused and stared off to a point beyond her. It was impossible to talk of such awful things, to discuss a detestable man and the women he had ruined, when he was holding her hand, enjoying her company. Elizabeth Bennet had consumed too many of his thoughts since he arrived in Meryton, and now here she was, light and beautiful, her dark eyes sparkling up at him. He could scarcely recall the proper steps, let alone discuss and rebut Wickham’s long list of grievances against him.



Tearing his eyes away, he watched Bingley talking eagerly to a trio of young ladies, including Miss Bennet and a redhead he understood to be Miss Mary King. The former's expression was, as ever, serene and pleasant; even at a distance, he could see the admiration in her gaze.

She was a friend to Georgiana and could be one again . She is kind-hearted. She likes Bingley. She deserves a man such as he.

“Sir?”

The pounding in his ears deafened him to the music and laughter swelling around them until the sharp edge in Miss Elizabeth's voice righted his thoughts.

“Mr Darcy? Is it so bad?”

Her eyes were alight, not with the lively mirth of which he had grown rather fond but with despondency. Stunned by how much he wished to fall into those depths, Darcy shook his head, clearing his thoughts, and in a low voice said, “If there is a shred of truth in what he has told you, I should give young Lucas there all my waistcoats.”

She gasped. “How can you jest? There must be at least one truth—he must love my sister—else her pride and her reputation are lost.”

He looked away from her, as eager to maintain a semblance of civility as to avoid what he assumed would be fury in her countenance. Leaning close to her ear, he assured her of his agreement. “True, he must love her, else this engagement makes no sense for a man such as he. We must speak privately. I shall tell you all I can of my history with Mr Wickham, and you can determine whether his character is worthy of your sister.”

Darcy led Miss Elizabeth to Miss Lucas, bowed to her and gave her an earnest look,

and disappeared into the crowd, desperate to find his hat, his carriage, and his peace of mind.

## Page 11

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Eleven

Not only did dancing with Mr Darcy leave Elizabeth dissatisfied with learning more about Mr Wickham, it gained her angry words from her mother in the carriage home.

“Lizzy,” she cried, “how could you dance with the man who has been so cruel to Jane’s Mr Wickham? Lady Lucas was shocked you would subject your family to such a spectacle!”

“Mama, only days ago when you first hated Mr Darcy, you spoke of Lizzy diverting him from Jane and marrying him for his fortune!”

Mary’s comment flustered her mother; Elizabeth threw her a grateful smile she hoped her sister could see across the dark carriage.

“Lizzy was talking up a storm with Mr Darcy as they danced,” supplied a helpful Lydia. “Were you telling him how awful he is, and how we all hate him?”

Before Elizabeth could respond, Jane spoke up. “Lizzy did as all of us should. Mr Darcy is here as a friend to Mr Bingley and his sisters, and he wished to dance with the lady Sir William calls ‘the brightest jewel of the county’.”

Lydia and Kitty snorted, but Jane’s words seemed to inspire new worries in their mother.

“Well, of course such a man would want to boast of dancing with her,” cried Mrs Bennet. “But mind you, he is up to no good, flirting with Lizzy for his own aims. You

are a good girl, Jane, to keep your distance.” In a lower voice, she added, “Your aunt Philips suspects Mr Darcy may wish to separate you from Mr Wickham through Lizzy!”

Elizabeth could scarcely contain her annoyance. Yet another mad theory for his presence!

Mary, who had danced but once and refused the punch, was more rested than the others and more sensible of easing the tension within the carriage. “Mama, if Mr Darcy remains at Netherfield when Mr Wickham returns to Meryton, perhaps they can again forge a friendship through Mr Bingley.”

Jane agreed with alacrity. “Yes, all are such good men at heart.”

Elizabeth swallowed a sigh, grateful for the darkness shielding her amazed expression. Such optimism! I shall never fall in love and lose all sense.

A few minutes later, as they bid each other good night in the hall, Jane bent her head close and—ever mindful of her younger sisters—whispered, “Mr Bingley says Mr Darcy never dances if he can help it. You and he made a fine pair, but I hope all was well between you? I witnessed smiles and conversation, but neither of you appeared pleased afterwards.”

Kitty’s emergence from the chamber she shared with Lydia provided Elizabeth with an excuse to escape to her room. Her thoughts were a mix of anger and regret as she undressed, but Jane’s observation teased its way to the forefront. Every time she had the opportunity to talk to Mr Darcy about the single subject that united them, one of them persisted with questions and the other became taciturn or angry. I doubt his honesty, he doubts Jane’s virtue. We are both of us at fault. Now he leaves me with more questions—more fears—than answers.

Have I ever had such difficulty having a simple conversation with another person?

Balling up her ragged stockings, Elizabeth tossed them almost angrily at the window. Enervated as she may have been from a night of dancing, it was frustration which now kept her mind fully alert.

Why, if Mr Darcy is so certain of Mr Wickham's perfidy, is he so reluctant to lay out his case? He must know it was his sister who introduced Jane to Mr Wickham and was then abandoned by them.

Could he believe his former friend had turned a page on his alleged prior behaviours and truly loved Jane as she deserved to be loved? No, it seemed he could not. Elizabeth was gripped by a frightening realisation: it was possible Mr Darcy could do more than allay her doubts and fears—he could worsen them. Mr Wickham must be very bad if Mr Darcy could hardly speak of it.

If only he would!

An assembly full of her neighbours, dancing, drinking, and chattering loudly over the music, was not the forum for such a fraught conversation. Nor was Longbourn's drawing room, in company with eager ears and gossiping tongues. In each, Jane was nearby and vulnerable to others' opinions on an engagement Elizabeth now was certain was a horrendous mistake.

Pulling on her night-rail, Elizabeth yawned and slipped into her bed. She sat, rubbing her toes, smiling as she considered that her feet, unlike Kitty's, were uninjured from her turn with Robert Lucas. Her mind drifted to the memory of Mr Darcy in his fine waistcoat and jacket, his hair trimmed, bowing to her and requesting her hand.

Jane's comments about his usual disinclination to dance were absurd! Until the most unpleasant topic arose, he seemed to enjoy dancing with her. How well they had

fitted together. He was so graceful, a fine figure; never had she felt herself in more capable hands in a dance. Capable and comforting, she thought, for despite his vexing reluctance to do so, Mr Darcy had promised to confide in her. He was clearly not a gentleman who spoke easily of private matters, least of all to a woman below him in station residing in a small market town that had not welcomed him.

He is willing to trust me so as to aid Jane and my family, which even my own father seems reluctant to do. That alone distinguished him as earnest and honourable. Elizabeth had already been aware of his discernment and that he was watchful—and she was often the object of his stares. Such overt glances would be Mr Darcy's most glaring flaw; otherwise, his manners were perfect—except for his propensity to be taciturn. Still, he had tolerated her family's imperfect behaviour on more than one occasion and seemed to comprehend that she had little choice but to do so as well. Nothing escaped his notice, and his mind was always engaged. How wide-ranging and interesting conversation could be if they moved beyond the worrying subject of her sister's future.

As she slipped into the embrace of a much-needed sleep, her concerns for Jane grew, and the urgent need to speak— alone —to Mr Darcy was her final thought. It was her first consideration when she awoke as well.

She was still summoning an excuse to call at Netherfield and seek out Mr Darcy when, shortly after fleeing the house the following morning, she encountered the man himself riding towards her.

“Good morning, Miss Elizabeth.”

She looked at him atop his horse, a gleaming black giant, as striking and intimidating as its rider. Mr Darcy's hard jaw was set, a small crease burrowing between his dark eyes. One gloved hand loosely held the reins; the other rested on his thigh. She blinked, her face heating, almost mortified by the pleasure she took in the sight of

him.

“Good morning to you, sir.” Nodding, she looked away briefly at a grove of beech trees—a common and uninteresting place to rest her gaze.

“Do you walk alone?” He dismounted and stepped towards her, leading the enormous beast.

“At this hour, I nearly always am alone, especially the morning after an assembly,” said Elizabeth. “I am in no danger from anything more than bird droppings or frisky rabbits.”

Curious whether he had intended to meet her and commence the private conversation he had promised, Elizabeth asked whether he too was alone. Earning only a nod in response, she wondered at his taciturn behaviour. “If you prefer solitude and silence, I shall leave you to it, but I must know whether Jane or her reputation are in danger from Mr Wickham.”

She turned away, trying to keep herself from beginning yet another argument.

“Wait,” came a quick reply as Mr Darcy moved to stand before her. “Please, I would speak to you. My manners were poor last evening. I apologise for any insult.”

Looking up, Elizabeth found he was gazing at her intently. The weak morning sun was behind him, but even in the dim light, she could see that he was freshly shaven and wearing crisp, clean riding clothes. No man should be perfectly groomed to take a walk or ride when the sun had scarcely risen. Unconsciously, she smoothed the creases in her morning gown.

“I thank you, but I must apologise for the words I spoke to you at Longbourn. I am a great defender of my sister and am too eager to see slights where none exist.”

The wariness in his countenance shifted to something more open. “You should not regret your words. Protecting a sister—one’s family—is all that is admirable.”

His eyes swept over her. Suddenly realising she had removed her bonnet earlier, Elizabeth placed it on her head and fumbled with the ribbons.

“It is. You must enlighten me as to Mr Wickham’s character. I fear that whatever terrible things he has said of you must be his in equal measure.”



### Twelve

A flash of pain swept his expression. It was gone just as quickly, and he sighed heavily as he looped his horse's reins over a tree branch.

"I am pleased that your dislike of me is overridden by your scepticism of Wickham."

Elizabeth gave him a weak smile. "I have been in your company only a handful of times and have been anything but polite in my manners. I am known to be impertinent, but never have I been purposely discourteous, even when my intention was levity. Forgive me."

Mr Darcy held up a hand; his eyebrows furrowed as if to imbue his next words with sincerity. "There is nothing to forgive," he protested. "I have behaved little better. We have had an awkward beginning. I cannot say either would have acted more politely if the circumstance of your sister's engagement to Wickham were not the material point of our conversation, and of our entire acquaintance."

Then he smiled, and it transformed his face entirely. No longer did he gaze at her solemnly, but with a warmth that lit his eyes and displayed him as the handsomest man she had ever encountered. Albeit a little stunned, Elizabeth returned his smile. "My father enjoys a debate, my mother an argument. I shall refrain from their examples so that we may discuss that one subject each of us wishes to examine."

He nodded, which she surmised was an acceptance of her apology, and gestured to the path before them. As they began walking together, he said quietly, "First, I must apologise for questioning your sister's honour. You have been everything gracious, in

spite of any disturbance you may feel over my questions and your sister's engagement. I take it you disapprove of her betrothment?"

"Disapprove? That is hardly a generous position, especially of a sister." She took a breath. "I admit I was bewildered by the swiftness of the connexion, and the topic of my sister's engagement, especially when raised by you, the man Mr Wickham so disparages, provoked me beyond measure."

"My portrait was painted and displayed without my input or approval, and it rendered me a most heinous character."

The small smile that accompanied his words prompted her to laugh. "Oh, broad, colourful paint strokes revealed a flaming character, produced in great detail but with sloppy execution."

His smile broadened briefly, then it disappeared; his expression grew serious. "You are right to distrust him."

There was too much to say here, and Elizabeth paused, wrinkling her nose as she formed her reply. "He swears love to my sister and promises marriage as soon as his business is completed, but he has scarcely been in her company to prove his worth while spending much of his visit to us defaming you as the cause of his past troubles." She sighed. "He is gone, and you arrive, clearly disapproving of the man and his promises but unwilling to say why."

Mr Darcy winced, but before he could speak, Elizabeth turned and grasped his sleeve. "Do you doubt his intention to marry Jane?"

"I doubt him in all things," he said, slowly lifting his gaze from where her hand lay on his arm. "Your sister is all that is admirable. I mean no insult to your family or home, but I know Wickham and the life he believes he deserves. He cannot be happy

without wealth to give him standing in society and allow him leisure. Has your sister a large dowry, or is a fortune to be inherited with Longbourn?"

A tremor swept through Elizabeth; she was stunned as much by his directness as by the revelations about Mr Wickham. Unable to bear the look of concern on Mr Darcy's countenance, she stared down at the well-trodden path. "My father has invested poorly. My sisters and I bring little to a marriage beyond our wardrobes and a thousand pounds each. Longbourn is entailed, to a cousin we have yet to meet but whom my mother has assigned to Kitty or Mary as husband."

Frowning, she glanced at Mr Darcy, prepared to see his disgust. Instead, he seemed stricken. His step slowed, then stopped.

"Is Wickham aware of any of this?"

She was ashamed not to know the answer. "My father has been more than secretive about his conversations and correspondence with Mr Wickham. I would like to believe he would disclose such information to any suitor. Certainly, the entail is no secret. Everyone in Meryton is aware of it."

"If Wickham knows, and continues with the engagement, it might lend credence to his story of an estate and fortune, and sincere esteem for your sister. Or—" Mr Darcy looked thoughtful for a moment, rubbing his chin. Behind him, the sun outlined his form. Elizabeth could see traces of auburn and gold in the dark hair that curled below his ears. Her hand twitched as though wishing to touch and gauge its softness. Then his deep voice broke the spell.

"Miss Elizabeth, you are an intelligent and discerning lady with only the best interests of your sister at heart. Whether or not you believe Wickham to be genuine in his affections, I should like to investigate his claims, understand his intentions, and determine his suitability for the marriage. Would you—would your father—allow me

to do so?"

"Neither my father nor I could refuse your help," she said, feeling as much foreboding as gratitude. "I do not know any man's heart nor his dealings. I beg you to tell me about Mr Wickham."

He looked relieved, and at her nod, they began again to walk together. Then he told a tale worse than she could have supposed. From childhood, Mr Wickham had preferred leisure to hard work. He was a clever but disinterested student, choosing to pursue fun with card games, parties, and wanton behaviour rather than take advantage of the gentleman's education provided him by the elder Mr Darcy.

"He has been reckless and lacked honour in his dealings with men and ladies alike."

Although Elizabeth believed she understood the delicate allusion made by Mr Darcy, she suspected he was leaving out details no gentleman would ever reveal to a lady. Forcing herself to be calm, she asked, "You did not deny him his inheritance nor a living?"

"Not at all. He came to me a year ago, demanding further recompense after having spent the funds I provided three years earlier when he turned down the living—one for which he was poorly suited." He kicked at a pebble on the path. "My father had wished him to go into the church, but I admit being relieved to hand him a cheque rather than the care of parishioners."

"Was it a considerable sum?"

"Three thousand pounds."

She nearly stumbled. "How is that possible, as a single man, to spend so much so quickly? Did he invest poorly?"

“I know only of a trail of debts left behind. I also know nothing of family in Norfolk or the inheritance of an estate, but that is easily discovered.”

“I would prefer to think him a reformed scoundrel, but if he has no means to provide for Jane, and-and...” Elizabeth looked up at Mr Darcy. He returned her gaze, concern clouding his expression, and led her to a small grove of trees, where he held her arm as she sat down on a well-worn stump. He leant against the tree opposite her.

“Do not give way to alarm,” he advised her. “Although it is right to be prepared for the worst, there is no occasion to count on it as certain.”

“We must trust that he has reformed a lifetime of poor behaviour within the past year!” She could not keep the bitterness from her voice. “When has hope been so tainted by doubt? Poor Jane, to have her trust so abused! Mr Wickham has bewitched the kindest girl in the world, but to what end? What can he gain from it materially? He covets riches but is reckless with any money he receives. My father is a gentleman, but we have no fortune. He must know that—it is not a secret.”

Elizabeth took a breath and looked up at the tall man whose gaze had not left her. “Jane sees only the good in people, and she could not doubt the man who adored her, but neither could she hate you. She believes you had some cause for whatever terrible things Mr Wickham claims you did.”

Mr Darcy appeared startled. “And you?”

She shrugged—too intent on worry for Jane—and answered only half his question. “Mr Wickham is more in love with himself and his voice than he could ever be with a woman. I suspect, and you confirm, that all of his goodness is in his appearance rather than his heart.”

“As my housekeeper said long ago.”

Elizabeth stared off at the horizon, watching the lightest of clouds move across the newly blue sky. She loved the promise of the dawn; it allowed one to believe in all the possibilities of the day ahead, and all the happiness of those waking to it. This day, scarcely eight hours old, already felt dark and unpromising. She sensed Mr Darcy's scrutiny and smiled weakly.

“Much as it is a relief to have this knowledge about Mr Wickham, Jane's heartache will be painful, and it will be difficult for all my family. My mother is overjoyed to have her most beautiful daughter engaged, and Mr Wickham's glib charm has only ingratiated him with her. A handsome face, assurances of wealth, and a few compliments are all my mother requires in her daughters' suitors.”

Elizabeth turned her face and wiped an angry tear. True as it was, it was an awful thing to say aloud to a gentleman, particularly to one clearly as honourable as Mr Darcy. Had her family not provided him with enough evidence of their foolishness?

“No mother wishes less for her daughter,” he said, as if reassuring her. “Mrs Bennet will be displeased to learn Wickham is not all that he claims, but will she be accepting if none of it proves true, and he lacks fortune in addition to those traits lacking in his character?”

“Disappointment and fear of ruin. What does this say to Jane's reputation? She was wooed at fifteen by a man twice her age, and my father ran him off. He too spoke charming words—Papa called him ‘the anaemic poet’.” The memory of it was no longer amusing, for it seemed Jane was easily bewitched by any man with a silver tongue. Elizabeth swiped at her eye, feeling all hope draining away. “Now she has betrothed herself to a man who is seemingly a charlatan!”

Mr Darcy bent before her and pressed his handkerchief into her hand. “There will be neither scandal nor ruin. Your sister is respected by her neighbours and has done nothing wrong. All will be well—I promise to ensure it.”

As his deep voice swept over her, Elizabeth felt the power behind his words; she could believe him and trust whatever actions he may undertake. The resolve in his statement was matched by the sincerity in his voice. Deeply touched, her thoughts fell away from her sister's romantic woes, and she began a deeper consideration of the man only inches away from her. His eyes, usually guarded, held a soft warmth; she saw in them a flicker of curiosity, as if he were attempting to understand her thoughts. Suddenly, Mr Darcy seemed not merely less severe but sweet; the assumptions and anger that had stood between them seemed foolish with this new cordiality they had forged.

She inhaled his scent, felt his breath on her skin as he crouched near, and took comfort in his strength. A long moment passed without any sound beyond that of the wind stirring the trees and the birds calling out in the cool morning air. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, calming herself before again meeting Mr Darcy's gaze. His expression was tender; his eyes were searching hers. Suddenly, whatever ease she had felt in his presence fled as a frisson of fear rose. He was so close—so very close—she could discern a small scar on his chin. No matter the content of their conversation, this proximity was far too intimate. He must think all the Bennet sisters behaved familiarly with gentlemen they had known for a fortnight!

Mr Darcy appeared to recall himself, standing abruptly and stepping back from her. Relieved, Elizabeth drew her arms around herself and looked up—he was so tall!—to find him frowning.

“What is it?” Fearing he had a new consideration about the heinous Mr Wickham, she rose from the stump.

After a firm shake of his head, Mr Darcy cleared his throat. “I must speak to your father?—”

“He has done little to determine the worthiness of Mr Wickham.” The resentment she

felt over her father's lack of effort gave a bitter edge to her reply, which was obviously noticed by Mr Darcy.

"I have wondered. However, I have been presumptuous enough to have written to my cousin, who knows Wickham and is more familiar than I with some of his regular haunts." His expression turned sheepish. "After dining at Longbourn, I also wrote to my solicitor to investigate Wickham's claims regarding Norwich."

Elizabeth's quiet 'thank you' felt like an inadequate expression of her gratitude.

"You owe me no thanks," he insisted. "Even on so short an acquaintance, you had the measure of the man. It is the details, and their veracity, we shall determine. If Wickham's claims prove true, and you believe his care for your sister is genuine, I shall withdraw and promise not to interfere."

She felt a gentle flutter in her chest as she recognised the decency and goodness of the gentleman she had met less than a fortnight earlier. Unfairly slandered by Mr Wickham and treated poorly by the Bennets, he was involving himself in their unhappy affairs not because he had to but because he wished to assure Jane's happiness.

The dawning realisation that he could play some part in her own happiness was one she would examine later.



### Thirteen

Dear God, he wanted to kiss her! When her distress ebbed and she was enveloped in the sun's rays, he had fought the desperate urge. Never had Darcy felt such a tumult of emotion. Everything within him churned with astonishment. Her face, her eyes, her mouth, hold me in thrall. Elizabeth says she cannot know a man's heart, but my own is now a mystery.

A faint whinny interrupted his thoughts, causing him to rise and look about. He shook off his fog and wondered how far they had strolled on this winding path. When he returned his gaze to Elizabeth, her expression held a hint of mischief. It was the most becoming thing he had ever seen.

"I believe your horse is missing you, or perhaps is missing his breakfast."

So much he had disclosed to her, all of it unpleasant; there were a multitude of reasons for her to be angry and fearful, and yet still she could find humour and lighten his thoughts. He grinned at her and was rewarded with a smile in return.

"Um, yes. Or perhaps this." Darcy reached into his coat pocket and withdrew an apple. He delighted in Elizabeth's laughter and gave it to her. "Please, you must make my amends. I shall ensure he receives an extra serving of oats at the stables."

They began the walk—half a mile, he estimated—back to where he had left Flyer. Despite the levity that had begun it, both were quiet; Elizabeth seemed lost in thought, and Darcy, much as he was savouring his time in her company, recognised he must broach another delicate subject. While he had felt no desire to discuss

Georgiana's presence at Ramsgate nor her role in Miss Bennet's acquaintance with Wickham, he was surprised neither had been mentioned by Elizabeth.

"There is one more thing," he began, in a quiet voice. "We have not spoken of the occurrence which brought us together and compelled my interest in these events. In Ramsgate, it was?—"

"Your sister who introduced Jane to Mr Wickham."

"You know? But you said nothing."

"Because your sister is blameless in the affair," Elizabeth assured him. "At one time, I wondered whether you had come to avenge her, angry that Jane had supplanted her in Mr Wickham's affections." She gave him a guilty look which he found adorable. "Jane is adamant that Miss Darcy was young, and all that was sweet and sincere. She regrets having lost her friendship."

"Georgiana is all that you say, and she liked your sister very much. Had Georgiana known of Wickham's true character—had I made it known to her—your sister would be..." Sighing heavily, he said, "She has known Wickham since she was a child. Wishing not to sully her pleasant memories of her childhood when he and my father were both in residence at Pemberley, I never told her of his real nature. At Ramsgate, she had no reason to distrust him and enjoyed his company there until he forced an introduction to your sister."

Something in his voice must have alarmed Elizabeth.

"Was it a fortuitous introduction? Did Jane's beauty distract him from your sister?"

"More likely from my sister's dowry and his chance to take revenge on me."

“Far greater than what Jane offers.”

He nodded. “Thirty thousand pounds.”

She gasped at the sum, which he knew was unimaginable to her, and her sweet countenance became deeply distressed. “This, then, makes his attentions to Jane truly nonsensical, for unless it is true love, what would compel such a man—indeed, any man—to shift his sights from a girl of huge fortune to one of meagre dowry? I promise you, Jane did nothing to deceive him with regard to her lack of fortune.”

“Of course not. Your sister is all that you say, and perhaps, like my sister, modest and a bit reticent.” Darcy pushed away a branch hanging overhead as if to push away the melancholy settling over his thoughts. “Georgiana is easily persuaded. She will regret any role she played in these events.”

“It is not her fault,” Elizabeth said quietly. “Your sister might have introduced them, but her presence mattered little. He would have encountered Jane regardless. I hope Miss Darcy was not injured by their abandonment. Jane wished to continue their acquaintance but had no means of finding your sister.”

“She wrote to me, and when I saw Wickham’s name in her letter, I went immediately to Ramsgate and removed her to London. She has a delicate temperament and—” Darcy stopped, hesitant to discuss Georgiana’s lack of confidence.

“I know only of her goodness. How is she presently?”

He was astonished by Elizabeth’s calm acceptance of the coincidence and her concerns for Georgiana. He would not tell her that his shy sister had felt her own awkwardness and ugliness in comparison to Jane Bennet, or that his reassurance that she was most fortunate, and would find a man who saw her worth, as all women deserve, made little impression on her.

“She is well. A new litter of kittens in my aunt’s kitchen proved distracting enough for me to keep my word to Bingley and seek some renewal of my spirits in Hertfordshire.”

She laughed ruefully. “Only for you to be dragged into the same sordid doings here.”

“I should have gone to Ramsgate with her. Had I been there, I could have protected your sister.”

Elizabeth’s finger tapped his arm. “You went directly to Ramsgate when your sister needed you. Had I had such a chance... But what is past is past. What matters is that you protected your sister and now seek to protect mine.”

Plucking a few stalks of grass, she began plaiting them together as they walked. “And if a happy ending is found, perhaps our sisters could be friends again, and I could meet your Miss Darcy as well.”

He could not hide his grin.

After another half an hour loitering on the path in conversations that touched on Elizabeth’s recent trip to the Lakes and Mr Darcy’s pride in his home county of Derbyshire, it was time to part. She provided what little more information she could—that Mr Wickham spoke of a wish to see America and that the Norfolk estate came to him from some distant relation he had never met and was to be ready for Jane come the New Year—and returned to Longbourn, her mind full of reflections on Mr Darcy. Much as she was touched by his confessions of guilt over Jane’s predicament and his avowals of assistance, her thoughts strayed to the warmth and benevolence she now saw in him. He was a good man—one quick to provide aid and advice, even if his pride had made it cumbersome and awkward to offer it. Her family had not made it easy for him; thanks to Mr Wickham, all of them—excepting Jane—had had their suspicions high and manners low when receiving him. And she

had been the worst of all, knowing he could not be so bad and yet hesitant to approach him.

My scepticism has been overridden by something much more dangerous. I like him, perhaps far too much.

With her mind awirl, Elizabeth was relieved it was still too early for her family to gather in the breakfast room. The morning post had arrived, providing her a needed distraction from her thoughts. None of the three letters in the salver was meant for her but recognising the looping hand of Mr Wickham on the letter addressed to Jane, she carried it up to her sister's room in hopes of a private conversation.

After a light knock, she entered to find Jane lacing her slippers. Her face fell when she saw the letter Elizabeth thrust at her. "Another?"

How odd! There was no joy, no pleasure in Jane's voice; she appeared distraught at the very sight of it. "Did you receive one yesterday?"

Nodding, Jane took the letter and opened a small box on her dressing table. She placed the letter inside.

Careful not to expose her own anticipation, Elizabeth said, "Perhaps Mr Wickham has completed his business and is writing to you of his success."

Jane, her back to her, only shook her head, prompting Elizabeth to step closer. Glancing down at the box, she saw at least ten letters were inside, and like today's missive, at least two were unopened.

"Jane?"

Her sister heaved a great sigh and turned round; her anguished expression bore all the

signs of incipient tears. “Oh Lizzy, I am a terrible creature! Yesterday, I wrote to Mr Wickham and told him I wish to end our engagement.”

“You...you did what? You broke it off?” Before the assembly? Elizabeth’s shock overcame the thrill she felt. For Jane to act so boldly—again!

“Lizzy, do not be angry with me! I know Mr Wickham’s feelings are genuine, but I recognise now what you have been asking...how well do I know him? Did I rush into my own feelings because his were so persistent?”

“And did you?”

Jane hung her head. “Yes, you were...you are correct. I made a horrible mistake. And worse than breaking Mr Wickham’s heart is that I am a wanton, a terrible girl who falls in love too easily!”

“Jane, you are anything but wanton, terrible, or capricious.” Elizabeth laid a hand on her sister’s shoulder, hoping to calm her.

“I have been capricious, behaving as Papa might have expected of Lydia! I openly displayed my eagerness to dance with Mr Bingley, and even before the assembly, my feelings were confirmed,” she cried. “I feel an ease in his company, a comfort in our conversation, that I have never felt with Mr Wickham. His attentions and compliments may have overwhelmed me at Ramsgate. Now my mind has clarity and I must break his heart.”

Elizabeth stared in disbelief at the sister with whom she had shared secrets and ribbons since she could speak her first words. Jane, recognising the hastiness of her attachment, assumed she was cruel to break it off? She would save herself! Taking a breath, she sought to calm Jane and reached out to press her hand. But Jane was not yet done with her self-recrimination.

“I cannot marry one man when I care for another. Even if Mr Bingley does not return my feelings, it is wrong to proceed with an engagement to Mr Wickham.” Jane wiped a tear from her cheek and swallowed. “I am fickle and cruel and have no wish to injure Mr Wickham, so I am attempting to do the correct thing and let him know before he makes further plans for us.”

“And that is commendable?—”

“I know I am ruined and do not deserve to be wed to anyone, even Mr Bingley!” Jane fell onto her bed, weeping. “I shall not allow my own weakness to ruin your chances of matrimony. I shall move in with the Gardiners, or find work as a governess, and you all can say I am dead.”

“Jane.” Elizabeth sat beside her, caught between laughter and tears of relief. “I shall stand by you, no matter who is your husband, or if you become a spinster aunt teaching all your nieces and nephews to sing rhymes and stay out of the mud.”

Sniffing, Jane looked up. Her flawless complexion was red and blotchy—evidence of her distress. “But Lizzy?—”

Jane is safe from Mr Wickham and Mr Darcy will not have to do anything at all.

Elizabeth gathered her sister in her arms. “This is for the best, truly it is. You must own your heart, much as it may, for a short time, hurt you and Mr Wickham.”

“Oh Lizzy! Mr Wickham is so kind, and he will be deeply wounded! His letters are so-so...full with feeling. I cannot bear to open this letter! He would have written it before he received mine.”

After everything Mr Darcy had said of him, Elizabeth could hardly feel sorrow for Mr Wickham and his flowery compliments. She welcomed her sister’s decision. Jane

was fortunate to make her escape from him—and to have done so without learning how terrible a man he was. How would he respond? How could he respond? And what did it mean for Jane? If not a dangerous man, he was prone to unpleasant behaviour.

Sighing, she pulled her handkerchief from her pocket and pressed it into Jane's hand. "Mr Wickham acted precipitously as well. He may not greet your words happily, but we must prepare for the more immediate repercussions here at Longbourn. Dry your eyes, put some cool water on your cheeks, and let us go and talk to Papa. Once he is over his shock and begins to tease you, we shall have breakfast and go for a walk to revive your spirits. If I must climb a tree to earn your laugh, I shall."



Fourteen

If Mr Bennet was relieved by Jane's change of heart, he did not reveal it. He cast a weary eye over his eldest daughter and asked her to repeat the story of her romantic epiphany a second time before his attention drifted to Elizabeth.

"Lizzy and I have each had our concerns about the speed with which you determined yourself eager to marry Mr Wickham," he said slowly. "It took less than a fortnight, and the engagement has not been two months yet. This change of heart is sudden as well. Are you so certain now that you do not wish to marry him?"

Jane's face reddened even further than it had when she haltingly told her father of her decision. "Yes, for it is to the advantage of neither if my heart does not belong to him. He deserves a less impetuous wife." She sniffed back a sob, and Elizabeth nearly erupted into detailing all the reasons Mr Wickham did not deserve a wife as good as Jane.

"Mr Wickham is not faultless, my girl," said their father in a harsh tone. "You deserve a man who will remain near you and court you properly—not go off to conduct business none of us understand and send letters that demand far too much. If I—" He shook his head, then fumbled with his spectacles and began cleaning them.

"Papa, what has Mr Wickham done to upset you?"

Jane's plaintive question went unanswered. She was innocent to whatever troubles Mr Wickham was making for their father, and Elizabeth was determined to keep her sister and her tender—and altogether too transient—emotions out of the resolution.

She will not marry a man out of guilt.

And yet the idea that Mr Wickham was making demands beyond the settlement Mr Bennet could offer obviously had not occurred to Jane. Her sister had not questioned the stories and promises made by her future husband, and Elizabeth had been loath to vex her with her own worries. But of course he would be unhappy with Jane's meagre portion if he had no fortune of his own. Once again, Mr Darcy was proved correct about the man's character.

Taking Jane's arm, Elizabeth led her to the door. She looked back at Mr Bennet, who sat, grey-faced, watching them.

"Girls, say nothing to your mother or sisters until Mr Wickham is made aware of Jane's decision. Apparently, I must write to him."

As Darcy helped Miss Bingley down from the carriage in Longbourn's drive the following day, he felt her deep sigh and prepared for some grievance about calling on the Bennets. Instead, she whispered more pointed words. "Mr Darcy, do help me ensure one of us sits between my brother and Miss Bennet. I fear he continues to disregard your advice. He was humming in the carriage!"

And how I wished to join in, Darcy thought. "I shall observe his behaviour." In what he soon would learn was a prescient bit of advice, he added, "Perhaps it is best not to ask about Miss Bennet's wedding plans, as that often sparks Bingley's ardour."

The smile with which Elizabeth greeted him and the Netherfield party led him to take a seat beside her—leaving Bingley free to claim a chair near Miss Bennet and her mother. Their actions earned a scowl from Miss Bingley, which both men disregarded. Darcy noticed that Mr Bennet was, again, absent from their society. Once greetings were made and separate conversations begun—thank God for Hurst and his praise for Mrs Bennet's cook—Darcy leant towards Elizabeth and said

quietly, “You are in high spirits.”

She raised a hand to her lips and whispered, “Jane’s feelings have altered. She has broken off her engagement.”

“Truly?” There was too much to say—he was surprised, relieved, and curious—but he could not ask further questions in a crowded drawing room. Darcy glanced at Miss Bennet, who looked a little pale but was agreeably engaged in conversation with Bingley and Miss Lydia.

“No one but my father is aware, and his response has been somewhat careful,” Elizabeth said before turning to respond to a question from her mother.

Careful? What has been said in his correspondence with Wickham? Darcy sat in contemplation for a moment, wondering how Miss Bennet had come to her decision and how Wickham might respond. He suspected Bingley’s eager charms had something to do with the lady’s change of heart, but it mattered little. She was safe—barring whatever ugliness Wickham might create. He had never been inclined to violence, but Darcy did not think him likely to walk away. He may come here.

As a light rain began outside Longbourn’s windows, he turned from listening to Miss Catherine’s conversation with Mrs Hurst and Miss Lucas and caught Elizabeth’s eye as she concluded what had been a quiet tête-à-tête with Miss Mary. He stood and moved towards the windows, hoping Elizabeth would join him and wondering how soon Miss Bingley would announce an incoming storm which demanded they flee back to Netherfield.

“Mr Bingley is quite perceptive that something has shifted in Jane,” Elizabeth said quietly, coming to stand beside him, her gaze meeting his in the glass pane. “Much as we needed the rain, it is a shame the weather will not reflect even unspoken relief and allow us all to walk out of doors.”

His small smile was no match for the warmth he could see in hers. “I would like that as well, yet who needs the sun when here is the centre of so much potential happiness.”

She wrinkled her nose—charmingly, he thought, biting his lip and wishing he did not need to turn the conversation to something more serious. Yet he must. “Did you tell her of our conversation?”

“No, she came to the decision based on her own lack of feeling.”

Darcy nearly laughed. Just deserts for Wickham. “She has written to him?”

Elizabeth’s brow creased. “Yes, before the assembly. He likely received her letter yesterday, but he will reply, probably more than once. He has been a prolific correspondent—a great writer of love letters.”

“Full of florid prose and false promises? I may be ill,” he grumbled. Wickham could lie as easily with a pen as he could with his tongue, but his willingness to exert himself by writing letters was surprising.

“You, sir, are a great correspondent. Jane told me how often Miss Darcy received your letters.”

“Ah, yes, but rather than gushes of love, a brother writes of day-to-day happenings and observances of a good meal or poor company. Far more eloquent and far less embarrassing, I assure you.”

She gave him a challenging look. “A little practice and I am certain ‘florid prose’ could come easily to any gentleman. Whether he could withstand the mortification of the experience is another matter entirely.”

“I suppose that depends on a gentleman’s heart, and his pride.” Darcy stared at her reflection until she turned her attention to a small smudge and began swiping at it with her finger.

“Mr Wickham has been so effusive about his feelings...is it possible he will not accept her decision and come here? Jane may feel obliged or could fall again under his sway.”

That was a possibility. Wickham had charmed them once, and whatever his reasons for wishing to marry Miss Bennet, he did not like when his toys were taken away. Darcy’s gaze became intense. “No harm will come to your family. Not as long as Bingley and I remain at Netherfield.”

He had been willing to do all he could to separate Wickham from the Bennets; now, as he stood beside the one whose heart and spirit had driven him, he realised he needed to communicate that Jane Bennet’s romantic travails were not the only reason for his interest. In a low voice, he said, “If weather permits, walk with me tomorrow morning and tell me of your favourite pastime, your most despised duty, your childhood mischief, and the foods you most revile. Not a word shall be spoken of this other, most wearisome topic.”

### Fifteen

Elizabeth, her hopes for time alone with Mr Darcy disappointed by the morning's deluge of rain, was further vexed when a letter from Mr Wickham arrived. Its heartfelt protestations of love and desperation sent Jane to her bed, where she fretted about her stupidity and feigned a headache well enough to be beset by one bad enough to keep her from services the following day. Another letter arrived on Tuesday. Their effect on Jane was so profound that Elizabeth interfered, urging her sister to disregard them and demanding that any correspondence from Mr Wickham be given to her. She was glad to have done so, for in the last missive, his pleadings of desperate feeling turned to incredulous accusations of betrayal and injury.

You will not cast me aside, my love. You are mine, promised to me. Nothing can tear apart your hold on my heart or my claim to your hand.

Was Mr Wickham threatening Jane? Elizabeth was at a loss to explain it otherwise. She needed to speak to Mr Darcy; she wanted to see him almost desperately. But no one from Netherfield had been seen since their call at Longbourn on Friday. The weather was cold and damp, and the grounds quite muddy, but nothing should prevent Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley from visiting. One gentleman's appearance would lift Jane's spirits, the other would do even more for Elizabeth. Where were they?

Her disappointment over their thwarted walk was profound. So much of their conversation had centred on Jane's romantic travails, and yet she felt she understood him. She was heartened he shared her eagerness to discuss other subjects—be it poetry, stories of town and family, history, or current events. No matter the topic, his opinions were certain to be deeply considered and interesting. Elizabeth had known

the young men of Meryton all of her life, and there were none whose company she had enjoyed as she did Mr Darcy's. And yet, she worried, as different as she was from Jane and he from Mr Wickham, was her growing affection for Mr Darcy too similar to what had happened to Jane?

No, it was the depths of his mind and heart that drew her. Of course, Jane would say the same of Mr Wickham—the same of Mr Bingley as well! Elizabeth sighed heavily and tossed aside her unopened book.

I do not know if it is love, admiration, or simply like-minded companionship. I am not capricious by nature. Whatever this is, it is more than I understand or have ever felt.

Setting aside her own concerns, Elizabeth determined it was past time to talk to her father about Mr Wickham's letters. After dismissing her enquiries for weeks after the engagement, he had appeared pleased by Jane's abrupt decision to break it off. A report of his actions earlier in the day made her curious about whether he also had heard from Mr Wickham. She rose and walked briskly to his book-room. Once granted entry, she got quickly to the point.

"Papa, what has happened? You went to see Uncle Philips after the post arrived."

Mr Bennet turned away from the window as she entered. Outside it, Elizabeth could see Jane and Mary walking on the path next to the muddy remains of the flower garden.

"The neighbourhood's voluntary spies have been hard at work," he said, chuckling.

"Lady Lucas was in Meryton and saw you go into his office. Charlotte is my friend, and she assumed I knew of your business there."

“Hardly spies, then. Merely gossips.”

The invective was harsher than usual; worried, Elizabeth stepped closer to her father and saw his beloved face was marked by fatigue. “Mr Philips is an attorney. Did your call concern Jane and Mr Wickham? I am worried about his letters to her.”

“He continues writing to her as well? The man may not squeeze money from my purse himself but he is denting it with the postages for these letters.” Mr Bennet sank into his chair, its seat moulded to his frame over the years; it had never proved comfortable to Elizabeth, but she imagined comfort was exactly what her father sought in the familiar but worn leather seat. He looked past her before his gaze fell to his clasped hands and he began speaking.

“I am pleased with Jane’s decision to break things off with Mr Wickham. He is a most vexing fellow. Only a fortnight ago, he had not believed her settlement was fair.” He dug through a neat pile of papers on his desk and pulled out a much-abused letter. Lowering his spectacles, he read aloud: “‘If I am to provide for the younger sisters, I must pay off my debt to those who funded my education.’” He threw down the letter in disgust and turned away.

Elizabeth’s indignation overflowed. “His education ? He was given funds by Mr Darcy to study the law, then spent them on...drink and frivolities.”

Eyebrows raised, Mr Bennet peered closely at Elizabeth. “I see. That fact only adds to my concerns over his new demand.”

Sinking into the worn red chair she had long considered her favourite, Elizabeth observed the deep worry in her father’s countenance. “Demand? What has he written to you? He writes to Jane that she cannot cast him aside.”

Ashen, his frown grew deeper. “No, apparently none of us can do so, or there will be



consequences.”

“He has threatened her? Us?”

Mr Bennet waved a hand as if it would dispel her concern. “I did not fully trust Mr Wickham, and mistook venality for geniality as he offered up his heart and his colourful tales.” He pulled off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. “Your sister’s former beloved provided few particulars of his present situation but made us all aware of Mr Darcy’s nefarious character. You seem to have struck up a rapport with the man since the assembly. Apparently, civility overcame you both long enough for you to determine that he is the worthier man. I refused to hear him out, certain of my own judgment. It was a grievous error, so do tell me what I must know.”

Although desperate to hear whatever Mr Wickham had written to her father, Elizabeth first was compelled to explain a little of what she had learnt from Mr Darcy. Mr Bennet paled upon hearing the truth behind the tapestry of falsehoods Mr Wickham had woven. “You must apply to Mr Darcy for the rest, as he is a gentleman and thus unwilling to provide me with any especially unpleasant particulars.”

“Good God,” Mr Bennet mumbled, his head in his hands. “A carefree life of dissipation and grift, and only when my pocketbook is affected, am I truly alarmed. I hardly know what to think, believing myself above the petty fascinations of licentiousness and gambling, but here I am with my daughter caught up in speculation due to her own kindness and beauty.”

The truth in her father’s confession pained Elizabeth. He had been unwilling to meet with Mr Darcy and had put off her questions—and only hers, as no one else save Mr Gardiner had pressed him to verify Mr Wickham’s character or the honesty of his many tales. If not for Mr Darcy’s fortuitous arrival and his willingness—nay, eagerness—to expose the truth to her, Jane and their family would be ruined. Yet still they were not clear of Mr Wickham, not if he refused to accept Jane’s decision.

“I thought him merely a prinkcock, a man certain of his charm and pleased to use it, but to have him exposed as a liar and libertine!” Mr Bennet began to complain of charming men and the danger of smooth tongues before arriving at the inevitable but daunting conclusion. “If she marries him, she will be miserable. If she does not, he will malign her, ruin her name. It is extricating him from our lives without ruining Jane’s happiness or her reputation that is the conundrum.”

“Jane will not marry him! She deserves happiness, not a marriage because a man—a man without scruples or fortune—demands it.”

Mr Bennet sighed heavily. “That is no different from how many brides and grooms enter the marital state. If I cannot meet his requirements, Jane is obligated, under the law. Her name, and that of her sisters, will be ruined, and Mr Wickham can ruin me by suing for breach of promise.”

Jane is doomed whether or not she marries him? “You must speak to Mr Darcy. He has been eager to be of assistance to our family.”

Elizabeth waited impatiently while her father’s fingers tapped a rhythm against his leg, as if he were containing his anger. Finally, in a calmer voice that still held all the disgust he had earlier expressed, he voiced his remorse. “Lizzy, my girl, you have done the work for me—work I should have done by putting pen to paper or deigning to speak to Mr Darcy when he called.”

“Why did you not see him?”

Looking abashed, Mr Bennet shook his head. “I have been an obstinate fool, refusing to grant even common civility to the gentleman.”

Leaning back in his chair, Elizabeth thought her father looked ten years older than he had a few days ago. Sighing, he admitted, “I too was charmed by Mr Wickham, and I

have not the funds to ensure the marriage or to send him away. It is quite a predicament.”

“Jane cannot be forced to marry him!”

With that exhortation, Elizabeth’s gaze fell to her lap, where Jane’s letter lay crumpled. She had no pity to spare for her father; all of her concern was directed towards Jane, the only person who deserved it, and Mr Darcy, whose efforts to warn Mr Bennet had been turned aside.

“Papa, you are correct that had Mr Wickham’s character been known, none of this could have happened. You must speak to Mr Darcy immediately.”

Sixteen

An unfortunate onset of stomach-ache affecting Bingley and Mrs Hurst had led to a dull, unsocial atmosphere at Netherfield. While Hurst did his best to entertain his wife with books and quiet conversation, Miss Bingley pronounced the estate to be cursed with brackish water, poor air, and ill-tempered servants, and she busied herself with plans for their return to town. Darcy suspected she would leave her brother and sister behind if they did not recover soon from their indispositions. Relieved by her occupation with something besides his comfort, he looked again at the letters that had arrived in the past hour. As he had anticipated, his solicitor confirmed no estates in Norfolk were connected to Wickham, now or in the future. The news from his cousin was more ominous.

Darcy,

You will not be surprised by the news I have on Wickham; you know his habits too well. He is in London, practising those talents he can boast of in the least accommodating gaming hells of Clapham.

Come to town as soon as possible. Your agent, Monckton, has further, more shocking news. Wickham's scheme did not begin with Miss Bennet...

Darcy had just sent word to his man that he would be travelling to town when a footman entered, bearing a note from Longbourn. He seized it, and was quickly relieved it did not contain worrisome news about Elizabeth. His irritation over the damnable weather and the household's dreariness was nothing to the regret he felt over missing her company. He ached for her presence and conversation. And yet, had

he not cared so deeply for Elizabeth's feelings, he would have rolled his eyes at Mr Bennet's belated plea:

I understand you hold the key to Mr Wickham's undoing and my daughter's welfare. I would welcome your visit to Longbourn.

T Bennet

Cursing under his breath, he mounted his horse and rode directly through muddy fields to Longbourn, where, after handing his coat, hat, and gloves to the housekeeper, he discovered Elizabeth pacing about the entrance hall. Concerned as he was at the sight of her seeming distress, her relief when she saw him centred all his thoughts. It is her happiness I care about. I do this for her.

"You are here."

"Your father sent a note. What has happened?"

She led him down the hall towards the book-room, then stepped into a small alcove set between two doors. He followed, excessively aware of how close they stood. "Mr Wickham has demanded funds from my father—far more than Jane's dowry—that he must know we cannot afford, and if he does not pay it, he will sue him for breach of promise."

Darcy swallowed a curse. He should have foreseen this.

"I have told my father some of what you revealed to me, and he understands that everything Mr Wickham told us is a twisted truth, a lie, or hyperbole, at best. Why the fiend has chosen to hurt my sister, whom he professes to love, remains a terrible mystery. My father is consumed by finding a way to pay or extricating us from the claim." She shook her head, her eyes fiery with anger. "I never knew one man could

be so bad.”

Exhaling heavily, he wondered whether Wickham had any notion of his acquaintance with the Bennets. “Has anyone communicated to him that I am in Meryton?”

Elizabeth looked at him, clearly surprised. “No mention has been made of you or any revenge you imagine, but what does this matter? Jane cannot marry him, but my father cannot pay him off.”

“He will not have to open his pocketbook,” he assured her. “I know what must be done.”

True as it was, something in his pledge visibly troubled her. “You cannot act on my father’s behalf.”

“I shall act on my own behalf.” Darcy’s eyes moved over her countenance, aching at the pain and confusion he saw there. Touching her hand—her skin softer than he could have imagined—his fingers closed around hers. “My intention has never been to ruin Wickham, but if ever there was a reason to do so, it is now, when I must prevent him from ruining your sister, or any others in the future.”

Elizabeth looked away from him, but without a bonnet to shield her expression, Darcy could see the fragility there, the brightness in her eyes and trembling lips. “You are certain you can stop him? You would do this for Jane?”

“For you and for your family, and my own.”

She closed her eyes before turning back to him. “Has the rain kept you away these past few days? I believe Jane has been distressed over Mr Bingley’s absence.”

And you, over mine? “He, Mrs Hurst, and a few of Netherfield’s servants have been

in poor humours, suffering from a dyspepsia.”

“Oh, how do they fare?”

“All seem improved. None will likely eat fish soup again.”

He earned a smile before she replied. “I am glad you were not stricken. Your wise company has been?—”

The sound of a sneeze somewhere in the house startled them both. Her hand dropped from his, and quickly she asked, “Do you know Mr Wickham’s direction? I failed to ask my father where his last letter was posted.”

“He is in London, likely at one of his... I know where to find him.”

The lift of her brow urged him to continue. “I have received word from my cousin.” He dreaded his next words but pushed ahead.

“Wickham cannot marry your sister, nor make claims to any of your father’s fortune. He already has a wife.”

A wife! Stashed away in the country!

While Mr Darcy spoke to her father, Elizabeth waited outside the book-room, her shock turning to cautious hope from his earlier revelation. When he emerged, she led him out of the door, towards last summer’s overgrown garden, before her mother could see him and embarrass them with her complaints and invective.

In sharp contrast to the resignation she had seen in her father, Mr Darcy wore an expression of angry determination. Men could shake their fists in frustration while an innocent like Jane was in tears. Of course, Papa was a man who required guidance;

Mr Darcy did not. He, and he alone, knew what to do. They were in his power—a power she was glad to accept. She trusted him.

Sighing, he rubbed his chin and in a grave voice said, “Your father understands Wickham’s situation. I am to town with a letter from him to Wickham.”

Her piercing expression must have worried him; he led her farther into the garden, where Elizabeth knew they could not be seen from the house.

“Tell me, all of it.”

“Wickham’s marriage was unhappy from its inception, and it adds to his complaints. His ‘profession’ is little better than when I last knew him. He supplements his winnings at cards and gambling by wooing women whose families will be more concerned with ruin than the loss of funds or a breach of promise suit. He has used aliases elsewhere, but Georgiana’s introduction to your sister in Ramsgate necessitated his true name. Beyond your sister, there are at least two or three others.”

Elizabeth sank onto the bench, almost unable to breathe as she considered all he had said. She was horrified at the falsehoods perpetrated by Mr Wickham. How would Jane respond when she learnt her naivety and rashness could have ruined her family? Elizabeth had exerted herself not to feel angry with Jane for the situation she had created, but a small bit of resentment flicked at the edges of her worry before she set it aside to consider that at least Jane was safe now.

Mr Wickham was a horrid man—a repugnant reprobate! She pitied his wife, likely an innocent girl who had fallen for his charms and was forced to wed by her angry father. A father who acted in her best interests, only to see her tied to a loathsome, unfaithful rake.

Turning to Mr Darcy, now sitting beside her, she was full of hope for her sister.



“Once Mr Wickham is reminded of his vows and his wife’s legal claims, Jane is free?”

“Indeed. His crimes, indeed his indecent behaviour, must be exposed. It is what I should have done long ago.”

Although he said it with conviction, Elizabeth now understood Mr Darcy’s temperament and could hear the underlying anguish in his voice. His sorrow was misplaced—she would not have it! Touching his sleeve, she rested her hand on the rich black wool.

“Long ago? You were a boy, not wishing to distress your father. And then you were a brother, dealing with grief, caring for a young girl, and learning to be master of Pemberley.”

He shook his head. “The master of Pemberley should not make excuses. He should make decisions, make differences in the lives of others.”

Elizabeth stared up at the sky, coloured an almost cheery blue for an autumn afternoon. “I am tired of all thoughts and conversations being consumed by the travails of such an unsavoury man. It seems there is an embargo on other topics until Jane’s happiness is secured.”

Reaching for her free hand, he grasped it gently within his. “It will be over soon. Your father has agreed that I may take all necessary measures on behalf of your family. I promise you will not see Wickham again.”

Shall I see you again?

Elizabeth’s thoughts jumbled, all centred on that one question and on the sight of his large hand, encasing hers. He had taken hold of it in the house when she had felt

overcome. Now, the warmth of his touch thrummed through her, filling her with a longing she did not recognise. Nearly trembling, she looked from their joined hands to find him gazing steadily at her. She nodded, breathless, unsure what to say beyond granting him the permission he sought.

“Thank you. You have become a dear friend to my family, and to me.”

He inhaled sharply and leant closer, his dark eyes searching hers. She breathed in his scent and closed her eyes. His thumb rested against her cheek, lightly tracing the curve of her cheekbone, his bent knuckles trailing her jaw.

“As are you, to me.”

His voice was so soft she could have imagined it. She leant into the warmth of his hand as his lips brushed her cheek. Dimly, she heard leaves crunching and then an unwelcome cry.

“Lizzy, are you to come home?”

Mr Darcy’s hand fell away. He stood and stepped back, but his eyes remained on her, watching as she tucked her hair and smoothed her skirt. As composed as Elizabeth wished to appear, there was nothing to be done about her burning cheeks and the warm fluttering she felt within. Turning, she saw Mary nearing them, wearing a thick cloak and a fretful expression.

“Elizabeth,” she said formally. “You are needed.”

As the sisters returned to Longbourn, Elizabeth wished to keep her thoughts on the moments just passed: the intensity of Mr Darcy’s gaze, the gentle touch of his hand, the fact that he clearly wished to kiss her. Instead, her patience was tried by Mary’s hectoring.

“One of my sisters is already betrothed to a”—Mary shook her head in a fierce manner as if to summon the words—“to a man of questionable manners. Lizzy, you must not give rise to further rumours and gossip by going off privately with Mr Darcy.”

Her sister’s misunderstanding of the situation, of the reasons she was alone with Mr Darcy, gave Elizabeth pause. Mary was not as charmed by Mr Wickham as the rest of the Bennets and had never approved of Jane’s hasty attachment. But as yet, she was innocent as to the true wickedness of one man and the goodness of the other. Still, Mary was not wrong, even if this was not mere flirtation. If Mr Darcy had intentions towards her, they were honourable.

If.

### Seventeen

Once he tamped down his frustration with Elizabeth's meddlesome sister, Darcy's disappointment was acute. Leaving now felt inelegant. It was not how a gentleman should behave.

Certainly, he had never acted in such a manner before—private conversations in assembly rooms and on walks, whispered thoughts and shared histories... Who had he become, this man enthralled by—nay, in love with—Elizabeth Bennet?

Half an hour later, he was bidding his farewells at Netherfield. Beholden to her sick relations, Miss Bingley did her best to conceal her despair at his departure and managed instead to praise him.

"I am glad you have been careful, sir," she confided, standing far too close as he watched his carriage roll up. "The Bennets are scheming. We are fortunate that dear Jane remains engaged and out of Charles's reach, yet I understand Eliza Bennet rebels against her mother's disapprobation and has similar designs on you."

Her hand touched his sleeve in nearly the same spot as Elizabeth's had earlier lain. He pulled away as she continued her complaints. "The ridiculous local servants we employ tell my maid that Mrs Bennet has warned her away from you, yet the impertinent girl pursues you in spite of it! I am glad you are leaving us. We shall follow straightaway!"

He nodded wordlessly and moved quickly down the steps to the carriage. He did not wish Miss Bingley to see the happiness her words had stirred in him. Much as he had

sensed Elizabeth's feelings matched his own—the tenderness of her expression, the eagerness she had for his company, and the acceptance and pleasure she took in his touch—this morning's near embrace had confirmed it.

The lovely, impertinent girl admires me. That others saw it as well strengthened his joy and certainty. And, he laughed, that the lady most sour to the notion had been his source!

For this, I shall owe a coin to Miss Bingley's gossiping maid.

Upon her return to the house, Elizabeth found Jane in her chambers sorting hair ribbons and as concerned about Mr Darcy's business with their father as she was over the general health of the Netherfield party.

She moved the pile of colourful fabrics and sat next to Jane in the window-seat. "Mr Darcy has gone to London to meet Mr Wickham and deliver him a letter from Papa that will free you and our family of any obligation."

Her sister paled, her lower lip trembling. "But how? I shall be ruined!"

"No, you, dear sister, will remain perfect. All of Meryton sees you as the best of the Bennets and will be pleased to see you made happy, in any circumstance." Elizabeth squeezed Jane's hand. "Mr Darcy will ensure you are protected and your future happiness made safe."

"Mr Darcy? How?"

"You were correct about him. Mr Darcy may not be all goodness, but he has neither cruelty nor villainy in him, and he knows the truth about Mr Wickham. Much as he may admire you, Mr Wickham is unworthy of being your husband."

Jane's blue eyes widened; her hand rose to her lips, and she took a deep breath before urging her sister to tell her all that she had learnt from Mr Darcy. Although Elizabeth spoke of Mr Wickham's imprudent waste of his education, dissolute life, and profligate spending, she refrained from mentioning his wife or his initial plan in Ramsgate, to seduce Miss Darcy for her fortune; her sister needed no further grief, nor the guilt she may feel over her young friend. When she concluded, Jane was pale, her expression surprisingly less sad than angry.

"He is so bad, I never thought it!" she cried. "Yet while Mr Wickham lacks steadiness and goodness, he professes to love me!"

"What man, good or bad, would not admire you? He has behaved quite ill," Elizabeth said, uncertain whether Jane's anger would turn quickly into desolation and tears. But it did not; instead she saw the strong, resilient spirit that had been hidden the past week.

"Lizzy, I am relieved. No matter what more Mr Darcy uncovers, I do not wish my attachment to Mr Wickham to continue. I made a very foolish mistake, and I do not want him as my husband, nor should we recognise him as our friend."

Elizabeth moved closer to embrace her sister. "I am glad we are in agreement. He charmed us all, and only the arrival of the man he so degraded could make clear what all of us should have noticed. Of course," she laughed softly, "every man who sees my Jane falls in love with her, which makes our efforts—to determine the good men from the bad—only more important."

Jane pulled away, swiping at her eyes. "My behaviour is little better."

Concerned by the plaintive tenor in her sister's voice, Elizabeth moved towards her and placed her hands on her shoulders. "Jane?"

Jane whirled round, revealing a stricken expression. “I transferred my affections from one man to another, almost more quickly than I can make rose water or paint a screen!”

Elizabeth drew a blanket round Jane’s shaking frame and clasped her tightly, whispering assurances that she was the best of all women, the best of her sisters.

“Mr Wickham is not a good man, nor was your ‘poet’, who thought your eyes to be the colour of milkweed pods, your hair a shade of lemon. He was hapless and hungry and rather stupid—you were then Lydia’s age! No girl is prepared for such oozing charm. Mr Wickham is more practised an actor and lover, and he fell in love as much as he is likely capable with your beauty and kindness. He surprised himself as well, I think, but he is a creature who seeks wealth and comfort in marriage, not a true partnership or hard work. You are better off without him.”

“I have been so foolish. Even Mary expressed surprise I would act as Lydia might, and she consoled me only by advising that my kindness entrapped me.”

Understanding that Jane deserved—even required—recognition for the part she had unconsciously played at Ramsgate, Elizabeth finally mentioned Miss Darcy. “You are no fool, but a heroine for having done a service to Mr Darcy and his sister. It was your presence that prevented Mr Wickham from exerting his designs on her—a girl of fifteen. You have Mr Darcy’s eternal gratitude.”

Jane gasped. “In spite of his admiration for me, Mr Wickham is a terrible man.” After a moment passed, she added awkwardly, “What of other ladies?”

“You are a dear heart, casting off a bad man and thinking only of other ladies who might suffer a similar fate.”

“Not every lady has you as a sister, or friends as helpful as Mr Darcy,” said Jane. “He

is a much more agreeable man than Mr Wickham. A very good man.”

Good, tender-hearted, clever, and generous , thought Elizabeth, who, feeling her cheeks warm to hear him praised, turned away. Jane nudged her shoulder. “I knew you would see it. All this time spent talking to Mr Darcy, at Mama’s request, to protect me. You truly admire him, perhaps as much as he admires you.”

As Elizabeth began to protest, she recalled the gentle touch of his hand on her cheek and felt herself reddening even further. Shrugging, she looked at Jane and began to laugh.

“Has one family ever boasted two sisters with a poorer understanding of men?”



Eighteen

London

Dusk was settling by the time Colonel Fitzwilliam entered Darcy's study; irritation was palpable in his scowl. "Although I am never surprised by the depths of Wickham's malevolence, this is a new sort of low."

The venom in his tone heightened Darcy's own anger. Tired and occupied by thoughts of Elizabeth, he had come to town by carriage rather than riding; he quickly regretted his decision as the inactivity had led only to dark musings. Now it appeared he was right to think only the worst. "What more have you uncovered?"

"His wife is Mrs Younge's younger sister."

It was a grim twist to an already shocking series of revelations. Fitzwilliam fell into the chair across from him and leant forwards to tell the sordid tale.

"She is ensconced in Sheffield, apparently unwell, and as unhappy as Wickham with their marriage. Mrs Younge made him marry her after he did what he does well and put a babe on her." Tapping his fingers impatiently, Fitzwilliam shrugged. "Could be why she is poorly—the child is yet to be born—but no matter. He is married and makes the chief of his income from mortified fathers."

"He charms them, sweet talks them, shows off his fine clothes and boasts of his prospects and estate, and when the father cannot supply the dowry he demands, he threatens to exit with tales of her dishonour."

Aghast, Darcy stood and paced across the room. “Proposing to innocent young women in a short-lived scheme aimed at ruining them and bankrupting their fathers. He is a degenerate. The lowest of the low.” He returned to his chair and leant over it, clutching its back. “He is a fool playing such a dangerous game with the hearts and bodies of young women.”

“And their fathers’ pocket-books.”

“He abandons his wife and unborn child and plays at the edges of bigamy!” Darcy’s stomach roiled. Wickham had not an iota of decency in him, disrespecting the name of his upstanding father, squandering the best education and opportunities he was offered, ruining lives and happiness wherever he went. At least, he thought, Georgiana was safe and well, and Miss Bennet would be as well. Now it was incumbent on him to dismantle the wastrel’s scheme and end his trail of ruin. “Mrs Younge has proved herself as venal as Wickham if she has been a part of this all along. Which of them was the architect of the scheme to entrap my sister?”

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “I believe she thought Georgiana to be his perfect victim. You would pay him off, and he would have enough to support his wife and child and confine his escapades to cards and gambling.”

The cruelty of it! “Quite a dangerous stratagem.”

His cousin’s eyes hardened as if imagining battle. “Yes, and at some point, he realised the risks in wooing Georgiana. She had the fortune he wanted, but you have the will and power to land him in prison. He dallies with the daughters of tradesmen and minor gentry who can toss him a thousand pounds to go away and leave their girls’ hearts and virtues intact. He cannot do this for long. Families and the law would close in on him.”

“Had Georgiana not got away, I would have done all in my power to ruin him,”

Darcy vowed, “and I shall do so now.” Sighing, he realised he must protect Wickham’s wife and child. Assured by Fitzwilliam of her apparent innocence in the schemes, Darcy vowed to find her a place on an estate far from Pemberley.

A thought came to him. “Wickham told Miss Bennet that he wished to travel to America. Much as he prevaricates, that may be his plan to escape his wife and the law.”

“Perhaps we should hasten it or find him a ship to Australia.”

Darcy managed a grim smile at that proposal. “We have his direction. Shall we seek him out tomorrow and see which ship his behaviour dictates?”

Fitzwilliam nodded. “I hear Australia is filled with poisonous spiders and lizards. It seems the ideal place for a scaly goat like Wickham.”

His disgust had not ebbed two days later, when he finally laid eyes on Wickham.

“Darcy, what is this?”

Wickham rose quickly, visibly alarmed by Darcy’s approach towards the corner table he had secured in The Cock his voice took on a hauteur as he read it aloud.

Mr Wickham, I thank you for sending me your direction. However, the complaints of my indolence are quite true, so in lieu of meeting you or forwarding the funds you requested, I have asked our mutual friend Mr Darcy to come in my stead.

He passes on no regards to you; only my lack of regrets, for I cannot release the hand of my beloved eldest daughter to a man such as yourself.

T Bennet

Wickham's face drained of colour; he stared coldly at Darcy for a moment before speaking. "You have no right to interfere in my business. You have intruded enough in my life. Now you wish to ruin my happiness?"

"Your happiness, indeed." Darcy's temper remained high, but he lowered his voice to say, "You endeavour to ruin young ladies?—"

"Ruin?" Wickham chuckled meanly. "Women enjoy every moment in my company. As for Miss Bennet, she is no ordinary lady! Have you met her? Never have I seen such delicate loveliness as hers. It is enhanced by the goodness of her soul. I was enamoured before I realised what was happening. A beautiful woman is my weakness, but she?—"

"Not your only weakness. Money, and the fine life you think you deserve, is your Achilles' heel. Women, drink, gambling, and general dissolution have destroyed your decency. If a shred is left, you will stay away from Miss Bennet and her family."

"Bennet is worthless. He has yet to reply to one letter, to any of my praise for his eldest daughter, or to my requests for her dowry or like compensation."

Darcy slapped the table. "You went after a lovely, kind-hearted lady, not caring how you hurt her, nor that she has four sisters whose reputations also could be ruined."

Wickham looked stricken. "That is the thing of it. I do love Jane. It is as if a thunderbolt struck me from overhead. I wrote her letters full of sincere words of love, and in return, she was faithless to me."

The man was despicable; truth and honour were unknown to him. And yet, if his heart truly was touched, Darcy could not mock him. He was himself learning the pain and joy of loving a woman, yet unlike Wickham, who had set himself on a venal path long ago, Darcy had the right to earn his lady's hand.

“Miss Bennet may have wanted to love you, but in the end, without even knowing of your wickedness, she realised you simply were not good enough for her.”

“Liar! Why do you care about Jane, or any of her sisters? Why do you make it your business?” Wickham’s eyes narrowed. “You have engaged your honour by involving yourself in my business—in the business of my dear Jane’s engagement.”

He grasped his glass and swirled the amber liquid in it, his expression changing from peevishness to something more familiar: cruelty. He leant across the table. “Have you stolen her for yourself? Has the great and stoic Darcy fallen for my country jewel? She has the beauty that matters to you, but oh—how your family will protest. You may as well wed a portrait of your mother, so similar are they in beauty.”

Darcy had recognised Miss Bennet bore some likeness to Lady Anne—fair haired, with a cool, classic sort of beauty—but he was not drawn to it. Something in his expression must have given away such thoughts, for Wickham laughed. “Ah, perhaps it is her sister who led you to it. Elizabeth is not Jane’s equal in looks, but she is far more astute—and far too curious about me. She had more questions for me than did her father.” He smiled meanly. “Fortune matters little to you, but had Elizabeth better connexions, and of course, fewer insufferable relations, her fine eyes and pert?—”

Darcy’s hand on Wickham’s throat stopped his next words. “Do not dare disparage any of the Bennet daughters. Do you understand me?”

Wickham’s eyes goggled as he nodded; Darcy threw him back into his seat, his fury now polished to a fine sheen. “Miss Bennet is a friend. I have no further interest in her beyond restoring her reputation and freeing her of you. Which you have made easy,” he said, drawing out the words, “by creating a situation which threatens you with utter ruin.”

Darcy tapped a finger on the empty glass he would not trust with his lips. “Belated

felicitations on your marriage. The poor girl. Do you truly wish to take on another wife, and the charge of bigamy?"

The glass Wickham had been raising to his lips slid from his fingers; uneasiness overtook his features.

"You... I-I was not to marry Jane! No promises were made."

"These letters, and the good and honest word of Miss Bennet, Miss King, and Mr Bennet, say otherwise." Darcy flexed his jaw. "As does the testimony of two other young ladies and their fathers, both of whom require repayment of their dowries and investments into your future."

"I do not have it!"

Darcy's eyes swept over Wickham, noting his panic and taking stock of his watch—a finely polished gold—his silk cravat, and his well-cut jacket. "Duly noted. You lack the coin yet your need for life's niceties is unabated."

"It is my right! I too was raised at Pemberley. It is what your father would want for me."

Disgusted by this particular argument, Darcy rose and walked a few steps to push open a window; he breathed deeply of the fresh air. "My father—and yours as well—would wish your conduct to be that of a gentleman. The fathers of the women you wooed with promises, whose money was extorted and whose daughters' trust and honour were injured? My father would side with them—and with your wife !"

"My wife." Wickham groaned, looking as if he had more words of disparagement for the woman.

“Had you studied law or ever bent your mind towards the education provided you, you might understand what slandering a wealthy gentleman and sporting with bigamy means in a legal sense.”

“I abandoned my designs on Georgiana! You should be grateful to me!”

Darcy again gave in to his anger, pulling Wickham from his chair and holding him against the wall. “Never let my sister’s name fall from your lips again lest I tear them off!” He took some satisfaction in the fear overspreading the worm’s face.

“Should you have attempted to make my sister—and hence me—your victim, I would have found a thousand ways to destroy you. You did not abandon your pursuit of her because you fell in love—you ran from the risks because of your lust.”

Wickham squirmed. “No man could resist Jane Bennet’s beauty. I was taken in by it, unaware Longbourn is entailed or that her father had saved so poorly”—his expression darkened—“or that she is so very dull and proper. Elizabeth and Lydia, now those two are not only pretty, but their liveliness ensures a pleasurable time could be had?—”

The impact of Darcy’s fist pushed Wickham sideways into the wall. He crumpled to the floor, howling. “You broke my nose!”

“Then I am satisfied. You were warned.”

Wickham’s instincts had slowed due to drink; he had not anticipated a punch . Disgust rose in Darcy as he rubbed his fist and stared down at the man. “Not only is Miss Bennet free of your claim of affections, but word has gone to the magistrates of surrounding counties that George Wickham is not a man to be trusted with wives, daughters, or investment schemes.”

Cupping his nose, Wickham struggled to stand. “See here?—”

Darcy reached for his hat. “You have constructed your own ruin. I desire we may be better strangers.”

Stepping outside the door, he nodded at the two men awaiting him. Colonel Fitzwilliam gestured for the constable to precede him in and turned to Darcy.

“Well done. Our girl is safe, and so is your lady. Blonde, eh?”

Darcy, careful to withhold his own anticipation, only smiled. “As usual, Cousin, you have it only half right.”



### Nineteen

‘Our business is completed, with the best possible outcome for your family.’

It was an ambiguous line, in Elizabeth’s opinion, but it was all her father would share with her from Mr Darcy’s express conveying that all ties to Mr Wickham had been resolved happily in favour of the man’s utter disgrace. What was not resolved was Mr Darcy’s return to Meryton; happy as she was for Jane and her family to be free of Mr Wickham, would the man responsible—the man she was certain she loved—come back to complete their own unfinished conversation? Much as she wished to know what had happened with Mr Wickham, it was Mr Darcy’s presence, his warm strength, and his reassuring manner she longed for.

The idea that Mr Darcy formed such a large part of her happiness was one Elizabeth had endeavoured to disregard, yet after the moments they had last spent in one another’s company, she felt nothing but anticipation to be near him again.

Although she knew of his disgust at the behaviour exhibited by Mr Wickham, and doubted he was the kind of man who gave his affections freely, just how Mr Darcy felt about her was unresolved. It was true he sought her company, but much of their conversation had centred on Jane’s misadventure. Their opportunities to speak alone, and learn about each other, had been limited, and she had been anything but transparent in her growing attraction to him. Was there more beyond those few moments of intimacy, that last moment in his company when she thought he might kiss her? Or would he think her as green as her sister, too easily caught up in brief intrigue, too readily smitten by tall, handsome strangers? Had she misread the familiarity between them?

Eager for distraction from her troubled thoughts, Elizabeth was happy to accede to her father's request that she assist him in explaining to her mother and sisters the true characters of Jane's former intended and the gentleman he had so viciously impugned. Mrs Bennet shrieked when she learnt that the charming future son of whom she had boasted for the past month was in fact a penniless scoundrel, and she emitted the least polite exclamation Elizabeth had ever heard from her. She was delivered her salts only after Mr Bennet provided her with a full glass of his best brandy. To his evident regret, she was sprawled out on his book-room sofa within minutes, half-asleep and murmuring about Jane's need to secure Mr Bingley.

Mary bowed her head in prayer; Kitty and Lydia were as silly as was to be expected, effusively voicing their disbelief that a handsome, amiable man could practise such evil deception.

"I cannot believe Mr Wickham is all that is bad, and Mr Darcy all that is good!" exclaimed Lydia, her eyes round and brows lifted high. "Mr Wickham was so jolly and told such good stories, but Mr Darcy is dull and unpleasant. Lizzy," she said, looking at Elizabeth incredulously, "you occupied Mr Darcy and kept him away from Jane. He cannot be as Papa says—you hated him as much as we all did!"

Before Elizabeth could reply, Mr Bennet cleared his throat loudly. "Lizzy was the most perceptive of us all as to the characters of both men. We are fortunate to have made the acquaintance of Mr Darcy and for your sister to have earned his trust and listened to him. Lydia, you and your sisters would do well to follow her example. Lizzy is a fine judge of character." He winked at Elizabeth and rose from his chair, clearly reluctant to abandon his sanctuary to Mrs Bennet and her quiet snores, before hastening them all from the book-room.

Once in the corridor, Lydia and Kitty began arguing about the worth of a red coat in measuring a man's honour. Elizabeth was grateful for the distraction they provided, as it allowed Jane—who had remained silent—an additional reprieve as she accepted

the full truth about Mr Wickham. Elizabeth clasped her hand and whispered, “As ‘a fine judge of character’, I must tell you that Mr Bingley also has secured a spot on my list of good men.”

Jane turned to her, her face remarkably clear of grief, and said quietly, “Your Mr Darcy is the best of men. I hope you love him as much as he clearly loves you.”

The surprise Elizabeth felt at her sister’s perception caused her cheeks to flush, prompting both Mary and Mrs Hill to pronounce her feverish and send her straight to her bed. There, Elizabeth tossed and turned half the night as she considered whether Mr Darcy knew her heart so well as Jane did.

The following morning, Mrs Bennet was fully recovered from her distress and worked quickly to ensure all in Meryton were made aware of Jane’s sensible and well-timed decision to end her attachment to the now despised Mr Wickham. It was a lesson in duty and efficiency Elizabeth hoped would influence her father in the future. Mr Darcy would certainly admire it; she anticipated telling him of it—and of many other things—when he returned.

Two long days later, on a cool and clear evening, Elizabeth and her family joined much of the neighbourhood for a card party. Aunt Philips’s reputation as an excellent hostess came from offering the best coffee to be found in Meryton. Had either Mr or Mrs Bennet been at all inclined towards a taste for coffee over tea, Elizabeth was certain her mother too would demand some of the fine beans in Uncle Gardiner’s warehouse. But when something did not appeal to her, Mrs Bennet found it easy to economise—even if it meant her elder sister outshone her in that particular area.

“Everyone needs a jewel in their crown, and she has no children,” she sniffed.

Elizabeth, at loose ends and increasingly despairing of Mr Darcy’s whereabouts, employed herself pouring coffee for the eager crowd. She stood near the table with

Mary, filling cups and watching the door, hoping rather desperately to see him enter. His friend had been of no help; since Mr Bingley's return to health, his sisters and poor Mr Hurst had fled to town, and, likely encouraged by some word from Mr Darcy, he had begun calling at Longbourn, seeking Jane's company and conversation. In his distraction, Mr Bingley could say only that he had left word for Mr Darcy of tonight's gathering and that 'his rooms remain prepared'.

Jane's newfound felicity is altogether vexing to my own.

It was not long after the clock struck seven that Elizabeth saw him; he stood in the doorway, his expression composed but his eyes seemingly searching the company until he spotted her. Smiling nervously, she watched as Mr Darcy began to cross the room towards her.

A murmur of voices made her aware others had seen him, although their pleasure was far less than her own. Exasperated that he remained disliked by people who now understood the truth about Mr Wickham, she resolved to demonstrate that the Bennets considered Mr Darcy a friend. Quickly preparing a cup of coffee, she stepped towards him.

"Miss Mary. Miss Elizabeth." He glanced at Mary but smiled at her and, looking a bit surprised, took the cup she offered.

"A bit of cream, no sugar?"

"You are aware of my preferences." His eyes were alight with warmth.

"Of course." Although she said it lightly, her cheeks burned with the pleasure of knowing his partialities, and displaying to him that she did.

He took a sip. "This is quite good. I thank you."

They regarded each other in what she hoped was mutual fondness. She knew more than how he took his coffee; she knew his expressions—the lift of a brow, the turn of his lips, the way he rubbed his chin when deep in thought. These minor alterations of an otherwise reserved countenance— she could read them. Could he read her expression, which she was certain now mirrored his?

It mattered little, as a moment later, Mary made herself known and explained in detail the origin of the coffee. Elizabeth noticed a faint trace of something like admiration on Mr Darcy's face before he spoke.

“As much credit as is due Miss Elizabeth for preparing this cup to my liking, if the excellence of this coffee is an example of your uncle's acumen in business, I should like to meet him and view his warehouses.”

The length and sincerity of the compliment was astonishing and was something Elizabeth felt should stay between the three of them lest her mother and aunt argue over who best deserved it. But coffee was not what she wished to discuss, and in a room full of excessively interested neighbours, they could not broach the significant matters which lay between them.

How vexing it was to be trapped—again—in a crowded room and unable to speak!

“Lizzy, you must be quite heated from pouring so many cups.” Mary gave her a scolding look. “Indeed, your cheeks are quite red. There is a bench on the terrace behind that large potted plant, if you care to step out of doors.” Mary took Mr Darcy's empty cup and moved away to the far end of the table, leaving Elizabeth astonished. Her nerves thrumming, she glanced at Mr Darcy, who appeared delighted with Mary's suggestion and offered to escort her. His eager gaze made clear his intention to remain with her there.

Mr Darcy squeezed past two grey-haired gentlemen arguing about a long-ago cricket

game and joined her at the end of the table. He gestured over to where Jane and Mr Bingley sat, their heads bent together. "Your sister appears well."

"Very well, thank you. Jane pities Mr Wickham and especially his poor wife. She can take the good of everybody's character and make it still better, while seeing nothing of the bad."

"In that she is much like Bingley. He is a good man, who wishes to see the worth in others." Mr Darcy hesitated, then in a low voice said, "He is sincere in his feelings for your sister. While his eye has been captured once or twice previously, his heart was not touched until now. Miss Bennet has firmly bewitched my friend."

"I am glad, but he will have to be patient. Jane has learnt a hard lesson, and even though her heart may be resolute, caution will guide her head."

Elizabeth smiled and earned his in return as he steered her through the glass doors and to the bench, hidden, as Mary had said, behind a potted plant inside the house and an overhanging tree branch outside. She was disappointed when Mr Darcy did not sit beside her but rather leant against the terrace wall. Despite the full moon, she could scarce make out his features.

"I am relieved your travels were safe," she said.

"I was fortunate with the moonlight and other carriages on the road. I am glad to return to Meryton. My business was completed with great success."

"All troublesome matters attended to?"

"Indeed. Fully disposed of. I do not anticipate any further problems."

Despite the grave subject, Elizabeth could hear a lightness in his voice. That he could

tease about what must have been difficult and unpleasant made her unbearably happy. She rose to stand beside him, seeing his face more clearly in the moonlight. “I wish to hear it all.”

“I expect you do, although the story is as unpleasant as its antagonist. At present, I prefer to discuss a more pressing matter.”

Her eyebrows rose, and his quiet chuckle almost sounded nervous, strengthening her hope that he shared her feelings. “I was anxious to return and see you,” he said in a voice so soft she trembled. “We did not have a chance to make our farewells then, but Miss Mary is making amends for her untimely interruption.”

His hand, hanging by his side only inches from hers, moved closer. When his fingers brushed hers, she nearly grabbed them.

“She is. My family is grateful for the kindness you showed, the help you gave to us. Mary, in particular, admires you a great deal.”

“Ah.” His lips quirked. “Another estimable sister.”

“I should not make you go through the full list, but all of my sisters have their merits and defects—some more pronounced than others.”

“Not you,” he said in a voice as tender as his expression. “I have seen no deficiencies in your character or appearance.”

Elizabeth’s breath caught as his fingers closed around hers and he leant closer. “Miss Bennet is beautiful, as Bingley apprised me of when I first came to Meryton. However, she is not the sister who caught my attention.”

Although unused to such compliments, Elizabeth was no longer wary of Mr Darcy’s

sincerity. Still, she could not keep from teasing him. “It was Lydia, with the cream cake, who truly drew your eye.”

“The fate of that cream cake was the most exhilarating event that had yet occurred at Netherfield.”

“Merely an everyday occurrence at Longbourn.”

He laughed, and she decided it was her favourite sound in the world. Then he spoke in a low, urgent voice that quickly overtook her mirth.

“Elizabeth, you know— you must know —I think you are the most beautiful of your sisters, and the handsomest woman of my acquaintance. More than that, it is your warm heart and clever mind that draw me to you.”

If his words had not already overpowered her, the tenderness of his voice and the warmth of his presence so near to hers made Elizabeth almost insensible. She lifted a hand to his chest, needing the feel of silk and wool and him , to feel grounded. His earnest gaze undid her.

“I, who have disdained the charms and easy compliments of other men, fall happily prey to yours,” she whispered.

The joy her words gave him showed in his eyes. His smile was one Elizabeth would have called shy had she not grown to understand him—he was a careful man and ever considerate of her feelings. He could be trusted, on even this short acquaintance, with her heart.

“That is because my praise and compliments are all true,” he said, kissing her fingers.

A clattering sound followed by a loud burst of laughter drew their glances towards



the open terrace door. When Elizabeth shrugged, he pulled her closer.

“You have proved yourself an honest man,” she said, blushing and feeling as though she might burst with joy, and not a little embarrassment.

“Always,” he murmured. “And a man worthy of you, I hope.”

When her gasp turned to a smile, he pressed his lips to hers. His kiss was brief and chaste, but she felt true affection within it. She hoped he felt hers as well.

Twenty

The following day, accompanied by Miss Catherine, the poorest chaperon in Longbourn village, Darcy was able to tell Elizabeth the story of his final encounter with Wickham. When he concluded, leaving out the particular insults made about her and her sisters, her disgust for one man was undisguised; her admiration for him was astonishing.

“He is truly monstrous,” she cried, holding firmly to his arm.

“He is—and has been almost from the cradle. He uses his few attributes to advantage. Wickham has a handsome face and an ease of manner and style of address which make him likeable. Deception and seduction are his talents. Thus it is unsurprising that he has had such success with his schemes.”

Glancing down at the ground, where their steps seemed to match in rhythm, he added, “Like my sister, I lack such ease amongst strangers. I spent much of my youth comparing myself to George Wickham.”

“I care nothing for his fate, but you must never compare yourself to him —your name does not belong in company with his! You are the best man I know.” Elizabeth’s hand slipped from his arm to grasp his hand. “I am grateful for all that you have done, all that you are to me.”

The endearments thus far exchanged between them had come mostly from Darcy; sentiments and flatteries once foreign to his tongue now flowed easily when with the lady he loved. Elizabeth had been shyer, although her smiles and expressions made

clear her feelings were as heartfelt. He slowed and, turning to her, whispered, “To you?”

Elizabeth nodded, an adorable blush pinking her cheeks in the chilly October air.

The warmth in her eyes nearly took him to his knees. Only the nearby presence of Miss Catherine, who appeared awed by his every word and movement, quelled his tongue. Swallowing, he confided, “I would like our sisters—Miss Bennet and Georgiana—to meet again. They are like in spirit. Much as Georgiana wishes to renew their friendship, it is your acquaintance with her I anticipate most keenly.”

Elizabeth appeared delighted but gave him a sceptical look. “Jane will be pleased to see her, of course. What is it you anticipate of our meeting?”

“Laughter. Liveliness. There is nothing Georgiana enjoys more than seeing me happy. After too long living with a ‘grumpy brother’, she will relish the teasing ways of a sister.”

It took him a moment to realise Elizabeth had stopped walking. It took a moment longer for him to realise what he had said.

“This may not be the time nor place for it,” he said, looking at her intently, “but I do wish for you to be her sister, and for you to be my wife.”

Her expression shifted rapidly; she stared at him in shock, as though he had told her the opposite of his honest sentiments. Awareness came slowly; recognising he had erred, Darcy stepped back, his heart sinking.

“I should not speak so imprudently to you of my true wishes. I am an impulsive fool, speaking of marriage to a lady I have known for less than a month, whose sister was so injured by a precipitous engagement. My feelings for you have progressed quickly,

but you are deservedly cautious. It was ungentlemanly of me to assume...to take liberties last evening.”

“It was but a kiss, one which I welcomed,” Elizabeth said, giving him a warm look. “If I am cautious, it is that I feared you would think all the Bennet sisters capricious, and I promised myself I would hide my true feelings until I was certain of yours.” She waved away his protests. “Yet I have been certain of you—your good character and your agreeable, intelligent nature—since we first walked together and discussed Jane’s engagement. I knew I cared for you soon after that and do not wish to injure your feelings when I ask that we wait for any declarations.”

Her cheeks pinked, and she gave him a delightfully shy smile. “Much as I may wish to exchange them.”

Her expression demanded he kiss her, but Darcy refrained and managed a solemn nod. “I am a patient man and ask only that you allow me the chance to earn your heart and your trust?—”

“You have it.”

“—so I may ask you again when you are ready.”

“A fortnight.”

He stared, a little stunned at her reply. Elizabeth’s nose wrinkled, and she looked at him worriedly. “Is that too long to wait? To allow others—our families and neighbours—to be as certain of our mutual feelings as we are?”

Grinning, Darcy took her hand and began leading her back to Longbourn.

“Wait!” cried Elizabeth. “What are you doing?”

“There is no time to waste. We must begin to display our felicity to your family,” he replied, smiling, his heart full. “And I have a letter to write to my sister.”

Over the coming days, the Bennets’ neighbours and the townspeople had far less trouble changing their opinions on Mr Wickham in favour of Mr Darcy. One had left behind debts with promises to pay double on his wedding day; the other had made good on all monies owed and proved himself a worthy friend to the Bennet family.

Mr Bingley’s continued residence at Netherfield Park, with an elderly aunt ensconced as hostess, gained him the neighbourhood’s favour as well. No one who saw Jane Bennet believed her wounded by the betrayal of her erstwhile suitor, for it was clear to all that a new one—nearly as handsome but more truthful and far wealthier—had claimed her heart. Still, Jane proved as cautious as Elizabeth had advised Darcy, and much to Bingley’s distress, the couple’s engagement would not come about for another two months.

Even more admired Mr Darcy’s steadiness. When he was seen walking and laughing with Elizabeth, it caught the imagination of many, and the respect of all, particularly when their engagement was announced scarcely two weeks after his return to Meryton. Mr Bennet was surprisingly disciplined in every matter of the settlement, and no one was better pleased than Mrs Bennet, who could not only anticipate the fine carriages and jewels that would be enjoyed by her eldest daughters but could now speak with true authority on scandalous rogues. Fortuitously for Darcy, she remained cowed in his company and wary of offending him, sharing her newly found expertise only with her youngest daughters and closest friends.

Darcy himself maintained his humour, as pleased to be proved wrong on most of his first impressions of the Bennets as he was to have some vindication for believing them crass. In late November, Elizabeth and her sister travelled to town, and he had the happy duty of taking Georgiana to call on them at Gracechurch Street. Both Jane and Georgiana had since learnt the full story of Wickham’s disgraceful behaviour and

wept upon first seeing the other. Those tears soon moved into happier conversations, including a renewal of Jane's agreement to sit for a drawing.

Work on the portrait commenced two days later at Darcy House. While the two young ladies met in the sunny morning room, Darcy guided Elizabeth through his home, showing her the rooms she would claim as mistress in a few weeks. She mentioned a letter from Mary had arrived at Gracechurch Street.

"Apparently, there has been great change at Longbourn." Elizabeth's impish smile matched the mischief in her eyes. It was the dearest expression, and Darcy indulged her by pretending solemnity.

"Yes?"

"It is my mother. Mr Wickham continues as 'that unmentionable villain', of course, but with the recent arrival of my loquacious cousin, Mr Collins, you may soon have a successor to your former title of 'that odious man'."

He bit back a smile. "Only one title captures my interest, and that comes less than three weeks from today: Mrs Darcy."

"My mother is occupied deciding whether he is for Mary or Kitty. We are easily forgot."

"I should reward your cousin for his timely visit, but?—"

Elizabeth gave him a grave look. "But then you would be forced to speak to him. I do not advise it."

Her impish smile demanded a kiss, and Darcy spent a long moment fulfilling his duty, until, breathless, they pulled apart and simply held each other.

“So long as we are left alone, I shall be happy,” he said, hoarse with emotion.

“As we already are. Let my mother arrange the lives of others. We shall manage our own happiness, together.”

The End

### Prologue

March 7, 1812

Miss Anne de Bourgh resided in what could only be called the world's most tiresome place, a place of such abundant leisure that almost any sort of novelty was a welcome change.

As though that were not misfortune enough, the spring weather did not know how to be anything other than unseasonably frigid. She had been kept within doors, unable to enjoy the freedom of driving her phaeton and consulting the master gardener about specimens for her herbarium, a pastime that was naught but an excuse to visit Gilchrist's cottage and beyond.

Her cousins had yet to arrive, though she suspected they would make little difference when they did present themselves on the twenty-third. Albeit the colonel could be entertaining at times, Darcy and Anne had blessed little in common, save for the fact both were dreadful company on a Sunday evening when there was nothing to do.

At the heart of the matter, there was a world out there which Anne very much longed to explore and experience.

While awaiting those who had been invited to dine, she was overcome with listlessness and dissatisfaction arising from lack of occupation. Sitting and silently snivelling, she stifled another yawn and listened while her mother and Mrs Jenkinson, whom Anne considered two of the world's most exasperating old women, discussed the upcoming ball. Although the celebration would be held in her honour, Anne was



permitted little in the way of involvement and, therefore, was ill-disposed to be pleased by anything they suggested.

Unseen and unheard beneath her skirts, the toes of her slippers tapped in time as the hands of the nearby clock ticked towards six. Such impatience was pointless. Anne expected little novelty upon the Hunsford party's arrival though she, at least, might have been unintentionally entertained by the tedious rector. Either that or at the dinner table, she would fall fast asleep headfirst, blowing bubbles in her turtle soup.

Being a genteel young lady, she hesitated to describe Mr Collins as a lickspittle, but he was excessively attentive to anything remotely concerning Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

From the entrance hall the parson's voice, as oily as his pomade, drifted Anne's way. A glance at the mantel confirmed the punctilious cleric was nothing if not punctual. He swept into the room and into a ridiculously low obeisance before his patroness.

Perhaps the graceless fellow will fall flat on his face this time.

Concealing unseemly mirth behind an ever-present handkerchief, Anne prayed the crinkling corners of her eyes and the shaking of her shoulders remained unnoticed. After all, she was supposed to be sullen and in poor health.

How could anyone presently residing on this estate be anything other than miserable? That thought brought Mr Collins's hapless wife to mind. What a prodigious wealth of patience she must possess.

Once Mrs Collins had introduced her houseguests, her father, Sir William Lucas, seemingly awed by the grandeur surrounding him, made a courtly bow as though he were at St James's. Then he took a seat without saying a word. The man's younger daughter, Miss Maria Lucas, appeared frightened almost out of her senses while

being made known to Lady Catherine.

The poor girl is even more of a mouse than I am purported to be.

But Miss Elizabeth Bennet, Mrs Collins's friend and distant cousin of her husband, appeared quite equal to the task of bearing up admirably in front of Lady Catherine, all the while remaining polite without resorting to affectation. Anne thought the girl had more pluck than the harp that stood unused in the corner.

Such a pert and pretty young woman brings a much-needed freshness and lightness to this stale, dim room. I find her a fascinating creature.

Miss Bennet did not behave according to the most current fashion nor did she dress in that manner, though Anne hardly would have known what was or was not in vogue were it not for her own lady's maid, Dubois. Still, Miss Bennet possessed a particular sort of elegance and charm. Such style was in direct opposition to the dowdiness and vapidty enforced on Anne by her overbearing mother, and she was less and less inclined to endure the restraints imposed by her ladyship.

Next month, however, all such parental strictures may be cast aside.

Anne viewed the formal drawing room through the young lady's dark eyes. While Miss Bennet studied the frescoed ceiling, Anne followed suit and noticed, perhaps for the first time in her life, that the elaborate scene was engirdled by an aureate cornice. Its golden curves, spirals, and flourishes fascinated her, and straightaway she conceived an inspiring notion. In her mind's eye, she pictured the end result, and it was glorious.

Coincidentally, thanks to Dubois—a French émigré of the Revolution of 1789 and a Kentish cousin of the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh—a few of the materials Anne would require for her creation already were in her possession. That little diversion of theirs

recently had saved her from a monotonous routine and a humdrum, cheerless existence. They considered their handiwork a lark. Others called it vandalism or out-and-out thievery.

What nonsense! I own Rosings Park. Ergo, I cannot steal from myself.

Days prior, when their mischief had first been detected, the person most affected by it ranted and raved and cried, "Heaven and earth! This is an outrage! I shall know how to act!"

In consequence, the magistrate was summoned. Servants were questioned and their quarters searched by the butler and housekeeper under her ladyship's supervision. Nothing was brought to light. Anne, Dubois, and Mrs Jenkinson may have been delinquent, but they were resourceful and clever.

Despite that recent upset, an extravagant celebration was to proceed as planned. Preparations had been underway for weeks. Lavish invitations had been dispatched to those Lady Catherine most wished to impress and to those by whose presence Anne would be honoured.

You are cordially invited to a private ball in celebration of Miss Anne de Bourgh's twenty-first birthday to take place at Rosings Park, Kent, on Monday evening, April 20, commencing at nine o'clock.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 3:51 am*

One

Friday, April 10, 1812

Outside Rosings Park's stable at daybreak, Fitzwilliam Darcy stood holding Cadogan's reins, knowing he had but a moment to decide whether it was nobler to suffer in silence or to confess a staggering failure.

Could his favourite cousin's pity or the slings and arrows of his teasing be endured? No, Darcy was of a disposition to tolerate neither commiseration nor ridicule.

Nobly suffering in silence it will be then. No one else must ever know of my vain attempt. Except her, of course. Still, he thought it would have been gratifying to have had the colonel's assurance that he in no way resembled the uncomplimentary portrait of him painted the previous evening.

"So, after only three weeks, you are deserting us, leaving me to deal with"—Darcy's head twitched towards the manor—"them."

"Sorry, old chap." Colonel Fitzwilliam was in the process of adjusting his horse's girth, so it was debatable whether his apology was meant for Cadogan or Darcy. "Speaking of deserting, where the devil did you go last evening? I thought you might have been at the parsonage entertaining a certain pert young lady who dared decline our aunt's invitation to drink tea."

Yes, I went there, only to be scathingly spurned by that pert young lady—the woman I ardently admire and love. Darcy's indignant huff formed a cloud in the frosty air.

Admired and loved. Past tense.

He knew he was fooling no one, least of all himself. He loved her still, in spite of the heartache she had caused, but her rejection was akin to bereavement, a loss as keenly felt as the untimely deaths of his parents. From those experiences, he knew grief would become less painful over time. That morning though it hurt deeply, to his very soul. Furthermore, his pride had taken an awful beating at her hands.

In response to his cousin's enquiry, Darcy scoffed. "Engaging Miss Elizabeth Bennet? I should think not." Forcing his eyes from the direction of the parsonage where she remained a guest, he rubbed Cadogan's neck with strong, rhythmic strokes. "If you must know, I went for a ride." A wild, reckless gallop that did naught to soothe this hellish anguish .

Although a groom already had done so, the colonel bent to inspect his horse's hooves. "I hope you enjoyed your freedom, Darcy, because let me tell you, once the Hunsford party left, there was neither pleasure nor escape to be had. Lady Catherine subjected me to her wrath. How was I even remotely responsible for your dereliction of duty?"

Surmising the colonel was accountable for information of which Darcy would have preferred Elizabeth remained unaware, he felt not a whit of sympathy for him.

Serves you right, you meddling rat.

"She even criticised my superiors for summoning me away from Anne's forthcoming celebration. I only managed to beat a hasty retreat when she ceased haranguing me long enough to take an overdue breath."

Tilting his head skywards, Darcy released another huff and watched the exhalation dissipate into nothingness, just as his hopes had done. You had it easy, my friend. Last evening I endured bitter criticism from not one but two women. To be rejected!

And with so little endeavour at civility.

After his punishing ride, as soon as the manor's front door had closed behind him, Darcy had been accosted by Lady Catherine.

“Nephew! I insist you put aside your bachelor ways, do your duty, and marry my daughter.”

Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Her breath had been entirely wasted on him. Confronted with that same old claptrap, he had responded in a disrespectful tone and was summarily dismissed. Retreating to his bedchamber, he had poured himself a large rummer of brandy—then another. Not a drop of solace was found in the bottom of the glass, only a swimming head and waves of umbrage and broken-heartedness.

Recollecting himself, Darcy handed the reins to his cousin. “Since events at Ramsgate, I have hardly known the blessing of a single tranquil hour.” But upon encountering Elizabeth in Kent, he had hoped his life was about to take a turn for the better. Why could he not have that which he most desired?

“Well, Cousin, as Claudius said in Hamlet , ‘When sorrows come, they come not single spies but in battalions’.” The colonel heaved himself upon the saddle. “You know I would stay longer and help you investigate the bizarre goings-on hereabouts, if at all possible, but unfortunately for both of us, duty calls. Just remember, if things are going untowardly one month, they are sure to mend the next.” He tipped his hat and trotted off towards London and his own regiment of battalions.

Longing to be away himself, Darcy kept watch until his cousin disappeared from view.

When sorrows and troubles come, they come not single spies but as the women in my life—Georgiana, Lady Catherine, Anne, and last but certainly not least, the

irrepressible Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Interwoven with his tangle with the latter young lady, the knots created by his female relations needed unravelling.

Squaring his shoulders, he made for the house. Veering from the front door, he sneaked in through the garden entrance, thus avoiding another confrontation with his aunt, though he doubted she would be awake until much later.

The manor quietly hummed with activity as maids and footmen went about their duties—opening shutters, cleaning ashes and soot from grates, sweeping, dusting, polishing, and myriad other tasks. But they might as well have been invisible as Darcy passed by them, lost in thought.

Clearly, he had been out of his senses to pay addresses to a young lady of lower standing. Moreover, Elizabeth Bennet was out of her senses to have refused him. As conceit and indignation rose within his breast, Darcy considered how fortunate he was to have escaped such inequality. And he told himself, while hastening up the staircase, that particular thought had nothing at all to do with Aesop's sour grapes.

A lesser man might have felt his life as tragic as Hamlet , the play from which Colonel Fitzwilliam had quoted.

At least, unlike Shakespeare's tale, there are no dead bodies littering the place. Yet.

Darcy had a letter to write, and he would attempt to be civil about it, even if it killed him.

It was done. Three hours had passed since he had awakened at five to bid his cousin farewell and to compose a response to Elizabeth's allegations. Not of an inclination to mince words, Darcy's bitterness had spewed forth upon two sheets of hot-pressed letter paper and spilled over onto the envelope page.

The ink was sanded and the sheaf folded with precision. Quality sealing wax, scented with cloves and balsam, was melted above the candle, releasing an aroma evocative of Christmas. Despite his expectations to the contrary, Pemberley would not have a delightful mistress presiding over Yuletide festivities that year.

Once the wax was applied to the paper, the taper's flame was snuffed between wetted thumb and forefinger. His eyes watered, and he denied the sting had anything to do with other than the smoking candle.

If ever I marry, it will be for affection and connexions, not for some grand love. With undue force, the Darcy intaglio was stamped into the warm, red blob, thus sealing both the letter and his fate. Love—a daft, fanciful notion!

Stepping away from the desk, he flexed cramped fingers and donned his superfine coat. A glance at the pier glass revealed a pale, drawn face with shadows beneath the eyes. Tucked into a breast pocket, the letter weighed him down like the celestial sphere resting upon Atlas's shoulders. Even under that encumbrance, Darcy walked tall and with confidence as he left the bedchamber.

How he wished he could escape as his cousin had done—flee, sneak away from the monstrosity of a house. Just go, and let them sort out their own problems. At times, family duty was a damnable millstone round one's neck.

Descending the stairs, he wondered how a person could be filled with emptiness.

Now I am adrift, off course. Thrown over. Cast aside like so much rubbish into the sea. But there was a lifeline, a rope tethering him. Duty to Georgiana and to Pemberley would save him from being carried along in a strong current, as some of his dissolute peers were apt to do.

With several collars hindering all attempts to rub away tenseness in his nape and with



the hatband pressing into his aching skull, Darcy left the house and advanced towards Elizabeth's favourite walk.

Upon arrival, he stood reminiscing. We used to meet here and ? —

Unbidden, an image of her angry face superimposed itself behind his squeezed-shut eyes. At variance with his feelings, she never had cherished their frequent encounters and rambles together. How could he have been so terribly wrong about her opinion of him? At least he had learnt that she, of all the Bennets, was not mercenary.

An endlessly dull, barren world loomed on the horizon. A bleak future seemed imminent. Nevertheless, as he strode eastwards into the rising sun, Darcy had to admit the weeks spent in Kent had made a noticeable difference in the budding of the early trees. The countryside was not as lifeless as it seemed.

Having already postponed his departure several times, he had planned to leave the following day but was compelled to remain at Rosings—not in accordance with Lady Catherine's edict but for his cousin Anne's sake. Never would he have agreed to stay for the ball had he known his proposal would be rejected, but not once had such a possibility entered Darcy's mind. If he remembered correctly, Elizabeth was to depart on the eighteenth.

Perhaps her own departure will be brought forward, sparing me the agony of the woman's prolonged presence. He had gone from wanting her forever by his side to wanting her gone from his sight.

After pacing for half an hour along her preferred route and eventually assuming she, contriving to avoid him, had steered clear of that particular walk, he abandoned any hope of encountering Elizabeth that morning.

How foolish I was to expend time and energy writing to a young lady so wholly

unconnected with me.

Cringing at the dreadful bitterness of spirit in which the letter had been written, Darcy intended to consign the missive to a good blaze upon return to his room. His words would be burnt to a crisp, leaving nothing but charred remains, like the remnants of his ill-fated aspirations.

Not yet wanting to return to the manor and the people therein, he ambled along the lane towards blooming wild cherry trees. Even their white, frothy flowers failed to gladden his heart.

When visiting his de Bourgh relations as a youth and wanting to escape Lady Catherine's tirades, he often had run to the wooded paths far beyond the park, so he directed his steps thus.

Perhaps I wandered here this morning to escape the memory of another woman's verbal onslaught. The voice he previously had thought so endearingly sweet had turned harsh twelve hours earlier. Raised in vitriol, it had accused him of numerous shortcomings. In a tone as sharp as a honed dagger, her final insult had been that he was the last man in the world whom she ever could be prevailed on to marry. The last man! Was she mad?

Upon entering the woods, a shaft of sunlight shone through the trees, stabbing his bleary eyes. Tipping his brim downwards and in such affliction as rendered him careless to his surroundings, Darcy watched his boots make long strides. A robin's song could not compete against Elizabeth Bennet's voice repeatedly ringing in his ears. 'Your arrogance...conceit...selfish disdain of the feelings of others...so immovable a dislike...I had not known you a month before I felt that you were ? —',

"Mr Darcy!"

Egad. The self-same young lady who had occasioned the extinction of all his dearest hopes was standing alongside the path.

Bathed in dappled light, she was heartbreakingly lovely. What a pretty picture she made standing there! He thought even the most gifted portraitist could not do justice to her loveliness, and his heart broke anew. Yesterday I was certain to be engaged to her, ecstatically so, by now .

Someday, some fortunate man would win her hand, and Darcy could not help but despise him for it. In his chest, the organ that had grown tender ached from loss and wounded pride, but vestiges of anger remained.

I shall be the epitome of gentlemanliness and charm, and she soon will regret her refusal.

Darcy knew he was deluding himself, for he was wracked more by sadness and mortification than vindictiveness. Still, he wished her a lifetime of happiness. Could she perceive from his countenance all she had wrought?

They looked upon one another, and he fell into the fathomless depths of warm, brown eyes until she moved past him.

“Madam, wait!” His tone, even to his own ears, sounded snappish.

### Two

Oppressed by a host of differing emotions, not the least of which were anger and indignation, Elizabeth slowly turned back towards the gentleman and responded with exaggerated impertinence.

“We are to continue last evening’s mode of incivility, are we? Very well. I beg your pardon, but no, in the interests of graciousness, I think it best I not linger. Good day to you, sir.” She dropped a negligible curtsy and walked away.

Mr Darcy’s voice followed. “Please, Miss Bennet. I require but a moment of your time.”

Elizabeth never thought herself wanting in self-possession, but even with a tolerably stout heart and a good dose of fortitude, she had had quite enough of Mr Darcy to last a lifetime. In her own defence, his insulting proposal had come on the heels of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s information that his cousin had congratulated himself on having saved a friend, Mr Bingley, from the inconveniences of a most imprudent marriage—meaning to her sister Jane. Congratulated himself! Such arrogance!

For five weeks, her sojourn in Kent had passed pleasantly, if uneventfully. Then everything changed when the prideful Mr Darcy—whom she assumed had been pledged to Miss de Bourgh—had asked her, with nary a complimentary word, to be his wife.

Guilt, sharp and unwelcome, now halted her escape. In good conscience, Elizabeth knew she had behaved no better than a termagant the previous evening, and no matter

how much he might deserve it, she would not subject him to the same unduly harsh treatment again.

As she turned to face Mr Darcy, she chastised herself for so cruelly rejecting him. Not for a minute did she rue her refusal of his offer, but she owed him an apology.

I may as well give the man his moment, express my regrets, then take my leave of him . After what passed between them, the less time spent in one another's company the better.

To his credit, Mr Darcy seemed disinclined to disturb the wretchedness of her mind with idle conversation. Such never was his wont.

“I have been wandering about in the hope of meeting you.” Reaching into a breast pocket, he spoke with aplomb. “Will you do me the honour of reading this?”

Determined to display no further symptoms of pique, Elizabeth instinctively accepted the letter, though she looked at it as though it might bite her. “Whose messenger are you this morning, sir? Historically, such envoys have come to grievous harm when bearing bad tidings.”

“Ah yes, shooting the messenger, a time-honoured response to news as unwanted as my amorous addresses.” Averting his eyes, Mr Darcy scrubbed a gloved palm across his mouth. “I beg your pardon. That was uncalled for. As for shooting the messenger, I remain unafraid of you.” A fleeting smile failed to reach his eyes. “And whether the contents of that letter are to your liking or not, they are meant merely to serve as explanations of past events. Without expectation, it is my hope that after a perusal, you might alter your perception of me and my behaviour.”

“This is from you ?” She scowled at the epistle before pushing it towards Mr Darcy's chest. “I cannot possibly accept it.” When he—childishly, in her opinion—hid both

hands behind his back, Elizabeth had no choice but to keep possession of the letter. Dropping it to the forest floor and grinding it beneath her heel would be preposterous.

The gentleman's next words were spoken with what seemed to her a degree of urgency. "There is vital information therein pertaining to Mr Wickham. Before you return to Hertfordshire, you must be informed of that man's dangerous propensities. You, your sisters, your friends, Meryton merchants—everyone—should be made aware of Wickham's habits and history. I regret not doing so while at Netherfield, but I had other people and their reputations to protect."

Doubtful, Elizabeth gave him a searching look before nodding and placing the letter inside her pelisse's pocket. Seemingly satisfied, he offered a perfunctory obeisance and was about to turn away from the plantation when her words halted him.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam noticed Charlotte and me gathering eggs earlier this morning and stopped to bid us farewell. I was sorry to see him go."

Mr Darcy's tone was unmistakably surly when he replied. "Yes, I am sure you feel ill-used by so forced a relinquishment."

Although temptation was strong, she refrained from kicking the gentleman's shin. I am making an effort to bury the tumult of my feelings beneath the restraint of society. Can he not do the same? "The colonel informed me that you are unable to depart tomorrow as planned." God willing, you and I, however, shall part now and for evermore. "I assume you are to remain for Miss de Bourgh's ball."

Their fraught history notwithstanding, Elizabeth thought they should be perfectly capable of conversing like well-bred gentlefolk. Let us see how long it may last.

In keeping with his customary mien, Mr Darcy replied in a dispassionate tone. "I am, yes. On the twentieth we shall celebrate my cousin's birthday. Apart from that, there

are certain matters at Rosings requiring my attention. And you? Will you stay and attend the celebration?"

In defiance of the awkwardness in which she found herself, Elizabeth forced amiability into her voice. "Lady Catherine graciously invited me to the event and was rather put out that I would not delay my departure. However, my travel arrangements were made well in advance, and I shall leave as scheduled on the eighteenth. It is with regret that I shall not be here for Miss de Bourgh's special day, but I am eager to be with Jane in London." A calm demeanour could not draw a veil over the angry accusation brimming within her eyes. "As you fully are aware, late in November my beloved sister suffered a devastating disappointment. Since then, she has contended with misery of the acutest kind."

Elizabeth thought it entirely possible she, herself, was more indignant over Mr Bingley's desertion than even her elder sister. Jane weeps. I fume. What was it his royal highness said at Hunsford? 'I have no wish of denying I did everything in my power to separate my friend from your sister or that I rejoice in my success.' Hateful man! "Mr Darcy, I regret?—"

From behind, heavy, hurried footfalls sounded on the path. As she turned, one of Rosings Park's liveried footmen came to a panting, bowing halt before her.

"Miss Bennet, I have been searching everywhere for you. Lady Catherine requires your presence. Immediately, if you please, miss."

Icy fingers clutched Elizabeth's heart. "Whatever for? Has there been an express from Longbourn or London? Or has something occurred at Hunsford?"

"I have not been made privy to that information, miss."

In a gesture of proper respect, Mr Darcy offered his arm and seemed intent on

escorting her to his aunt. “If I may, Miss Bennet?”

She flinched. “There is no need, sir.” Glancing at his countenance, she descried the indisputable hurt caused by her reluctance.

Poorly done, Lizzy. Do not be so spiteful. Thanking him and gingerly placing her hand upon his sleeve, Elizabeth thought she might never again be in charity with not only Mr Darcy but with herself.

The footman trailed behind as they headed down the frost-covered woodland path and into the park. Although Mr Darcy walked with long, confident strides, Elizabeth easily kept pace, anxious about the tidings awaiting her.

Both silent as the grave, she fancied that Mr Darcy, he of the furrowed brow and undue interest in the hawthorn hedges— as prickly as the man himself —was as discomfited in her company as she remained in his.

Discourse about the item in her pocket was avoided, but the letter practically burnt a hole there, so afire was her curiosity to know its subject. She feared that in addition to information pertaining to Mr Wickham it might contain a further appeal for her hand.

In his presence, she could not help but recall Mr Darcy’s fervent declaration from the previous evening. It had started so beautifully. ‘You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you.’ Who would not be affected by such an avowal? Had he stopped there, she would not have responded so harshly or have regrets that morning about the petulance and acrimony she had hurled at him. Despite the chilly air and the ice gripping her heart, a warm flush overspread Elizabeth’s body, and a dreadful embarrassment radiated down her arm to where her gloved hand rested upon the sleeve of the man who claimed he loved her.

But he could not long occupy her thoughts, for alarming presentiments of disaster



began running pell-mell through her mind. Lady Catherine's summons could only mean she had learnt of some calamity or of her nephew's proposal. After all, Miss de Bourgh was supposedly promised to him.

They walked through the park and into the gardens, each step bringing Elizabeth closer to what surely would bring either sorrow or her ladyship's wrath. Seeking suspension of anxiety, she prayed for the latter. But if it was about the proposal, why should she be reprimanded and held accountable for an unexpected and unwanted offer? Why must she suffer the consequences of another person's folly?

Will Mr Darcy find himself in the hateful position of being obliged to remain by my side and answer for his transgression?

Three

As they walked on, Darcy fervently prayed no ill tidings from Longbourn awaited Elizabeth, and he contemplated other possibilities for the summons.

Could his aunt have learnt of his proposal? And if so, might she hold another person accountable? The weight of Atlas's celestial sphere shifted from his shoulders, only to settle upon his chest.

He would not allow Elizabeth to suffer ill consequences from what could only be called his own foolhardiness. By her side he would stand, defending the young lady against any and all of Lady Catherine's accusations. Taking root in his brain, those imminent and unfair charges bloomed in vivid, mortifying detail—his aunt pointing the finger of blame at Elizabeth, insisting her arts and allurements, in an instant of passion, had drawn him in, making him forget himself and everything he owed his family, namely Miss Anne de Bourgh. What a heap of absurdities.

But not all of it was absurd. Elizabeth's allurements had drawn him like metal filings to a mighty magnet. Not only powerfully attractive, she utterly fascinated him. And he would wager his last guinea that she wielded no artful wiles. Honest to a fault, she had had no qualms about pointing out his faults.

Frowning, Darcy nearly stopped in his tracks.

My faults. They may be heavy, indeed. Had Elizabeth the right of it? Was he arrogant, conceited, and selfish? Was he disdainful of others' feelings? He wished he had voiced his concerns to Fitzwilliam while he had the chance. Whether he

welcomed it or not, his cousin would have delivered both the unvarnished truth and invaluable counsel.

All acrimony he had directed towards Elizabeth gradually turned his own way. My proposal was an abomination.

Falling in love was a novel and utterly painful experience, and as he passed the prickly hedges stretching up and down the lane, he gave a passing thought to the belief that hawthorn was purported to heal a broken heart. But as a man of education and intelligence, Darcy put faith in science, not myths, superstitions, or false hopes. The woman with whom he had wanted to spend the rest of his life had rejected him, and that was the end of it.

Unbidden, his father's voice intruded upon his thoughts. 'A gentleman does not offend a lady's sensibilities.' That lesson had been inculcated in him, and Darcy felt duly ashamed. The previous evening, by detailing feelings other than those of the heart, he had offended and insulted an exemplary lady, the woman he purported to love. Why had he spoken of her inferiority and of family obstacles?

I even might have uttered the word degradation and something about my scruples. Damn. What scruples? At the rate his heavy heart kept sinking, it would soon be in his boots.

Within minutes in a most abrupt and precipitate manner, his relations' palatial residence loomed ahead of him. So preoccupied had he been, brooding the entire time it took to reach the manor, that he had not spoken a word to the precious creature by his side. Ungallant swine! It mattered not. She obviously took greater delight in their surroundings than in his company.

"Well," he said, climbing the front steps, "here we are." What a talent I possess for enlightening conversation!

A loud rumble erupted beside him, and a dainty gloved palm quickly covered the lady's obviously empty stomach. "I beg your pardon, sir. By now, I have missed breakfast at the parsonage. I told Mrs Collins I would take only a short walk in the grove." In a manner arousing Darcy's sympathy, she added, "As was my wont."

His heart landed in his boots, leaving his chest hollow. Around the lump in his throat, he said, "As was your wont. This morning, to avoid me, you took to the woods and?—"

The front door opened, and a footman collected their coats. Before relinquishing her pelisse, Elizabeth surreptitiously slipped Darcy's letter from that pocket into one in the folds of her gown. That she was so protective of it and of her reputation gave him a sense of relief and not inconsiderable guilt.

Informed that Lady Catherine and Anne awaited Elizabeth in the morning room, Darcy offered his arm, and they followed the footman through an ante-chamber to where his aunt, cousin, and Mrs Jenkinson sat.

A good blaze sizzled in the white marble fireplace, making the east-facing parlour comfortably warm. With its tasteful paper-hangings, tapestries, and Brussels-weave carpets, it was less extravagantly showy than the more formal drawing room.

When Darcy did not immediately move away, Elizabeth looked out of the corner of her eye at him. "Until I know my aunt's business with you," he whispered, "I shall not leave your side." At that assertion, she appeared at once all perplexity and vexation.

"Darcy, you may leave us." Heavy with rings, Lady Catherine's fingers waggled at him in dismissal.

No, he would not be flicked away like a gnat. After greeting the others, seating their

guest, and requesting tea and toasted muffins, Darcy sank into the matching Gillows tub chair nearest Elizabeth and gave his aunt a defiant look.

Pretending to have taken no notice of his open resistance, Lady Catherine turned to her visitor. “Now then, Miss Bennet, I was seriously displeased to learn that you?—”

Prepared to jump to the young lady’s defence, Darcy shifted to the edge of his seat and leant forwards, twisting his signet ring.

Her ladyship’s narrowed eyes locked on him. “If you insist on remaining here, you will cease fidgeting at once, Darcy! Come over here, and sit on the sofa beside Anne, where you belong.”

Belong? Because the better part of valour is discretion, Darcy reluctantly moved across the room and sat as directed. From that vantage point, he noticed that the four pastoral de Bourgh tapestries—one for each season—seemed duller than he remembered. He was about to ask his cousin’s opinion of them when her ladyship spoke again.

“As I was saying, Miss Bennet, I was seriously displeased to learn you would leave before my daughter’s ball. It is a pity Miss Lucas became inconveniently homesick after only a se’nnight and departed with Sir William, but I knew you could not possibly care to leave us so soon. To that end, I took it upon myself to write to your mother, insisting you be permitted to remain a while longer. Mrs Collins will be very glad of your company, I am sure.”

Darcy’s head snapped to Elizabeth’s flushed face and widened eyes as she said, “I am much obliged to your ladyship, but with all due respect, I really must leave on the eighteenth. My uncle is to send his manservant for me on that date, and my sister and relations will be awaiting my arrival in town.”

“You seem quite out of humour this morning, but it is within my means to occasion a most delightful reanimation of such downcast spirits.” Holding up a sheet of paper, Lady Catherine employed a lorgnette to peruse it. “Your mother replied saying she has no objection to your staying and that Mr Bennet will certainly agree once she advises him to do so. Of course, daughters never are of much consequence to a father. Indeed, all your family and relations can spare you until after Anne’s celebration.”

“You are all kindness, madam.” Elizabeth’s over-bright eyes darted towards Darcy. “But I must abide by my original plan.”

Because of me, she will not accede. Blast. I know how much she enjoys dancing.

“Not so hasty, if you please.” Her ladyship’s bejewelled fingers reached for something on a silver salver. “Your mother’s reply included correspondence addressed to yourself. Nephew, make yourself useful and pass this to Miss Bennet.”

Darcy did so, and standing before the young lady, he made two observations. She cringed while accepting a second letter from his hand, and one of her bootlaces was untied. Without a second thought, he dropped to a knee. “Please,” he said, pointing to Elizabeth’s boot, “allow me.”

“What are you about now? Get up off the floor at once, Darcy! Heaven and earth! You resemble a sentimental noddie on bended knee like that. Such respect should be reserved for dear Anne.”

I did not hear that. Once the bootlace was retied and secured with a tight double knot, Darcy stood and studied Elizabeth’s mien. Perceiving the mortification in her eyes, he whispered, “I am so very sorry.” Returning to his cousin’s side, he wondered for what exactly he had just apologised.

A maid arrived with the requested tea tray, and the serving and partaking of

refreshments occupied everyone until Lady Catherine indicated Elizabeth should attend to her mother's reply.

What seemed to be a single sheet of paper was then opened, read, slowly refolded, and added to the other letter in her pocket. Lifting her eyes to gaze longingly towards the door, she softly said, "It is as you say, Lady Catherine. My family can spare me until after the ball, and my uncle is being informed of the change in plans." Her chin lifted, and she spoke with determination. "However, I cannot possibly impose upon Mr and Mrs Collins."

"What nonsense! With my approbation, neither you nor the Collinses can have any objection whatsoever."

Another voice, a gentler one, spoke up. "And if the rector and his wife are unable to accommodate you, you are welcome to be my guest here at Rosings." With varying degrees of surprise, Lady Catherine, Darcy, Elizabeth, and Mrs Jenkinson turned to look upon Anne. "What? We have adequate room for one more houseguest, and as my mother said, there can be no reason for your going so soon. Please, Miss Bennet, say you will stay for my celebratory ball. We shall have a grand time, I assure you."

In such close proximity to his cousin, Darcy heard her next words, though she spoke under her breath. "If you enjoy surprises, that is."

The look of dread on Elizabeth's face rent Darcy's heart. To have coerced her into such a position! The poor dear has no choice but to accept the invitation, yet neither of us wishes to be forced into one another's company.

Four

Marching away from Rosings towards Hunsford, Elizabeth was impervious to the chill in the air. Vigorous activity and the vexations of life kept her blood heated. Such was her undignified stride that the long-legged footman—whom Lady Catherine had insisted accompany her—dog-trotted to keep pace. Exasperated thoughts knew no moderation, particularly regarding Mr Darcy, that gentleman's meddlesome aunt, and her own marriage-minded mother.

I shall take to my grave the fact that Mama suggested I somehow inveigle an invitation to Miss de Bourgh's ball for all my sisters.

Just as Elizabeth, with considerable exaggeration and not a little self-pity, wondered whether her circumstance could possibly become any more wretched, icy pellets with a hard, sugary consistency began pelting her face and forming sloppy conditions underfoot. Slipping and sliding, she grumbled to herself for half a mile. Misery, thy name is spring sleet.

Not customarily formed for prolonged ill-humour, upon arrival at the parsonage, Elizabeth spent an inordinate amount of time struggling to untie a wet bootlace with chilled fingers. Botheration! It was the same one Mr Darcy had secured with such a knot as would have defeated a strong, seasoned seaman.

After requesting tea, she settled, warm and dry, upon a small sofa beside the fire. Just as she broke the seal on the gentleman's letter, Molly entered balancing a tea service complete with toasted, buttery muffins and damson preserves. The maid was thanked, and Elizabeth was left alone to tuck into a second breakfast.



Mrs Collins soon ducked her head round the door jamb. "I shall join you in a moment, Eliza."

While awaiting her friend, Elizabeth consigned the letter to her pocket again and turned her thoughts to Miss de Bourgh's forthcoming celebration. Under ordinary circumstances, the anticipation of a private ball would have filled her with eager expectations of pleasure. But Mr Darcy will be there. And my cousin with his clumsy feet and inability to move separate parts of his body together gracefully.

A line from her mother's letter came to mind. 'Your father says that by staying longer, you will have time to further observe the follies and foibles of Mr Collins and his patroness.'

In comparison to the long-suffering Mrs Collins and Miss de Bourgh, Elizabeth admitted her lot in life was not so very wretched. After all, she would have to remain in Kent only three additional days.

I shall persevere...even if it kills me. I simply shall avoid seeing Mr Darcy until the night of the ball. And Lady Catherine had the right of it. Dear Charlotte cannot object to my staying a little longer. But how awkward I shall feel making such a request.

The lady of the house then joined her on the sofa and poured herself a cup of tea. "You had an extraordinarily long walk in the cold this morning. I trust your outing helped alleviate whatever ailed you last night and earlier today." It was more question than statement. "Still, you seem out of sorts."

Not even to her dear friend would Elizabeth divulge what had transpired the previous evening in that very room. Surely Charlotte would think her a simpleton for refusing a gentleman of such consequence. It had taken her own mother an entire se'nnight to forgive her for refusing Mr Collins.

Mama must never know that not only our cousin but another of the men invited to Miss de Bourgh's ball made me a marriage offer and was rejected. For an instant, Elizabeth felt like the most selfish, ungrateful daughter on the face of the earth, but she refused to be sacrificed on the altar of her mother's ambition.

"I find myself most awkwardly circumstanced this morning, Charlotte, and I fear what I am about to say will result in mutual embarrassment." With all mention of Mr Darcy's involvement carefully omitted, a compendious history was given of what had transpired at Rosings.

"The audacity of her! Such presumption was beyond belief." Drawing in slow, steady breaths, Elizabeth stilled her restless hands upon her lap. "What business had she going behind my back and writing to my parents with no regard whatsoever for my wishes? And to prevail upon you to accommodate me beyond my scheduled departure is unconscionable. Wretched woman! I do not wish to be a burden but find myself obliged to impose upon your hospitality a little longer."

Charlotte had listened to Elizabeth's litany of complaints with earnest attention. "Lady Catherine admires you—almost as much as Mr Darcy does—though neither of them ever would admit such. Her ladyship would not have gone to such trouble for someone of whom she disapproves. And truly, your remaining is no imposition at all. I am happy to have you here with me. You know I value your friendship beyond that of any other person." She gave her friend's shoulder a gentle nudge.

The gesture was returned. "I have no doubt of your warm regard, Charlotte. Thank you."

It had taken Elizabeth quite some time before becoming reconciled to the November engagement and January marriage of Mr Collins and the then Miss Lucas. Esteem for her friend had sunk under the weight of disappointment and disapproval, and there had existed between the two a restraint. Absence, however, had increased Elizabeth's

desire to see Charlotte and even weakened her disgust of the woman's husband. It saddened her to suspect the couple shared no grand passion. Had her cousin ever spoken of how much he admired and loved his wife? Will anyone ever again speak such ardent words to me?

Those thoughts were interrupted by Molly who informed them Mr Chapman, a parishioner, was at the door beseeching Mr and Mrs Collins to attend his dying wife. Elizabeth considered accompanying them, but although she was not insensible of their plight, she was unknown to the Chapmans and would be neither welcome nor helpful at such a time.

Instead, she went to her bedchamber where the fire of curiosity could be extinguished in privacy. Once seated upon the edge of the bed, she opened Mr Darcy's letter and read it through twice in its entirety and thrice those sections regarding Mr Bingley and Jane as well as Mr Wickham and Miss Darcy. With each reading, the written words caused outrage, sorrow, and pain of the heart. Afflicted by a coalescence of feelings, she tossed the pages aside and paced the small room in trembling wretchedness.

The clanging and clattering of pots and plates from the kitchen could not drown out the clamour in her mind—a jumble of ire, mortification, and commiseration. Fairly vibrating with it, she could scarcely contain her animosity towards Mr Darcy's obtuse defence of his action against her dearest sister and the disdain he felt for the rest of her family.

Then there was the matter of how gravely disloyal the despicable Mr Wickham had been to the Darcys. How mortifying it was for Elizabeth to realise she, too, had been endowed with susceptible naiveté and had courted prejudice and ignorance.

Duly ashamed of her mistaken first impressions of the two men, Elizabeth gave an anguished cry and dashed away tears of frustration with herself and of sympathy for

Miss Darcy. How could she possibly face the girl's brother again with any degree of equanimity?

Prone then upon the bed, she chastised herself over and over again. Since the very beginning of my acquaintance with Mr Darcy and Mr Wickham, I drove away all reason. Stupid girl.

Tears soaked her pillow, but after much reflection and self-reproach, she admitted Mr Darcy's explanations vindicated a portion of his insufferable behaviour but not her own.

Five

Saturday, April 11

Having been informed she was ‘obtuse’—not to mention ‘mad’—Anne vigorously exerted herself to repel her cousin’s ill-natured aspersions. Although Darcy was less than ten years her senior, he had become an insufferably dull, pompous, overbearing brute. Albeit a brute I cannot help but hold in high regard .

Lady Catherine always claimed she and Lady Anne Darcy had planned a union between the two cousins while they were in their cradles. Anne laughed to herself, picturing Pemberley’s heir, tall even at that young age, squeezed into an infant’s cradle. Such balderdash! Why, Darcy was a lad of nearly seven when I was born. The sisters might have agreed that it would be advantageously pleasing if Darcy and I decided to wed, but that will not happen.

The cousins’ latest difference of opinion had begun half an hour earlier when Darcy exited the library and espied Anne in the hall where she donned her gloves—the soft tan ones embroidered with her monogram. Darcy had given her those gloves, and she always and only wore them while driving.

“Where are you going,” he asked.

Though Anne thought it should be obvious and none of his business, she said, “Out.” Tucking her book and riding whip under one arm, she wagged eight kid-clad fingers in front of his face. “In my phaeton.”

“ You are venturing out in this cold? There was sleet earlier, Anne. And you are not going alone, are you? Take either Mrs Jenkinson or your lady’s maid with you.”

“The former is asleep in her chair, snoring and drooling, and the latter cannot be spared. At present, Dubois is putting finishing enhancements on my full-dress gown.”

Anne flattered herself in thinking she possessed a degree of captivating deceit, particularly when adding her own little embellishments, such as the snoring and drooling detail.

Dear old Mrs Jenkinson! I should not ridicule the fine lady who superintended my education and is supposed to be available at all hours to satisfy my needs and maintain propriety. Still, Anne appreciated how doting her companion was and how protective she was of her charge’s comfort.

Darcy beckoned a footman and requested his own coat, scarf, hat, and gloves be fetched. “ I shall accompany you.”

You would have to kill me first. “I thank you, but no. As they say, ‘One’s too few, three too many’.”

Crossing his arms, Darcy said, “You are being either evasive, deliberately obtuse, or both. Pray tell who will attend you?”

Lifting heels off the floor and stretching her neck, Anne tried to gain an inch or two. Although her mother was a tall woman, her father had been rather squat, and Darcy towered above her.

“I shall be with Mr Brinton.” Her cousin’s face grew livid at that. See what happens when one tells the truth?

“Brinton? Brinton! Are you completely mad?”

“Of course not. I simply said his name to see how you would react.” It was no lie. “If you must know, Gilchrist promised to show me where the wild cherry trees may be found.” Again, no lie. “I want to press some of their frothy, delicate blossoms in my Flora.” Anne held up the book, glad she had thought to bring it along, though she had no real interest in using it. As for what she planned to do afterwards, she did not feel it necessary to disclose such information. It was none of Darcy’s business.

Besides, why would it be ‘mad’ to go for a drive with Laurence Brinton but quite acceptable to do so with Iain Gilchrist?

Obviously, Anne knew why. One was an eligible gentleman bachelor and an infamous flirt. The other was a loyal servant, and she, a wealthy, innocent damsel, was his employer.

It was with gentle persuasion and much acuity that Anne eventually softened her cousin into complaisance. She first, however, had to agree Darcy could accompany her as far as Gilchrist’s cottage—just beyond the glass-roofed structures where tender plants were raised and exotic ones protected.

And that was where, a quarter of an hour later, they encountered her master gardener. Anne already considered Iain Gilchrist to be in her employ because Lady Catherine would control Rosings for only another nine days.

The Scotsman, in Anne’s opinion, was a dark-haired Adonis upon whom nature had bestowed more than his fair share of attractiveness. Tall and well-formed like the plants in one of the hothouses, he was exotically handsome. His face, while bronzed, was unlined for he still was a relatively young man. Customarily, he wore a myrtle-green coat, pristine shirt and cravat, nankeen inexpressibles, and boots that looked like Hessians—far too fashionable for a mere gardener. Because he wore gloves

while working, his fingernails were spotless, and he smelt of earth, dried herbs, and greenery. Anne's only complaint was that, at certain times, he spoke with a perplexing Highland Scottish burr.

When the cousins greeted Gilchrist outside the orangery, the gardener doffed his cap and bid them good morning.

Anne had not realised she was staring at the well-favoured fellow until Darcy's throat was cleared with exaggeration. Once upon a time, she had been infatuated with Gilchrist. But a gentlewoman and a gardener! Can you imagine the scandal? Admittedly, she still felt great affection for the man, and the regard was mutual. However, never would she unscrupulously control or influence someone in her employ. He is a willing partner in my—our—scheme.

After exchanging a few civilities, Darcy said to Gilchrist, "Please ensure Miss de Bourgh is not kept overlong in this frigid air." With that, he took his leave of Anne and her gardener.

Later, near the woodland, Anne sat in her phaeton while her ponies stamped and snorted. Her toes and fingertips were freezing, her entire body shivered, and she held a handkerchief to her nose while Gilchrist plucked unwanted wild cherry blossoms for her.

Soon though, she knew they both would be warm and cosy enough, albeit not in either her grand manor or the gardener's sweet little cottage. Instead, they would cut across the woods and onto the road, all the way to Rara Avis for a brief call.

Teasingly referring to her as milady, Gilchrist passed Anne the delicate white flowers, and she laughed with him while carelessly placing the blossoms between pages in the middle of her Flora. They were the only plants therein, but she supposed she would have to collect more specimens to satisfy her mother and cynical cousin.



Nearly giddy with ebullience and anticipation, she urged her ponies to move along at a lively trot while Gilchrist held onto his cap.

Rara Avis and its young master are like nothing else and no one I have ever known. Which is not saying much. Rarely do I make or receive calls.

Brinton's home, though seldom was he in residence there, was a trove of treasures from faraway lands. It was alive with music and with plants and birds and knick-knacks not native to England's shores.

In that marvellous manor and on those beautiful grounds, Anne felt as though she was exploring and experiencing the world. On that estate, she felt alive , never sullen or in ill health.

And she would trade Rosings Park for Rara Avis in a heartbeat.

Six

The air remained crisp, more mid-winter than April. Rare sightings of sunlight amongst clouds were so unexpected and inviting that after leaving Anne in Gilchrist's care, Darcy continued rambling. He had no particular destination in mind, but his feet—the traitors—led him to a certain young lady's favourite haunt at the edge of the park, a grove which no one but Elizabeth herself seemed to value.

In the distance, Hunsford's church bell tolled six times, marking the death of a parishioner. Three strokes, twice. An adult female. Removing his hat, Darcy bowed his head and said a prayer for the soul of the departed woman. The knell then sounded one stroke for each year of her life. Twenty-nine. Not much older than I. Too young.

Continuing through the grove, he considered retreating when Elizabeth, advancing in his direction, was spotted through the trees. Fearing she might turn away upon descrying him, he stepped forwards and spoke her name. Her heightened colour, Darcy supposed, resulted from the perverseness of another encounter with him. Or might I entertain the notion that, after reading my letter, she has changed her mind and has thrown herself in my way? By George, I truly am an arrogant lout. No doubt, her rosy bloom was from being out and about on that hibernal morn.

“We meet again, Miss Bennet.”

As she neared and curtsied, he noted that although her cheeks were rosy, her eyes did not appear at all brightened by the exercise. In fact, they looked swollen, like his sister's after a bout of weeping, and he wondered whether it was the consequence of

having read his letter. Darcy nearly fell to his knees.

“What is it?” he asked, dreading her answer. “What has happened? Are you unwell?”

With the sort of civility he envied, she replied, “I am well, thank you.” Only after turning her face skywards did she smile. “It is a fine day for a walk, albeit chilly. One could hardly complain of being incommoded by the heat thus far this spring. The sun’s return, although weak, is most heartily welcome.” Elizabeth’s puffy, red-rimmed eyes studied the surrounding park. “During my sojourn here, I had hoped to see some of Kent’s gardens in bloom, but I fear prolonged frost will severely delay planting or destroy whatever has been sown already.”

Darcy could converse eloquently and effortlessly with a marquess or a duchess, even royalty, but he found it difficult to do so with Elizabeth. Weather and agriculture, though, were subjects he could discuss with ease.

“I believe this is the coldest spring we have had since ninety-nine. So, yes, the harvesting of crops may be late this year and of a low yield. As for blooms, although Rosings Park’s gardens are rather too formal for my taste, I wish you could see the flowers in all their splendour. In Kent, gardens are as common as people are in London.” The look on her face gave him pause. What? What did I say?

“Do you mean common as in vulgar—with a lack of refinement and taste?”

“No.” He heaved a sigh. “I meant common as in prevalent.” His explanation seemed to appease her, for she no longer scowled. In a gesture indicating the entire park, Darcy added, “These seventeen acres are maintained by a battalion of gardeners and labourers overseen by Gilchrist, a master gardener. Lady Catherine disparages the man as having little sense because he has yet to solicit her own, as she calls it, gardening proficiency.”

The smile Elizabeth offered was as weak as the sunlight, but it encouraged him to continue, and he pointed southwards. “The eccentric owner of the neighbouring estate was in the Highlands several years ago acquiring plants native to that region, such as bog myrtle, heathers, and such. While there, he hired Iain Gilchrist, a much renowned horticulturist, for Rara Avis. In Gilchrist’s own words, he was ‘uprooted from his Scottish home and planted in Kent’. As you may know, Scots are preferred master gardeners, for they have the best training. I employ one myself at Pemberley.”

“Does Gilchrist work for both Rara Avis and Rosings?”

Why did I broach this subject? I certainly shall not be mentioning the rumours to her or to any lady. “No, only the latter. While I was here last Easter, Gilchrist came to me asking for a position at Rosings, claiming he was intrigued by the possibilities a larger estate offered. He came with excellent references. With good reason, Lady Catherine does not care for the young gentleman who inherited Rara Avis. He is too free-spirited for her liking. So initially at least, she was proud that Rosings Park’s grandeur lured Gilchrist away from Mr Binton.”

Having struck upon a befitting change of subject, Darcy said, “Of late, my cousin Anne has taken a keen interest in botany, particularly the flora hereabouts. As we speak, she is being assisted by Gilchrist in putting together an herbarium, or a Flora, as she calls it.”

“You mentioned hiring Rosings Park’s head gardener, and it made me realise you must be a very capable but busy gentleman, what with the overseeing of your own grand estate, the assistance you gave Mr Bingley at Netherfield, and tending to matters here for your aunt and cousin. You take on a great deal of responsibility, sir.”

“It certainly keeps me out of trouble.” Pleased to have Elizabeth’s undivided attention, he smiled and added, “Well, mostly .”

“How are you able to spend so much time away from Pemberley?”

“I employ a competent steward, a matchless housekeeper, responsible groundsmen, and as I said, a superb master gardener. He and his under-gardeners work long hours caring for the archery, cricket, and bowling lawns as well as maintaining proper temperatures in the conservatory and orangery. We also hire, as necessary, myriad seasonal labourers to tend the grounds and orchards.”

Darcy thought that moment might be an auspicious opportunity to demonstrate an interest in her relations. “Speaking of working the land, do you not have an uncle who is a gardener? I seem to recall Miss Bingley mentioning such.”

Why is she rubbing her brow? Has she a headache? Blast. Narrowed eyes and the pressing together of her lips did not bode well for him.

Planting her fists on her hips, Elizabeth turned blazing eyes upon him. “No, I do not. However, I do have an uncle, aunt, and four cousins whose surname is Gardiner. G-A-R-D-I-N-E-R.”

The spelling was done with painful slowness, as though Darcy was dim-witted. Why had he not shown an interest in those who were most important to her? Why had he been unwilling to associate with the people she held dear?

“I am deeply ashamed, and I apologise for being presumptuous. Your relations deserve respect.”

“I hope you are not begging forgiveness on behalf of Miss Bingley, sir. You are not to blame for her misinformation.”

“True. But I have made numerous blunders myself, abominably stupid ones, where you and your loved ones are concerned. For those faults, I beg your pardon.”

Given absolution, Darcy thought Elizabeth the most generous soul of his acquaintance, but being in her charming company after a failed proposal was sweet torture. Her presence threw him into not only contrary feelings of disquiet and delight but determination. A resolution was formed. He would change for the better, not only in the hope of improving her opinion of him but because it was the honourable thing to do. He would be patient and perhaps, God willing, the woman he loved would grow to think better of him.

Hugging herself, Elizabeth rubbed her upper arms. "Shall we walk? 'Tis chilly standing here."

They entered the park's bisecting avenue that over the years the sun had bleached to a stark whiteness. Crunching seashells beneath his boots, Darcy rattled away about the whelks, cockles, and limpets that had come from a bay bordering Margate. Why am I babbling about marine mollusks? Why are we even speaking of this when there is a letter to discuss?

"You once hinted that I am of a taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak. But no longer can I hesitate to raise the matter of my letter, which I wish had never been penned. Please tell me you burnt the wretched thing." Darcy glanced her way, but she made no response. "My purpose in writing was to warn you about Mr Wickham. I also hoped, and still do, it might make you think better of me. However, I fear my explanations and certain wording therein may have caused you pain." He longed to see her expression, but the pretty bonnet she wore obstructed his view.

She stopped walking, scuffing the toe of her boot against washed-out seashells. "Upon initial perusal yesterday, I wanted to rip your letter to shreds." Looking him in the eye she added, "Now I treasure it."

Darcy sucked in a breath. "Treasure it? I rather imagined you might have wanted to rip me to shreds after reading such bitterness. Please say you might one day forgive

me.”

“For which of your transgressions do you now seek forgiveness, sir? Your treatment of Jane specifically or the way you behaved towards my family, friends, and neighbours? Had I not read your letter, I would have added Mr Wickham to that list.” The soft leather of Elizabeth’s gloves strained against knuckles as her hands formed into fists. “Needless to say, the scoundrel has lost my esteem.”

The smile she then offered was a sad sort of one. “I cherish the trust you have shown by relating your dear sister’s misfortune. You may count on my discretion.” Gesturing towards the grove, she said, “Shall we make another circuit of the park?”

Darcy agreed with brisk readiness. The sort of unreserved, uninterrupted, and intimate communication she seemed willing to share with him was nothing short of his heart’s desire.

Seven

All sense of time was lost to her as Elizabeth walked and talked with Mr Darcy, her gloved palm curled round his arm.

Hesitantly at first, the gentleman spoke of his sister, his parents, and his upbringing. “My father instilled in me the importance of honesty, of self-command, and of strong moral principles. I have strived to live up to his expectations.”

“You mention honesty.” Elizabeth’s curiosity would not be conquered. Her dignity and vanity demanded satisfaction. “So, at the Meryton assembly, were you being truthful when you said I was not handsome enough to tempt you? If so, why would you have wished to make me your wife? Or was it all a scurrilous falsehood?” It had been something of a scandal throughout Longbourn village and Meryton, but that had been her own fault for spreading word of the insult.

Mr Darcy’s voice lost much of its power. “There is no adequate excuse for that callous remark, but I did not know you when it was uttered. I barely glanced at you or anyone that night.” He touched the fingers resting upon his sleeve and indicated they should stop walking. Turning, he caught her eye. “The truth, madam, is that you?—”

The look he bestowed upon her made Elizabeth blush.

“The truth is that the better I came to know you, the more your beauty, like a rosebud, blossomed before my eyes. It is greater than the sum of its parts.”

“My parts ?”



“I mean your appeal is a combination of—” He seemed to struggle for a compliment. “What shall I call it? Your, um?—”

“You must mean my *je ne sais quoi* , for I certainly do not know what you mean.” She did, but a vindictive part of her wanted him to squirm. Though less out of favour, he was still in her black books.

The gentleman’s words spilled forth in a rush. “I mean your appeal is a combination of intelligence, compassion, and loyalty. I even admire your defence of the supposedly downtrodden, even when they do not deserve it. And I admit I am strangely attracted to your temerity. Mostly, though, it is your exuberance. Even here and now, despite the enmity you feel towards me, your enjoyment of life shines through like the sun through these clouds. You, I think, are not formed for petulance. Unlike me, your manners have all the recommendations of ease, good humour, and unaffectedness. I wish—for your own sake and for that of others—that I had your amiability amongst company. And how I dearly wish I could undo all my past mistakes.”

Slowing his speech, he seemed intent on articulation. “I once told you that I have not that talent you possess of conversing easily with strangers. I cannot appear interested in their concerns, as I often see you do so admirably.”

When he touched on the matter of Wickham and Miss Darcy, Elizabeth asked thoughtful questions and expressed genuine concern for his sister and for him, and she was thanked for it.

“Mr Darcy, you know I never hesitate to express pert opinions. Now that I comprehend your circumstances, it is easier to be forthright with you, a gentleman I previously held in contempt and treated with irreverence. How could I be less than completely frank when you were so brutally candid in your revealing letter? Your entrusting me with Miss Darcy’s secret speaks of great faith in my discretion. If I am

to be honest—not only with you but with myself—your candour and trust are earning you a claim on my good will.”

“I am very glad to hear it.” He smiled then, quite handsomely, but it faded into a frown as he mentioned his abysmal offer of marriage.

Remorseful about her response to that proposal, Elizabeth clasped her hands in front of her and studied them, not him. Such blunders! Such blindness of head and heart!

“I utterly misconducted myself that evening, sir, and my conscience will not acquit me.” A sting formed in her eyes as they watered not from cold but from shame.

She raised her chin to look him in the eye. “I did not behave in a ladylike manner.” Her voice cracked, and a tear fell unheeded. “How despicably I acted, and how aggrieved you must have felt!” A sob broke free. “Will you ever find it in your heart to forgive the harsh words I spoke?”

“Hush now.” Mr Darcy stepped closer and gently dabbed her cheek with a pristine handkerchief. “Every word you just said, I repeat back to you.” He smiled. “With the exception of ladylike . We both know I did not behave in a gentlemanlike manner. So, let us agree to absolve one another, and let us look not backwards but towards the future.”

Sniffling and smiling, Elizabeth nodded her head in hearty agreement.

Of Mr Bingley’s leaving Netherfield they spoke at length. To Elizabeth, it was evident her elder sister was very much in love with Mr Darcy’s friend, but she admitted it was not likely to be discovered by others.

“Charlotte told me that being so very guarded would be disadvantageous, and if Jane concealed her affection from the object of it, she might lose the opportunity of fixing

him.”

Mr Darcy nodded his understanding. “I know a foolish man, blinded by pride, who mistook a lady’s assurance of manner for coquetry. He unknowingly concealed his burgeoning love from her—the most worthy of women—and thereby lost any opportunity of ever securing her affection. Were he not already desolate, he should be tarred, feathered, and pilloried.” With her pensive regard fixed upon his face, he asked whether her expression was one of solicitude or of pity. “The gentleman would not want your sympathy, madam. He still wishes to secure the young lady’s affection.”

Oh dear! Several retorts made it as far as the tip of Elizabeth’s tongue but remained unvoiced.

By unspoken agreement, they walked on in awkward silence. When a few minutes had elapsed, Mr Darcy promised to send Mr Bingley back to her sister.

“It was very badly done of me to have interfered as I did, poking my nose in where it had no business.”

“What of my family, sir? Have you changed your stance about them? I might argue that you as a gentleman and I as a gentleman’s daughter are equals. But the truth is that you are infinitely Jane’s and my superior in consequence and wealth.”

“True, but that is not so for Bingley. He is not of the gentry. Your family holds higher standing, though your father’s wealth falls far short of my friend’s. At any rate...” Mr Darcy paused until she looked him in the eye. “None of that should matter a jot when a man has fallen in love.”

When a man has fallen in love. A blush overspread Elizabeth’s cheeks, and a tingle shot down her spine as she turned away. Without confirmation, she sensed the

gentleman's heated, penetrating gaze fixed upon her profile. Despite her refusal of his marriage offer, it was increasingly evident he remained attached to her.

It was all too much. She needed time to think. "Mr Darcy, what is the hour? How long have we been walking?"

He consulted his pocket watch. "A quarter of eleven. Are you fatigued or in need of sustenance?"

Elizabeth admitted she had, once again, not yet eaten breakfast. "I must go, but I very much enjoyed our conversation." She curtseyed. "Good day, sir."

"I shall escort you to the parsonage."

The authority with which he had spoken rankled. "Whatever for? I am perfectly accustomed to walking hereabouts unaccompanied and have been doing so off and on for a month now. Besides, have you forgotten my answer from the other evening? We may have put aside our differences and are learning to be civil towards one another, but you are not responsible for my welfare."

The instant the words were out of Elizabeth's mouth, she wished them unsaid. Mr Darcy's crestfallen mien caused her a degree of shame. Of course, a true gentleman would consider himself responsible.

Just then, there came such a cacophony of rattles, squeaks, and the clatter of hooves on gravel that both of them turned in the direction of the lane.

"That is Anne's phaeton approaching with undue speed," said Mr Darcy. "And from the wrong direction. She was to confer with Gilchrist about her herbarium, then directly return home. Where the dickens has she been all this time?" He apologised for the outburst but took no pains to conceal his vexation and concern.

“Make haste then, sir, and ascertain Miss de Bourgh’s welfare. I shall pray there is no need for such apprehension.”

### Eight

Respecting Elizabeth's wishes, Darcy bid her a good day and let her go, but as he watched her walk away, something she had said weighed heavily on his thoughts. 'You are not responsible for my welfare.' Yes, thank you for reminding me that this heart of mine belongs to someone who does not want it.

Darcy recollected himself before he could be completely overtaken by sentiment, and although he was not directly responsible for Anne's welfare either, he set off after her, anxious about what might have delayed his cousin's return from the outing with Gilchrist. Hoping to catch her before she reached the manor, he hastened towards the carriage house, a two-storey structure housing the barouche, chaise, phaeton, and Darcy's own coach. Above were living quarters for the coachman, grooms, and stable hands. Horses were accommodated in the nearby barn.

He espied her between those two buildings. Anne saw him, he knew she did, but she pretended she had not and strode towards the house at an amazingly quick pace.

Close behind, Darcy raised his voice. "Anne! Where have you been?"

"Not now, Cousin." Tucking something beneath one arm and hitching up her skirts, she broke into a run, shouting over her shoulder. "It is freezing cold, and I am rather late. Her ladyship will have my guts for garters."

Darcy took chase across the lawns, hard on her heels, until he reached her. "How prodigiously eloquent you have become of late. When did you learn to run like that, and from whence has all this unexpected vitality sprung?" His cousin was quite an

altered creature since last he had visited Rosings, and he truly was glad that she no longer appeared quite so pale and sickly. “I fear you have been spending far too much time with the head gardener. Your good manners have suffered, and I might have to advise your mother to curtail your visits.”

She sped ahead and breathlessly called back to him. “I was not alone with Gilchrist all morning, if that is what is vexing you.”

Again, Darcy easily caught up with her. “Who else was there?”

She stopped to spare him an annoyed look. “Where, exactly, do you mean? In the woods? I saw a few squirrels scurrying about.”

“Such insolence!” Darcy placed his large hands upon her thin upper arms. “Listen to me?—”

Anne pulled away. “Leave me alone. I was in such good humour earlier, diverted beyond moderation. Now you are ruining it.” Panting, she ran up the steps towards the garden entrance.

Darcy caught her by the sleeve, and a book dropped from under her arm. Leafing through it, he scoffed. “Is this your herbarium? It does not contain much. I had expected to see descriptions of plant specimens and, if apt, their healing properties.”

Colour rose in Anne’s cheeks as she snatched the Flora from him, clasping it against her breast. “Gilchrist and I have just begun.” In a tone shifting from defensiveness to challenge, she added, “It is a respectable diversion. Botany is one of the few sciences considered appropriate for genteel women, and I shall not listen to any opposition.”

“Just because you enjoy a diversion does not attest to its propriety. What occupied you and Gilchrist all that time? I witnessed you making sheep’s eyes at him earlier.”

Being two steps above, she stood nose-to-nose with him. “And I have witnessed the way your eyes fix upon Miss Bennet like a hungry little boy at Gunter’s!” Turning and grabbing the latch, she flung open the door, barely missing Darcy’s face with it.

He followed her into the library. “As difficult as it is for me to believe, I am beginning to entertain unsavoury suspicions about you and Gilchrist. For pity’s sake, Anne, have a care for your reputation. Should my intuition prove unerring, shame will be brought to the noble name of your mother. Tell me now, are you engaged in some sort of a”—he swallowed hard—“liaison?”

“Lower your voice,” she hissed, “lest servants as far as Rara Avis hear your salacious accusations.” Under her breath, she muttered, “How did Miss Bennet put it? Ah yes. For a man of sense and education and who has lived in the world, you, Fitzwilliam Darcy, are a nincompoop ! And furthermore, propriety and etiquette do not always equate with authentic goodness.” She turned on her heel and fled the room.

Sinking into an upholstered armchair, Darcy leant forward, shoulders slumped. The cushions on the sofa across from him appeared faded, but his curiosity about such an anomaly was equally dull.

Head in hands, he thought his cousin was entirely correct in her estimation of him. Nincompoop. He had made so many mistakes—assuming Wickham was out of his life once and for all and hiring the nefarious Mrs Younge as Georgiana’s companion. Those two errors in judgment had nearly led to his sister’s ruination. Then he utterly had bungled his one and only attempt to woo a woman. And by giving Bingley disgraceful guidance, he had broken another lady’s heart. Kind soul that Miss Elizabeth Bennet was, he had been forgiven for those trespasses—or so he hoped.

Have I now unfairly accused Anne of illicitness?

Heaving himself from the chair, Darcy decided another reckless ride might be in



order, then he thought better of it. He would not put a horse in peril just because he, himself, had failed to put his best foot forward. Instead, he went for a brisk walk through the conifer plantation and contemplated his misdeeds.

Listening with half an ear to the rector's rambling sermon that Sunday, Darcy sat alongside his aunt in the righthand, frontmost pew—the one reserved for the de Bourgh family—and rested his eyes upon Elizabeth, across the aisle, next to Mrs Collins.

“Suffering,” intoned the clergyman, “cannot conquer faith. Furthermore...”

Upon receiving a sudden pain in his right arm, Darcy glared at the offending bony elbow. Jabbed a second time, he assumed Lady Catherine had noticed his inattention. Bowing his head, he redirected his eyes to the floor. Her ladyship poked him a third time and asked for his pocket watch. Clearing her throat to capture the clergyman's attention, she held up the timepiece and tapped an impatient finger upon its face.

After that, the service concluded rather abruptly, and the relieved congregation filed out and stood about the churchyard, chatting.

Never a garrulous sort of person, Darcy made an effort to speak briefly to those with whom he was acquainted, all the while hoping for an opportunity to engage with a certain young lady from Hertfordshire and perhaps accompany her to the parsonage. On his way to her, he stopped and joined his cousin who was conversing with one of Rosings Park's leaseholders. The man recently had wed the daughter of another tenant, and the newly married couple stood side by side, sharing affectionate looks. His hand never left the small of her back, and she frequently smiled up at him.

Darcy longed for that same sort of attachment with Elizabeth, or rather, with her as Mrs Darcy.

Into the wee hours, he had lain awake, envisioning such a future. The yearning was a constant, physical ache, and he despaired of ever being able to change sufficiently to win her love.

Familiar, wholesome laughter rang out above all the hubbub and recollected Darcy to his surroundings. Turning, he espied Elizabeth smiling and chatting with the Collinses— and Binton, that popinjay, of all people!

As parishioners dispersed, Darcy headed towards the Hunsford party, assuming they were taking leave of Mr Binton.

Instead, upon witnessing Darcy's approach, the master of Rara Avis shepherded them into his carriage. "Sorry, old boy," he called out, "but I have room for only these three." Smiling his perfect smile, Mr Binton gave him a jaunty salute and hopped aboard the vermilion landaulet.

The equipage carrying Lady Catherine, Anne, Mrs Jenkinson, and Dubois stopped alongside Darcy, but he shook his head at the coachman and said he would walk. Missing Fitzwilliam's companionship, he stopped at the stable to visit his own carriage horses. Refusing to feel sorry for himself, he admitted it was rather pitiful that he had sought the company of animals.

As the stable workers began returning from church, Darcy overheard their chatter, and it soon became evident they were unaware of his presence in the stall.

"There's a thief hereabouts. I heard so at Mrs Chapman's funeral, God rest her soul. Tommy, the errand boy, is Chapman's nephew, and he swears the de Bourgh gold and family silver—dishes, knives, and such—is being nicked."

"A younger voiced piped up. "The butler must have done it. He's the one responsible for the valuables, ain't he?"

“Aye,” said one of the grooms, “but that ain’t the only embarrassing fact the de Bourghs want kept secret. The frail young miss, who sat in church all innocent-like, goes to Gilchrist’s cottage two or three times a week for hours at a time...but only weather permitting, mind.”

As the group approached the nearby ladder, Darcy emerged from behind one of his matching bays and addressed the stable master. “Johnson, I should like a word with you.”

That silenced the workers, who scrambled up the ladder to change out of their Sunday best before going about their duties. After giving the stable master a piece of his mind for allowing that sort of gossip from his underlings, Darcy walked out into the yard and chuckled at the erroneous gossip about plates being stolen.

When was the last time I laughed aloud? Days? A fortnight? Feels like years. Even without someone to share in his mirth, it felt wonderful to laugh.

Sobering, he knew Elizabeth would take her leave of Kent the day following his cousin’s celebratory ball. Therefore, he intended to properly woo the young lady, solve the thievery or vandalism, and discover what in the world his cousin had been up to during her outings.

And he had just over a se’nnight to accomplish all three tasks.

Somewhat of a snip, I should think.

Nine

Monday, April 13

Later than customary in the middle of the day, Elizabeth was in her room fastening her warm pelisse in preparation for a walk when a hurried and heavy tread pounded upon the stairs.

“Cousin Elizabeth! Cousin Elizabeth!” It was Mr Collins’s frantic voice, portending either joyous tidings, doom and gloom, or new shelves in some closet. Opening her door in trepidation, she spotted him ascending, red-faced and gasping for breath.

“You will scarcely believe what has just occurred,” he cried upon reaching the landing, advancing towards her, gesturing not unlike a windmill. “Come down. Come down at once! Make haste!”

Fetching her gloves and asking the nature of the emergency, Elizabeth could make no sense of his babble about her good fortune.

Quicker than was advisable for one so ungainly, her cousin clambered down the stairs until at the bottom he hustled Elizabeth out the front door. There, in the lane at the garden gate was Miss de Bourgh sitting in a park phaeton.

Bowing and scraping, Mr Collins rattled on about Miss de Bourgh’s superlative presence and divine radiance gracing his humble premises. “And as you so graciously requested, here is my cousin.”

The two young ladies greeted one another, and it was with great relief that Elizabeth discerned no physical harm had befallen Mr Darcy's cousin during Saturday's reckless drive. She suspected Miss de Bourgh's character was more complex and interesting than it appeared, for she had observed a perceptible sparkle, a telling gleam in her eye. And when the heiress thought no one was observing, a self-satisfied little smirk often played at the corners of her mouth. Such had been witnessed on those occasions when Lady Catherine had spoken of her daughter's poor health, the accomplishments she might have achieved if not for her frailty, and of her long-standing engagement to Mr Darcy.

The subject of her thoughts addressed her. "Although the sun deigns to shine, it has made little difference in the chill of the air. How providential to see you warmly dressed for an outing, for I have come with the express purpose of inviting you to join me on a jaunt. Will you accompany me?"

"Of course she will." Mr Collins clapped a palm to his black-clad breast. "You pay my poor cousin a great honour. Indeed, you do."

Elizabeth had anticipated a lovely walk alone with her thoughts, but she supposed an outing with the enigmatic heiress might prove enlightening. Shading her eyes against the sun, she accepted the invitation with thanks and added, "Never have I ridden in a phaeton before, but I have heard of their tipping over. I trust you do not drive with excessive speed."

"Cousin Elizabeth, you discredit Miss de Bourgh by implying such incautious behaviour. Never would the daughter of my patroness drive recklessly. As you see, her phaeton is not so very high—although as befitting her exalted station, it would be perfectly proper for her to sit far above others."

The little smirk played about Miss de Bourgh's lips. "The hour grows late. Your cousin and I must be on our way."

While he profusely apologised for keeping the heiress waiting in the cold, Mr Collins clumsily assisted Elizabeth in climbing aboard. Surrounded by upholstered squabs and with her lap covered by a heavy rug, she felt snug and secure as the pair of grey ponies surged forwards to trot along the lane.

Miss de Bourgh explained how the light-weight metals in her carriage's construction resulted in better suspension and ease of steering. "High phaetons do tend to tip over if one turns a corner too quickly, but I assure you that is not the case in a low one such as this."

Elizabeth held on as they navigated a sharp turn past Rosings Park's orangery. "Mr Darcy mentioned you are interested in botany and are compiling an herbarium. Will you be collecting specimens today?"

Gathering the reins in one hand, Miss de Bourgh patted the leather-bound book beside her on the seat. The word 'Flora' was embossed on its cover. "Patches of wood anemone were discovered in dappled shade near the deciduous copse, and my head gardener cut some for me. We are to fetch them now."

They stopped in front of a thatch-roofed cottage of Kentish ragstone. "This is, as Gilchrist calls it, his bothy." Book in hand, Miss de Bourgh hopped down and rapped at the door. "Gilchrist, are you there?" Receiving no response, she beckoned Elizabeth, then disappeared inside.

Feeling quite the trespasser, Elizabeth set foot in the tiny dwelling which was rich in specimens of nature. Mingled aromas of dried flowers hanging upside down from rafters and the herbs growing in windowsill pots evoked pleasant memories of Longbourn's fragrant still-room, striking her with a painful longing for her home, for her family.

"I was hoping you might meet Gilchrist today." Plucking anemones from a dish of

water on the table, Miss de Bourgh carelessly tossed the wet flowers into her Flora. When she noticed Elizabeth watching, she gave a little laugh. “I have only started my collection. So far, I have these anemones and a few wild cherry blossoms.”

Elizabeth thought crumpled flowers pressed between two pages would look rather sad. Saying nothing, she glanced through illustrated editions of a botanical magazine and gardening manuals stacked upon the table. Her thoughts, however, turned to other words—ones written in a strong masculine hand in black ink upon hot-pressed letter paper of the finest quality. Lost in thought, she startled when Miss de Bourgh took her by the arm and moved towards the door.

“I am too eager and in too much of a hurry to wait for Gilchrist. I have a surprise for you, Miss Bennet.”

There it was again—that telling gleam in her eye. Something was afoot, and Elizabeth did not care for surprises. As they took their places in the phaeton, she said, “Where is your Flora? Did you leave it behind?”

Urging her ponies to walk on, Miss de Bourgh gave an inelegant little shrug. “’Tis unimportant. I shall collect it another time.”

Soon they passed wild cherry trees in bloom at the ancient woodland’s edge. When they passed the place where she had encountered Mr Darcy, Elizabeth insisted upon knowing their destination.

Aiming her whip southwards, Miss de Bourgh grinned. “We are for Rara Avis, the small estate bordering Rosings.”

Such information provided no comfortable feeling. “Rara Avis? But that is where Mr Binton resides, is it not?” Miss de Bourgh nodded in acknowledgement, and Elizabeth’s concern grew apace. “Is it not rather late in the day for making calls? And

is there a Mrs Brinton to receive us?"

At a crack of the whip, the phaeton gained speed. "No. He is a bachelor."

Gaping at the young lady, Elizabeth cried, "Then we cannot possibly go there alone!"

"We are not alone. We have each other." Growing more animated, Miss de Bourgh spoke in fulsome praise of Rara Avis, its manor, grounds, plants, and birds. "You will be delighted with the place, I promise. I saw you chatting and laughing with Mr Brinton after church yesterday. Did you not think him charming? The good humour of his countenance is bewitching, is it not?" Without awaiting an answer, she nudged Elizabeth and gave her a wink. "Laurence Brinton is not only single. He is singular!"

Botheration. "Please tell me you are not playing at matchmaking and that is not the reason for our journey thither."

"No, no, not at all, although I do hope to cultivate an intimate acquaintance between you and Mr Brinton." The phaeton was masterfully steered round a sharp bend. "I should warn you, however, that the gentleman is considered the black sheep of his family, and his notions of decorum are not as strict as, say, Darcy's. And speaking of that cousin of mine"—Miss de Bourgh made a face—"what is your opinion of him? Have you, like certain ladies of the ton, set your cap at Fitzwilliam Darcy? Do you lie awake at night and think of him with excessive awe and infatuation?"

Elizabeth scoffed. "Most certainly not." I shall not denigrate the gentleman, but I will be honest. "He did not make a favourable first impression in my neighbourhood, but he improves upon further acquaintance. The more I come to know him, the more sensibly I understand his disposition. As for infatuation, no. He is far too taciturn and arrogant for my liking. We are complete opposites."

After reading his letter, though, Elizabeth had been well pleased with the



conversations they had, and if she were honest with herself, she had not entirely loathed sparring with him months ago at Netherfield.

Miss de Bourgh gave a merry little laugh, a sound previously unheard from her. “Arrogant, oh yes. But taciturn? Rarely do I have an opportunity to observe him in social settings amongst strangers, but with family and intimate friends, he can be talkative enough. In fact—at least with me—he can be rather too fond of expressing himself, making speeches, giving lectures, and issuing orders.”

Elizabeth could well imagine that.

Passing through an expanse of conifers and hoping to dispel a degree of anxiety, she inhaled deeply, closing her eyes, sensing the humus below and the refreshing, resinous scents of the surrounding pine, spruce, and fir trees. No insects buzzed, no birds sang, no squirrels scuttled. The silence of the woodland was disturbed only by her thoughts and Miss de Bourgh’s resumption.

“Despite my complaints, I am inordinately fond of Darcy. He possesses those virtues expected of a true gentleman, such as courtesy, refinement, honesty, and generosity.” Elizabeth gave an incredulous, scornful little laugh. “You scoff again, Miss Bennet, but you must understand he is amongst the one or two hundred wealthiest men in England. To be distinguished by the master of Pemberley is something, indeed. Ergo, he is very careful about paying particular attention to any woman or asking them to stand up with him. Dancing with Darcy, you see, confers a special importance upon a lady. You may wonder why I shall not marry him, but all I shall say for now is that I have no desire to be mistress of Pemberley. I have other plans.”

Interesting, but what would she say if she learnt he had distinguished me and conferred upon me a most significant importance? Still, Elizabeth’s judgment could not be impartial concerning his merit. “Your cousin does not even like to dance, particularly with young ladies who have been slighted by other men or with those

who are only tolerable and not handsome enough to tempt him.”

“You sound embittered.” Reining in her ponies beneath a budding deciduous canopy, Miss de Bourgh studied Elizabeth. “Did Darcy speak so disrespectfully to you?”

Bowing her head, Elizabeth fidgeted with the rug’s fringe. “Not directly, but he must have known I could hear him. To have spoken so insultingly demonstrated complete indifference to my sensibilities as well as my reputation in my neighbourhood.”

She rubbed her brow. I thought I had forgiven him for that. Why must I dwell upon it? “I beg your pardon. Your cousin did apologise for those remarks, and I should not have made mention of them.”

“Do not fret. One of these fine days, Darcy will have his comeuppance. Some clever, spirited woman will put him in his place. I have endeavoured to do so, but such an inflated opinion of one’s eminence is not easily damped, is it?”

Set into motion again, the phaeton soon turned away from the wooded track, onto the road, down a tree-lined lane, and up to the manor’s gravel sweep at Rara Avis.

Ten

Rara Avis was a pretty prospect, but Anne could tell Miss Bennet thought it unworthy of extravagant praise.

A groom arrived to take charge of the equipage, and as the ladies stood at the bottom of the steps, Brinton rushed down them.

His white shirt was marred by dried dabs of yellow and blue paint in a larger splotch of scarlet. Black breeches, stockings, house slippers, and an unbuttoned, striped vermilion and chartreuse waistcoat completed his eccentric appearance. Good grief! With that tousled hair and those rolled up shirtsleeves, he looks like an unkempt beggar.

Arms stretched wide, Brinton approached. “Anne! How exceedingly good it is to see you.”

Not bothering to conceal her astonishment at his déshabillé , Miss Bennet whispered to Anne, “Obviously, we were not expected.”

“And Miss Elizabeth Bennet! I am overjoyed to welcome you to my home.” Reaching for her hand, the master of Rara Avis bowed over it. An ebony curl, longer than fashionable, fell over one of his eyes. Graceful, paint-stained fingers brushed it back into some semblance of order before he placed Miss Bennet’s hand upon his forearm and covered it with his own. She flinched, and Anne supposed the lady never before, even with gloved fingers, had touched a man’s exposed skin.

“Do come in, ladies, and view my latest creation. Then we shall nibble on currant cakes, drink tea, chat, and have a pleasant afternoon. And,” he said, smiling at Anne, “because I dearly love to dance, I now request, in advance, a set with each of you at my dear friend’s ball.”

Anne could tell Miss Bennet was taken aback by the gentleman’s familiar manner. But I am certain there is so much kindness in his reception she cannot help but be charmed.

Miss Bennet murmured, “We should not be here.”

In less than ten minutes, as Anne expected, Brinton—being his customary, likeable self—had enchanted Miss Bennet.

I daresay she cannot help but succumb to his allure. But perhaps it is the other way round, judging by the way he has yet to remove his hand from where it rests upon hers. How terribly interesting. Yes, terribly so.

Having been energetic in promoting Rara Avis and its dashing owner during the drive thither, Anne suspected her efforts might have been, to some degree, overly zealous. A feeling, almost akin to envy, arose within her breast.

Balderdash! Although the society of so talented, so clever, and so jovial a gentleman gradually had become Anne’s most exquisite pleasure, it was not as though she were in love with Brinton. She was certainly not jealous.

Trailing behind, she observed them, talking and laughing, winding through long passages and up several staircases. Every moment there, every turn about the place, seemed to supply Miss Bennet with a new delight. Anne remembered feeling that same sort of awe during her own early visits. The manor brimmed with exotic potted plants, songbirds in ornate cages, stained glass windows, Brinton’s works of art,

musical instruments, and curiosities from round the world.

“Just one more flight,” Brinton said, “then we shall reach my garret.”

Miss Bennet bestowed her delightful smile upon him. “Garret, sir? You paint a dismal image—a cold, wretched abode for an artist.”

Earlier, she had complimented a few of his landscapes on display, but Miss Bennet had yet to hear him recite his verses or perform sweet, haunting, intricate melodies on the violin. It seemed to Anne that Laurence Brinton was the living embodiment of the extraordinary men of centuries past who had created masterpieces during the revival of learning. She, however, may have been biased.

“Here we are.” He opened the door. Sunlight flooded the sky parlour, streaming through windows on three sides and in the roof.

Anne had been there only twice before. There were too many stairs for her liking, and she was panting, while Miss Bennet was scarcely out of breath. It must be all those walks she is so fond of taking.

The garret was warm, and sweat beaded on Anne’s forehead until her mother’s voice reminded her that ladies did not sweat; they perspired. As delicately as possible, she mopped her brow with a handkerchief.

Miss Bennet cried in delight upon seeing the pair of colourful popinjays upon their perch.

“Ah yes. Meet Squeak and Squawk.” Brinton grimaced. “They were named by sailors who abducted them from La Isla de la Trinidad . Their previous owner—from whom I rescued them—kept those horrid names, and my lovelies were so accustomed to Squeak and Squawk that I had not the heart to change them.”

He spoke to the parrots, and one of them made a loud, harsh reply of sorts. “During warm weather, these beauties reside in the aviary, but it is presently far too cold for my pets out there in the garden. What a beastly, cold spring we are having.” Holding out his hand, he made kissing noises. One of the macaws—Anne did not know which—flapped its wings and flew over, landing on his wrist. Miss Bennet gently stroked the macaw’s scarlet head while Brinton fed it some sort of nut.

Anne wrinkled her nose. He is talking to the bird in the same sickening manner Mrs Jenkinson uses when cooing at infants. Ugh. I could never utter such meaningless twaddle. Besides, I do not want children.

After setting the bird upon its perch, Brinton theatrically unveiled the oil painting he wanted the ladies to see. Anne’s gasp was echoed by Miss Bennet’s.

“That is me ,” Anne cried, aghast, “holding Squeak...or Squawk. Heaven and earth, Brinton! What am I wearing ?” Ready to swoon, Anne fetched the sterling silver vinaigrette from her reticule, opened the lid, and deeply inhaled its pungent infusion of ammonia, vinegar, alcohol, and lemon oil. Her nose ran. Her eyes stung. Her sensibilities were aggrieved.

Sounding utterly bewildered, Brinton asked, “Anne, have I offended you?”

Good grief. The loveable muttonhead lives life without fear and without regard for others’ judgments or criticisms. Anne knew that surrendering to society’s expectations would prove downright dull, if not malignant, to Brinton.

“How could you portray me like that?” She glared at the portrait, then at him. “When did you paint that travesty?”

“I frequently make sketches of your face, Anne, you know that. I have shown them to you.” Appearing somewhat dejected, he gripped a fistful of the shirt covering his

chest. “Admittedly, I took certain liberties in depicting your form and mode of dress, but?—”

“Mode of dress? That gown is practically indecent!” Anne squeezed her eyes shut. “Paint over it, Brinton. Paint me a dark-hued velvet gown with some sleeves and a high neck.”

Turning, she glared at Miss Bennet, for she had just heard a barely suppressed laugh. Her blushing face is a mask of gravity, but those expressive eyes betray her mirth.

Anne stamped her foot. “This is not amusing!”

“Tut, tut.” Brinton patted Anne’s shoulder, then turned to throw a sheet over the easel. “Such a pity. You often lament the dowdy fashions your mother insists you wear, so I thought you would be pleased with that portrait.”

Anne knew how much he loved sharing his talents and happiness with others, and she regretted her angry outburst. “I promise I shall be pleased with it once you properly clothe me.”

From the parrots’ perch came squawks that sounded suspiciously like, “Heaven and earth, Brinton! What am I wearing ? Heaven and earth, Brinton! What am I wearing ?”

It was all too much. Anne had had enough. Enervated, she trudged over to the garret’s sofa and collapsed amongst its colourful silk cushions. Hang this frailty of mine!

Thankfully, the outlandish clock on the cabinet informed her they had overstayed their welcome. Well, not really. I know Brinton would like us to remain, but the man has no sense of time. I doubt he even owns a pocket watch. He lives in, and strictly for, the moment.

But she could not risk her mother's wrath or, heaven forfend, Darcy's. And Mrs Collins would fret should her houseguest not arrive at the parsonage in a timely manner. Anne did not even want to think about the panic Mr Collins would be in should the daughter of his patroness be assumed missing.

"We must leave." Grabbing her reticule and stumbling down the staircases, Anne called for her pelisse and phaeton. Miss Bennet and Binton slowly followed in her footsteps.

Calmer then, Anne reflected on their visit. If one blotted out the memory of a certain scandalous oil painting, she believed the brief call had served its purpose. Like Gilchrist, Binton was a willing partner in their scheme. And never would she unscrupulously control or influence a friend.

Anne was growing rather fond of Elizabeth Bennet, and she hoped her new friend would not regret her involvement, albeit in a secondary role. She must not become truly enamoured of Binton, for I would not like to be responsible for another person's heartbreak. I have anxious considerations enough as it is.

In a rush to return to Rosings, Anne had left her gloves at Rara Avis, and Miss Bennet insisted they take turns wearing hers. The shy sun had hidden itself behind clouds, and Anne, chilled to the marrow and craving her fireside and a bit of Mrs Jenkinson's incessant coddling, urged her ponies from a slow jog into a lively trot.

Stifling a sigh, she answered another of Miss Bennet's endless enquiries about Binton. "He recently turned six and twenty, and before you ask, yes, he has an inheritance from his parents. After their deaths, he was raised by a wealthy great-uncle, the owner of Binton Hall. When that gentleman died, my friend inherited his ancestral home and re-named it Rara Avis, which means rare bird. And he is a rare bird, indeed. Amiable, he is liked by almost everyone save my mother and Darcy who think he is an immature, selfish, and irresponsible young man who flits from one



interest to another.”

“Does he flit from one woman to another?”

Passing out of the woods into the park, Anne watched a robin tilt its head, listening for a worm in the thawing ground. Mimicking its sideways movement, she contrived an answer. “No doubt you have discerned that Brinton is an audacious flirt. Thus far he has shied away from marriage.”

Best change that subject! “He has many friends, ones who understand him. He mingles with politicians and artists alike, including Byron. He does not, however, tolerate people who belittle him. He likes happy people and?—”

A rider approached at a gallop, and Anne pulled back on the reins. “Oh good grief! Is that Darcy ?”

Eleven

For the better part of an hour, Darcy had been sequestered with the butler and housekeeper as they tried in vain to get to the bottom of the recent mischief. According to Mr Harris and Mrs White, the whereabouts of all maids and footmen had been accounted for each time damage had occurred, including the previous night during which time the manor's doors and windows had been tightly locked.

The only members of the household not already questioned about the thievery or vandalism were Dubois and Mrs Jenkinson, and both were above reproach. Darcy acknowledged such interviews had to be undertaken but was reluctant to interrogate two ladies of genteel birth.

Before speaking to his cousin's abigail and elderly companion, he had hoped to call on Elizabeth and partake of her delightful society. Lost in pleasurable thoughts as he descended the stairs, he hummed a tune, then nearly jumped out of his skin when from below his aunt's voice boomed like thunder.

"Darcy! Have you seen your intended today?"

"Thus far, I have not had that pleasure." But I am on my way to the parsonage, where I shall properly woo the woman intended for me.

Impatient at being waylaid, he checked his pocket watch and spoke in haste. "I assume you erroneously refer to Anne as my intended."

"Of course I do!" One of Lady Catherine's bejewelled hands splayed across her neck.

“What do you mean erroneously ? Stars and garters! Who else could possibly be your intended?”

“I must remind you, my lady, that your daughter and I are not engaged, and in so speaking, you run the risk of damaging her reputation.” Darcy had spoken with unwavering firmness, but as ever, his reminder was ignored.

Studying his person with evident suspicion, Lady Catherine eventually gave him a rare smile, and a speculative gleam shone in her eyes. “You look particularly dapper this morning. Having applied yourself so well to your appearance, I trust you will be requesting a private audience with Anne as soon as she is returned.” Though muttered, her next remark was audible. “That girl needs a husband.”

In point of fact, Darcy had gone back to his chambers following the meeting with the two senior servants. His hair had required a good combing after being tousled and tangled in frustration over the devilry being perpetrated. Jonesby, his valet, had helped him don a flattering bottle-green coat and handed him a comfit of anise, caraway, and fennel seeds to freshen his breath after too much coffee. That second toilette of the morning was not, however, for Anne’s benefit.

Knowing her ladyship’s temper never could bear opposition well, Darcy was disinclined to make complicated matters more awkward. Choosing to save himself from useless remonstrance, he simply avoided the subject. “I was considering speaking with Mrs Jenkinson and Dubois regarding the vandalism. Have you asked them, or the stable workers, about Anne’s current whereabouts, or shall I?”

“It goes without saying that I have done so. I am exceedingly attentive to such things, you know. Dubois said she helped Anne into her riding habit, and John Coachman reported that my daughter went out in her phaeton over an hour ago. No one has seen her since. This is a most vexing concern. Until recently, it has not been like Anne to disappear without letting us know her plans.” Turning on her heel, Lady Catherine

walked towards the library. “Favour me with your company. I must speak to you in private.”

With a longing look towards the front door, Darcy followed.

As soon as the library door closed behind them, his aunt took the most comfortable chair for herself and indicated where he should sit. Rearranging her shawl, she began in anger. “Prevailing reports of a most alarming nature reached me hours ago when my coachman told me of Anne’s frequent and protracted visits to Gilchrist’s cottage. I could not like his implication of unseemly goings-on.”

“Did he say as much?”

“Of course not, and he should mind his tongue if he values his position. A tryst! Can you imagine the scandal? The disparity of an earl’s niece and a gardener!” Fanning her flushed face, she gave a dismissive, unladylike snort. “This is all because of that botany hobby of hers. Now, you see how greatly your dear cousin has been traduced. Though I know it can be naught but a scandalous invention, such ignoble slander cannot and will not be tolerated. I insist upon having these disgraceful reports universally contradicted. You hired Gilchrist, and you must see to the matter at once.”

Although not entirely free of apprehension in that same regard, Darcy remained silent about his suspicions. A sense of duty to his relations ever ready, he reluctantly postponed calling at the parsonage and promised his aunt he would speak to the gardener.

The gleam was back in her ladyship’s eyes. “Very good. I shall anticipate a favourable report from you later and a joyful announcement from you and Anne this evening.”

On his way to Gilchrist’s cottage to confront him about his possible involvement with

Anne, Darcy fervently prayed he would not discover the two of them in any sort of compromising position.

Upon finding the cottage unoccupied, he glanced about. What is this doing here? With a huff of disgust, he picked up Anne's Flora and tucked it under an arm.

After wandering about the grounds, he espied Gilchrist in one of the greenhouses.

The air was hot as he stepped inside, yet there was a chill in Darcy's reception as he asked whether the master gardener knew Anne's whereabouts. Gilchrist said he had not seen her that morning.

"Then, how do you account for this?" From behind his back, Darcy produced his cousin's Flora and slammed it on a nearby potting table. "I found it in your cottage." Jaw jutting, he ground out, "On your rumpled cot."

Seemingly unconcerned, the gardener shrugged. "She must have stopped by the bothy while I was out. The anemones I saved for her are gone."

Nearly matched in height, the two men stood toe to toe. Damping down anger, Darcy spoke in an even tone. "Do you have any notion where she might be now?"

Without answering for himself, Gilchrist beckoned one of the nearby underlings and asked if he had seen Miss de Bourgh that day.

"Aye," a young lad replied. "I saw her with a pretty young lady driving into the woods about an hour ago."

Darcy ordered everyone, save the master gardener, from the hothouse. "Look me in the eye, Gilchrist, and tell me you have not laid a hand upon my cousin."

There was a tightness in the Scot's eyes as he turned and swore he had not. His unflinching gaze bore into Darcy's as he admitted to a platonic friendship with Miss de Bourgh, nothing more.

Added to that, Gilchrist's insistence that he was far too busy with spring planting in the formal, kitchen, herb, and scent gardens to spend much time assisting Anne with the herbarium also bore truth. Therefore, Darcy was inclined to believe him. But there followed such an angry spate of Scottish burr that he had difficulty following it, and the man's gruffness made reserve impossible.

Neck and jaw rigid, Darcy drew himself up taller. "Lady Catherine will be informed of the insolent manner in which you?—"

The gardener said such a complaint would be of little concern, and he gladly would return to his former employer. Mr Brinton, he said, had complete faith in his abilities while Darcy's termagant of an aunt mistrusted his horticultural knowledge.

Good character was paramount in a gardener. What had I been thinking to have hired such a surly fellow? Another of my mistakes. Stepping closer and having a fraction of an inch height on the inflexible Scot, Darcy calmly said, "In that case, Gilchrist, you may leave at once. You are hereby dismissed from employment at Rosings."

Gilchrist turned away to fuss with one of the new varieties of rose he was cultivating.

Momentarily distracted by the blush-hued bloom, Darcy pictured Elizabeth's lips and imagined their softness and warmth. Stepping forwards, he plucked one of the petals and placed it in his breast pocket.

Outside the stable, his agitation beyond expression, Darcy tucked Anne's Flora in his saddlebag. Riding out of the park and onto the lane in search of his cousin, he prayed she had not gone astray, in any manner.

Just as his horse had been urged into a gallop, a light carriage pulled by two grey ponies approached at a lively trot. Anne! Darcy hauled back on the reins while she did the same to hers.

Feelings in sudden warfare, he was delighted upon recognising the passenger, relieved his cousin was safe, but still angry about Gilchrist. Stopping abreast of the phaeton, he tipped his hat and forced a smile.

“Good day, Miss Bennet.” In a less pleasant tone, he asked his cousin where she had been.

“Good day to you, too, Darcy.” Anne gave him a wide-eyed, innocent look. “As you see, I have taken Miss Bennet for a nice little jaunt.”

“You have been gone for well over an hour.” Darcy lowered his head, glaring at her from under his hat’s brim. “Your mother is concerned. Where, exactly, were you all that time?”

“We stopped by Gilchrist’s cottage to fetch the anemones he picked for my Flora.”

“Yes, yes, I know that. But where did you go afterwards?”

“We drove through the plantation.” His cousin gave him a sugar-sweet smile. “Now we are on the lane, heading back to the parsonage.”

Not unlike the three horses, Darcy breathed noisily through his nose. “It does not take an hour to drive through the woods.”

Eyes softening, voice gentling, he leant forwards. “Miss Bennet, would you be so kind as to tell me where you were between the woods and here? And please do not say Rara Avis.” Her rosebud blush matched her tempting lips, and Darcy’s heart

throbbed against the petal in his breast pocket.

Elizabeth glanced at Anne, then looked straight at him. “Very well, sir, I shall not.”

Darcy’s eyes flew wide, and he detected a fleeting quirk of her lips. Saucy little minx!

“Do not be so dull and unadventurous, Darcy,” said Anne. “Yes, we went there. I wanted my dear new friend to see the place.”

A feeling of dread overcame him, and Darcy’s hands clenched on the reins. “From afar, I trust.”

In a most unladylike manner, Anne rolled her eyes. “Even had I foolishly planned on us—two single, ingenuous ladies—calling on a bachelor, do you suppose Miss Bennet here would have consented to such scandalous behaviour?” She looked as though butter would not melt in her mouth.

His heart’s desire’s expression, however, indicated she obviously wished herself elsewhere, somewhere far, far removed from the cousins.

To regard Elizabeth Bennet with anything less than esteem was utterly unthinkable. Darcy tore his eyes away from that lady’s lovely countenance and caught the smug smile on his cousin’s face. Cunning little brat!

With a saucy grin, a forceful shake of the reins, and a mighty ‘Gee!’, Anne urged her ponies to race away from him.

He might have been mistaken, but when he thought about it, Darcy could have sworn his cousin was wearing gloves that were too big for her and that Elizabeth’s hands were bare.



### Twelve

With cold fingers, Elizabeth held fast to her bonnet as the phaeton lurched ahead and raced along the lane. Above the clatter of ponies' hooves, she heard Mr Darcy's shout as his horse gave chase.

Miss de Bourgh's voice rose above the carriage's rattles and the rushing wind. "Can you keep a secret?"

Elizabeth did not want to become embroiled in any further subterfuge. "Yes, I can . But I choose not to hear whatever you wish to divulge. Please do not involve me in your intrigues."

When the heiress took her eyes off the road and glanced at her, Elizabeth wondered whether the remorseful look spoke of guilt or of regret.

Eyes fixed straight ahead then, Miss de Bourgh masterfully steered her ponies past the parsonage and towards Rosings.

"You are coming home with me. With you by my side, neither Mother nor Darcy will dare chastise me. Besides, I wish to show you the glorious gown I shall wear to the ball." Reaching over, she covered Elizabeth's bare hand with her gloved one and beseeched, "Stay with me. Please."

Botheration! On second thought, she realised Mrs Collins would be at Mr Chapman's with her basketful of foodstuffs, and Elizabeth wanted to avoid being alone with Mr Collins and his prattle. It was a draw, but as long as Miss de Bourgh did not solicit

her involvement in any sort of collusion, Elizabeth would rather spend time with Mr Darcy's cousin than with her own.

“Why yes, I shall be delighted.”

When Elizabeth walked into the parlour arm-in-arm with Miss de Bourgh, Lady Catherine's air was even more than customarily ungracious. Her ladyship's beady eyes burnt as brightly and looked twice as hard as the gemstones flashing upon her fingers.

Deigning to grace Elizabeth with a slight inclination of her head, Lady Catherine spoke with stiff politeness. “Miss Bennet, I was not expecting you.”

“She is my guest, Mother.” Miss de Bourgh offered Elizabeth an apology, a seat, and refreshments. The first two were accepted, the latter politely declined.

Lady Catherine spoke in hushed tones. “Where have you been, Anne?”

The heavy tread of boots, echoing from the great hall and drawing near the parlour, belonged to Mr Darcy, who then appeared in the doorway.

“Ladies.” He bowed but said he could not join them. “I have urgent business to which I must attend. Just in time for spring planting, I am afraid I have summarily dismissed Gilchrist from employment here at Rosings and must find a replacement. I shall explain later.” He bowed again. “Miss Bennet.” With that, he turned away.

Miss de Bourgh jumped to her feet, and her pinched face turned an alarming shade of red. Then she dashed to the door in a flurry of voluminous riding-habit skirts. “Darcy, stop right there! What did you say to Gilchrist? I hope you did not offend him. He does not appreciate anyone questioning either his knowledge or his integrity. Besides, you cannot send Gilchrist away. He is my employee, and I shall not have it! Do you

hear me?”

Certain she had heard the gentleman reply ‘No’ before the bickering cousins moved down the hall, Elizabeth—barely stifling a giggle—bowed her head and bit her lip. Once she had herself under control, she said, “My apologies, Lady Catherine, but with your permission, I should return to the parsonage now.”

The instant Elizabeth stood to make an eager escape, Lady Catherine raised her voice. “Not so hasty, if you please. Where did you and Anne go today? I warn you, I am not to be trifled with. Though I had not thought you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy, I suspect you somehow have led my daughter astray. If Sir Lewis were still alive, he would be turning over in his grave!”

At Elizabeth’s grin, Lady Catherine’s eyes narrowed into slits. “I fail to find humour in this, young lady! Now, I insist upon knowing the truth. Were the two of you at Gilchrist’s cottage? Did you leave Anne alone there with that man?”

Perhaps at her ladyship’s age—no doubt similar to Mama’s—one tends towards captiousness. Both of them certainly have no difficulty finding fault with me. “We paid a call there to collect anemones, but the gardener was not at home.”

Breathless, Miss de Bourgh rushed back into the room. “Miss Bennet, I beg your pardon for abandoning you. Oh! Surely, you are not leaving, are you?”

Elizabeth nodded. “I feel I must.”

“No. No, you cannot go without seeing my gown.” Miss de Bourgh tugged Elizabeth’s arm. “Come up to my apartments, please.”

Thinking her rather pitiable, Elizabeth had not the heart to deny the entreaty. She seems so desperate for a friend.

As the two young ladies ascended the grand staircase, Miss de Bourgh had yet to let go of Elizabeth's arm. "Would you henceforth call me Anne?"

"If you wish. But, in turn, you must call me Elizabeth." She could not lament the acquaintance. Surely, it was not pity she felt but something more meaningful—the burgeoning of true friendship. In addition to being of an age, they shared something else in common. Ignominious mothers.

"Miss de Bourgh, Anne, speaking of gowns, I had no notion of attending a ball when my trunks were packed. However, I did bring one I wore last November at a private ball at which Mr Darcy and I stood up together for a set. So he has seen—"

Stepping away, Anne turned to face her. "I distinctly remember your telling me he did not dance with you because you were not handsome enough to tempt him. Good heavens, my friend! If that cousin of mine danced with you, conferring that special importance I mentioned, that means he likes you!"

Taking her by the arm again, she tut-tutted. "Do not fret. My lady's maid, Dubois, is adept with needle and thread. I shall have her embellish your gown in such a way that Darcy will not recognise it." Elizabeth demurred, but her protests fell upon deaf ears.

As they moved through the manor's maze of wings, galleries, and long passages with rooms opening off them, Elizabeth became entirely disoriented. If ever left to find my way out of this place, I might never escape. They will find my desiccated skeleton in some closet or other. With shelves, no doubt.

Eventually shown through Anne's apartments, Elizabeth thought them everything that money and good taste could provide.

Seated then in the commodious dressing room, the luxury of her surroundings faded to inconsequence when Anne proudly held up a sleek gown of ivory taffeta.

“Imagine, if you will, Elizabeth, this garment devoid of all its beautiful embroidery. That would be the gown my mother, even now, expects me to wear to the ball. But clever Dubois here”—she indicated the maid standing in the shadows—“spent endless hours sewing these narrow, indigo stripes and this spiralling, floral pattern upon it.”

With a deep-blue fabric draped over one arm, the lady’s maid stepped into the light. “Ah, but my masterpiece is this addition which I have yet to finish embellishing,” she said in a faint French accent.

Anne took the darker garment and wrapped it round the gown, fastening it beneath the bodice. “Voilà! It is now an open robe. And do you see how Dubois has copied the gown’s design onto the robe but in golden threads? It will shimmer in candlelight.” She swayed the gown back and forth, making the robe billow. “But what is truly exciting is that, behind closed doors, I have been embroidering?—”

Dubois cleared her throat. “Mademoiselle?”

“Oh Dubois! Surely we can let Elizabeth know of our?—”

From somewhere in the apartments, Lady Catherine’s voice calling for her daughter sent employer and maid into a flurry of activity, and they disappeared with the gown to secret it away.

While Elizabeth waited for Anne’s return, Lady Catherine entered the dressing room. “Miss Bennet! Now what have you done with my daughter?”

Thirteen

Tuesday, April 14

Frequent downpours intermixed with sleet prevented Darcy from walking to the parsonage. Putting servants to the bother of preparing his carriage in a deluge for such a short distance was unthinkable. As unthinkable as calling on Elizabeth Bennet while looking like a drowned rat and feeling not much better. Consequently, he cursed the foul weather that suspended his wooing of the young lady and left him in the company of his aunt, his cousin, and the drowsy Mrs Jenkinson.

In disgrace due to her suspicious outings to Gilchrist's cottage, his cousin sat in sullen unresponsiveness while Lady Catherine gave way to violent indignation.

“Think, Anne! You are an heiress, the wealthy daughter of the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh, a niece of the current Earl of Matlock, and granddaughter of his predecessor. A woman of the upper classes does not cavort with a gardener! Your conduct has become most vexatiously provoking, and you are forbidden from visiting that man ever again.”

Darcy agreed with his aunt. Why, such a class difference would make an alliance between Elizabeth and himself seem almost like one of equality! The thought gave him pause. Apparently, one's opinion of one's own consequence is not easily damped.

To escape the womenfolk, he went to the billiards room and played alone, cursing Colonel Fitzwilliam's superiors for calling him away. Then he sequestered himself in

the library with the groundsman who, until a replacement for Gilchrist could be hired, agreed to temporarily add the head gardener's duties to his own responsibilities.

Wednesday, April 15

Darcy met with the estate manager to ensure the farms were well run and the tenant cottages in good repair. They discussed the problem of the late planting and adjusted their plans for a profitable autumn harvest. When the man left, Darcy turned towards the window to ruminare and glare at the accursed raindrops running down the pane. The curtains captured his attention, and he would have sworn they used to have a pattern stitched upon them. He sprang from the chair. Blast! It was past time to interrogate Mrs Jenkinson and Dubois.

After he had requested her presence in the library and asked a few leading questions, Anne's elderly companion shook her head and expressed concern about the goings-on.

"So very peculiar, is it not? And so suspect, too. Now, Mr Darcy, if you will excuse me, I must ensure your cousin's comfort." Shuffling her way to the door, she grumbled about the weather.

Darcy sighed. He had gleaned nothing, other than the fact that coldness and dampness had an adverse effect on the woman's rheumatism.

The abigail's interview proved to be another awkward affair. The refined lady was not only a French émigré but some sort of relation of Darcy's late uncle, Sir Lewis.

"I cannot help you, Mr Darcy," she said in her appealing accent, adding a Gallic shrug for good measure. Dubois then reminded him that she reported and answered directly to Anne, but she agreed the disappearances were a matter of great interest to her. "Comme c'est très mystérieux!"

Darcy had known questioning two such genteel ladies would be pointless.

Thursday, April 16

A variety of sporadic precipitation continued to fall, but Darcy craved escape. His spirits were jaded from writing odious business letters, rereading books, playing cards with the ladies, and listening to all the nonsense being uttered by them. He longed for playful impertinence, and as he explained to his aunt, he felt an overwhelming desire to call on the Collinses.

“How can you be so asinine as to think of such a thing, Darcy? I shall not hear of it. You must stay here and entertain Anne.”

His cousin leant forwards in her chair. “If you do go, would you be so kind as to fetch a package for me? Miss Bennet should have something for Dubois.”

Darcy agreed with alacrity while gaining his feet.

“Sit down!” Her ladyship gave a dissatisfied sniff when he did not comply. “The weather is ghastly. You will not be fit to be seen when you get there.”

“A gentleman cannot always be within doors. I have grown restless. The parsonage is not far.”

“I do not understand this sudden urge to call upon those people in this weather when you could stay here, warm and dry, and in more exalted and cherished company.” With a twitch of her head, indicating her daughter, Lady Catherine gave Darcy a significant look that signified nothing at all to him. At his blank expression, she heaved a sigh. “Oh very well. At least, take a footman with an umbrella. If nothing else, he may have some sense.”



Excusing himself, Darcy bounded up the stairs, and upon reaching his apartments, removed his coat. “Jonesby, I wish to exchange this waistcoat for the one that, according to you, matches my eyes...not that I am such a dandy to care about such things. Quickly, man.”

Darcy shrugged off the buff-coloured waistcoat and waited and waited. “Jonesby, what the blazes is taking so long?”

The embarrassed valet returned from the dressing room empty-handed, save for a gold coin he handed to his master. “My apologies, sir. The indigo waistcoat appears to be missing. I distinctly remember unpacking it and storing it in the clothes press. However, when I looked in the appropriate drawer, all I found was that guinea.”

Darcy heaved a heavy sigh. The theft was different from all the other disappearances, and someone clearly had no notion of the cost of a simple waistcoat. A guinea! To quote Dubois, how very mysterious.

“And have you read that one, Miss Bennet?” In the parlour at Hunsford, Darcy pointed to a table upon which rested a copy of Gulliver’s Travels .

“Go on, Eliza.” Mrs Collins smiled. “I know you are itching to say it.”

Elizabeth’s eyes lit with mirth. “I did, indeed, read Gulliver’s Travels , sir. Rather swiftly , in fact.”

Darcy did not care for wordplay in any form, and he was the wretchedest being in the world when it came to courteous falsehoods, but for her benefit alone, he smiled. “Speaking of travellers’ tales, did you know that Mr Brinton keeps journals of his many journeys abroad?”

He knew she and his cousin had been at Rara Avis. But for what duration were they

there? Had Elizabeth enjoyed the man's company? "I suppose he regaled you with colourful accounts of his visits to faraway lands."

Tilting her head, Elizabeth gave him a puzzled look. "No, he made no mention of such. I viewed a few of his paintings and met a pair of macaws. Oh, and Mr Brinton requested sets with your cousin and me at her ball."

Darcy damped down the tinge of jealousy heating his blood. "Then may I have the honour of standing up with you for two sets, one preferably being the supper?"

He heard a little gasp from Mrs Collins, and upon granting him the requested set and another of his choice, a pretty blush overspread Elizabeth's cheeks.

Dare I request the first or last? Then he remembered promising to dance the opening set with his cousin. Blast! He leant in. "Would you grant me the great honour of your last?"

Still blushing, Elizabeth nodded.

"Well, now that that is settled," said Mrs Collins, drawing Darcy's attention away from her captivating friend, "shall I fetch my husband from writing Sunday's sermon and set up a table for whist?"

"A moment please, if you will." Darcy smiled at the lady of the house. "May I also have the honour of standing up with you for a set?" Both the rector's wife and her friend seemed delighted by his request, and he felt rather proud of himself for thinking of Mrs Collins.

Once the card table was placed and they were seated round it, Darcy had an opportunity to test both his patience and his abilities. He listened with half an ear to Mr Collins's prattle while trying to remember which cards had been played and

which ones remained. Such undertakings were made more difficult while sitting across from his distracting partner, the partner he wanted for the rest of his life. He was grateful to Mrs Collins for agreeing to keep score. Darcy was an intelligent, masterly gentleman, but dealing with more than three or four tasks at a time was beyond even him.

Much later, as he stood with the others by the front door and donned his greatcoat, he remembered something else with which he had been tasked. “Miss Bennet, I believe you have something for me to deliver to my cousin’s maid.”

“Oh yes.” She turned away. “I shall return directly with?—”

“For shame, Cousin Elizabeth! Lady Catherine’s nephew is not your personal courier!” Turning to his guest, Mr Collins begged pardon on behalf of his presumptuous relation.

There ensued then a bit of a commotion and fuss until Mrs Collins inserted herself into the fray.

“I shall fetch it for you, Eliza.” Upon being told its location, she took her husband by the arm and led him away. “Do you not have that sermon to complete by tomorrow for Lady Catherine’s approval?”

“Oh my dear Mrs Collins! You are so very...”

Their voices faded away, as did Darcy’s surroundings. He had eyes and ears only for the couple’s houseguest as she opened the door and glanced skywards.

“Finally, the clouds are clearing away. I can see the moon, a waxing crescent. There might even be a sunrise worth witnessing tomorrow.”

While pulling on his gloves, Darcy took care to inform her there was a bench on a hill at the eastern edge of the park, a favourite spot of his, particularly in the mornings. Without thinking, he reached out and gently grasped her bare fingers, wishing he had not bothered with the gloves. Her eyes widened as she looked down at their joined hands, and his burgeoning smile fell flat. Now that I am holding them, dare I kiss her fingers or simply give them a gentle squeeze?

The ensuing awkwardness was dispelled by the return of Mrs Collins. Darcy released Elizabeth's hand to accept the valise stamped with her initials, then he bowed to both ladies.

"Good night. Thank you both for a most enjoyable evening." Plunking his hat upon his head, he stepped out into gathering darkness.

Being a gentleman, he resisted curiosity. Nothing could tempt him to violate Elizabeth's privacy by peeking inside the valise. Its contents would remain another mystery.

He ruminated then on their time together in Hertfordshire, back when he had foolishly thought a connexion to her and her family totally inappropriate. But that connexion, that attachment, that bond, was what he wanted more than anything in the world, and he could not help but reimagine a future together. Unreciprocated love and rejection might have broken his heart, but he would win hers, even if it took a lifetime. Well, not a lifetime. I should like to raise a family with her before we are old and grey.

Whatever boundaries she set would be respected, even though just being in her presence made his heart race. His stomach was often in his boots, and his grasp of the King's English sometimes failed him.

More awkward than when he was a stripling suffering from calf love over some

young lady, being in love—truly in love—was a humbling experience.

Fourteen

Friday, April 17

Stars still shone when, bundled up warmly, Elizabeth left the parsonage.

After crossing the lane, she entered the frost-covered park and veered in an easterly direction. I must be mad to leave my cosy bed at the merest crack of daybreak and walk in freezing temperatures towards the rising sun's weak warmth. Despite that opinion, Elizabeth was as happy as a lark, though she did refrain from breaking into song.

Stepping lively and swinging her arms to generate heat, she gave herself free rein to think about Mr Darcy. He was not at all the vexatious, arrogant so-and-so she had been so prejudiced against since first acquaintance. His manner was so altered, so gentlemanly. He intently listened to what she had to say, behaved with propriety, smiled, and spoke to her more in the last se'nnight than he had during almost two months complete in Hertfordshire. With each and every encounter, her respect and regard had increased until his society was deemed entirely agreeable. And since there was nothing so tiring as ill temper, she was resolved to continue enjoying his company while unable to escape it. No, she no longer wished to escape it.

There he was just ahead also walking eastwards, coattails flapping in his wake. Elizabeth laughed at herself. Just as I knew he would be. Admiring his athletic frame, his confident, powerful stride and graceful carriage, she had to admit the gentleman was handsome, even from behind.

Previously, she had been plagued by the mischance that brought him to a place no one else but she ventured. That morning, though, she welcomed the opportunity to visit his favourite spot and to gradually improve the intimacy of their acquaintance far from prying eyes.

Hurried footfalls must have apprised him of her presence. Mr Darcy turned back, and she wondered if he had been listening for her. As he approached, Elizabeth's heart gave an unexpected lurch. Did it mean she held him in affection? She dismissed such a thought at once. The feeling, no doubt, was brought on by their forced proximity. It would not last once they returned to their customary lives.

Along with a greeting and a bow, he bestowed upon her such a broad smile that a dimple appeared upon his cheek. The good humour of his countenance made her breath catch, and the last vestiges of her pique fell through a crack in the ice of her heart and sank into murky depths, hopefully never to resurface.

He offered his arm, and mutual enquiries on common subjects passed before they walked awhile in silence, each unwilling to further disturb the dawn's quietude.

At their destination, which afforded a stunning view of the sun painting a rosy, golden glow across the cloudy horizon, Mr Darcy removed his greatcoat and spread it upon the bench's cedar planks. Then he stood, facing her and staring in evident admiration.

"Sir, you are missing the beauty behind you."

Without looking back, he replied, "It is unequal to the beauty before me— your light, your rosy glow."

Unaccustomed to compliments, Elizabeth bowed her head. Other appealing words, ones spoken eight days prior, resounded. '...how ardently I admire and love you' .

Strong was her urge to reach out, to touch him, as he had done to her the previous night. In what? A gesture of affection? Yes, perhaps. She hoped her smile conveyed the happiness she felt.

He sat beside her then, close but not touching, and they chatted about their families and watched the colours change while the sun cleared the horizon.

With fondness and honesty, Elizabeth spoke of her parents. She sang her elder sister's praises and made excuses for her younger ones.

"Lady Catherine was quite put out that we had no governess and no accomplishments worth mentioning. Your aunt, of course, does not know that Lydia is a shining example to all young ladies."

"She is?" The disbelief in Mr Darcy's voice was almost comical.

"Oh yes. She is a shining example of how not to behave."

Tactfully dropping that subject, he asked, "And you? For what are you known? What is Miss Elizabeth Bennet's forte?" Although not another soul was in sight, he lowered his voice. "Other than capturing the master of Pemberley's heart, that is."

Until that moment, she had felt quite at ease, but when he said such things, what was she to say in return? "My grandest accomplishments are impertinent wit and an unerring ability to judge a person's character on first sight. 'Tis rather uncanny, really." In an admirable mimicry of Lady Catherine, she added, "I am quite proficient."

Pausing in indecision, Elizabeth fidgeted with a ripped stitch on her glove. "I wonder at my imprudence in asking this, sir, but if you ever were to return to Hertfordshire, would you?—"



“Yes. Yes, I most certainly would, if you so wish it.” He grinned.

Her application had begun in earnest, but Mr Darcy’s unexpected playfulness tugged at her heart. “I was going to ask if you would consider becoming better acquainted with my family and relations. But now I shall not bother asking.”

“Let us speak seriously, madam. If—no, when— I go there, I shall embrace your family, one and all. Figuratively, that is.”

Elizabeth feared that if ever he did spend time with her family—notwithstanding what he had said to the contrary—his attachment would vanish faster than her youngest sister when there was mending to be done.

“I know your sister’s name is Georgiana. Can you name mine?” Will he meet my challenge?

Without hesitation, he said, “Miss Bennet is Jane. Next would be Miss Mary, followed by Miss Catherine—though you called her Kitty, and Miss Lydia. But to be fair, you spoke of each by name just minutes ago.” He leant forwards, his expression soft while looking deeply into her eyes. “I received a reply from Bingley, and your elder sister should expect a visit from my friend”—he consulted his watch—“in approximately seven hours.”

Smiling and seeing him in a new light, Elizabeth barely stopped herself from embracing Mr Darcy. “Such rectitude, sir! You are the very best of men, and you have my heartfelt gratitude.” Tears threatened, welling in her eyes as she imagined her beloved sister’s happiness. A folded pocket-handkerchief appeared in front of her face. “Thank you. Oh, what is this?” A pink rose petal had fluttered from within the linen folds and landed upon her lap. “How lovely.”

He seemed embarrassed. “It reminded me of your—” His eyes fell to her lips. “Of

you.”

Her blush matched the petal as she handed it to him. “In that case, you had best keep it. I would not want you to forget me.”

“Never.” His eyes sought hers. “Never could I, even if I tried.”

The new light in which she viewed the gentleman shifted again in the sunrise, and it reflected the possibility of her own future felicity. Had Mr Darcy not previously alluded to the fact that he still wished to secure her affection, she would have sworn no man would offer marriage a second time to the same woman. No, she must not raise her hopes. I fear I have become ill-fitted to endure the loss of his esteem.

His adoring mien was becoming a little too intense, too intimate for Elizabeth’s comfort. “It is fortunate your tidings about Mr Bingley bring me tremendous joy this morning, sir. There will be no need to shoot the messenger.”

“I am glad to hear it.” Shifting closer, he slid his arm along the back of the bench, his hand brushing her collar in the process.

Gooseflesh arose upon her nape. Her breathing was affected, and a thrill coursed through her entire body. That the staid Mr Darcy should affect her so! Keeping very still, she took a deep breath. Whatever that fragrance is, he smells divine. Is it his shaving soap? What would he do if I just leant in and nuzzled that firm jaw?

Thinking she might scream if he did not speak or do something, Elizabeth blurted the first thought that came to mind. “Anne seemed surprised when I made a remark about your being taciturn.”

Withdrawing his arm, the gentleman smiled at her in a self-satisfied manner. “You and Anne talked about me, did you?”

Looking down at the bothersome ripped stitch, Elizabeth hid a grin. “Yes. It must have been when we were rather desperate for a topic.”

“Minx!”

Elizabeth tapped a forefinger against her chin. “I believe I was telling your cousin about the time I sat with a visitor at the parsonage, fearing we might sink into total silence. If memory serves, the gentleman took up a newspaper from the table, glanced over it, and made some sort of cold remark. Then Charlotte returned from her walk, and after sitting a few minutes longer without saying much of anything to anyone, the visitor went away.”

“You are teasing me. And rightfully so.” He rubbed his forehead a few times, and Elizabeth hoped she had not given him a headache. “I have made so many abominably stupid blunders since my father’s demise, and I am so very sorry for any pain I have caused you.”

Regretting that she had recounted the incident and suffering no little measure of shame over his woebegone expression, Elizabeth gave his arm three little pats. “Prepare yourself, sir. I am going to tell you something dreadfully shocking.”

Expression grim, he nodded.

“You, Mr Darcy, are human . And humans make abominably stupid blunders all the time. My most recent one was when I just now mocked your past behaviour, and I beg your pardon for that. However, you must learn some of my philosophy.” Drawing herself up, she gave him a stern look. “Repeat after me now, sir. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.”

He complied, and his countenance softened into something akin to adoration.

Fifteen

Saturday, April 18

The oft-forgotten sitting room had been one of Sir Lewis's favourite sanctuaries at Rosings. The de Bourgh coat of arms was proudly displayed on the far wall, and the settee and its two matching armchairs were upholstered in blue fabric with a gold fleur-de-lis design. As Lady Catherine was fond of reminding everyone, her late husband came from a respectable, honourable, and ancient line.

On that Saturday, under cover of darkness in the wee hours of morn, actively engaged in their mischief, one pilferer turned to the other. "Do you not suffer even a modicum of guilt over these ill-gotten gains?"

A scoff was heard. "No," Dubois then whispered, "not at all. Belonging to our mistress, they are not ill-gotten. Why would I suffer guilt? We commit no sinister act, no crime causing bodily harm. We are not plotting to behead the King or blow up the House of Lords."

"Heaven forfend!" cried Mrs Jenkinson, a little too loudly.

"Hush, madam," Anne hissed at the elderly woman.

The five cushions with which Mrs Jenkinson was attempting to abscond were more than she could manage. Repeatedly, she dropped one, bent to retrieve it, complained about her rheumatism, and dropped another cushion in the process.

Unseen in the dim light, Anne rolled her eyes and practised patience. Mrs Jenkinson was still supposedly her companion. Soon, though, she would be, in Dubois's words, *de trop* .

Stepping up, Anne reminded Dubois that her uncle sat in the House of Lords. "Do not even whisper of blowing up one of our Houses of Parliament." She supposed her abigail, having left during France's Revolution of 1789, could not help but remember her country's ruthless atrocities.

Careful not to set anything aflame with her candle, Anne stooped to admire the settee and armchairs with all their gold-thread embroidery. How I wish pieces of furniture were more portable!

Softly saying, "Tassels! Tassels!" and bouncing from foot to foot, Anne's lady's maid pointed towards the curtains. With all that moving about, her candle flickered and extinguished.

Anne peered into the dark depths of the room. "Excellent, Dubois."

The abigail relit her candle from Anne's before fetching her scissors.

It is just as well the colonel departed when he did. Dubois had an admiring eye for not only Colonel Fitzwilliam's person but for his uniform's golden epaulettes.

Still, Anne was grateful to her maid. As a remedy for the ennui to which her mistress had succumbed earlier that year, Dubois had introduced *parfilage* , as it was known in her country. When the pastime reached England's shores, it was named *drizzling*. Stripping metallic threads from textiles caused tiny flecks of gold or silver to fall—like drops of drizzle—from their core of silk or linen.

Once popular with France's aristocracy, *parfilage* gave ladies the opportunity to

exhibit graceful, elegant hand movements while picking precious threads from fabrics. In Anne's case, drizzling began as a lark but soon became an addiction.

"Well, ladies," she whispered as they gathered round. "Five cushions and a handful of tassels—a worthy yield for one night's work. I believe we now have all the thread I need to finish my creation." That clever idea had come about on the same day Anne had met Miss Elizabeth Bennet and noticed the formal drawing room's aureate cornice with its golden curves, spirals, and flourishes.

Guiding her accomplices out of the sitting room and up the staircase, Anne was sorry their lark was coming to an end. Although it all started as a harmless frolic with which to amuse themselves, she had learnt something useful in the process. She finally could proclaim herself an accomplished woman. Alas, no one other than Dubois and Mrs Jenkinson had witnessed her astounding feats of dexterity. Soon, though, others will see how gracefully and skilfully I have used my hands.

Only two days then remained until her twenty-first birthday, the celebratory ball, her surprise for a certain gentleman, and what would be shocking announcements for her mother.

Freedom and adventure were within sight. Giddiness increased apace.

So agitated by the promise of happiness, she scarcely could contain an urge to dash up the stairs and skip gaily along the halls.

Patience was not Anne's forte.

In a tiny sewing room while morning light shone upon the forgotten needlework on Anne's lap, she and Mrs Jenkinson listened enraptured as Dubois told them about the 'Field of Cloth of Gold'.

In June 1520, Henry VIII met France's François I in an attempt to ease the conflict between the rival kingdoms. With each monarch striving to outshine the other, the occasion became a magnificent spectacle with temporary pavilions, jousting, music, feasts, pageantry, and glittering tents and clothing of expensive fabrics woven with silk threads of silver and gold.

At least Anne listened to the splendour of it all while Mrs Jenkinson dozed by the fire. It was little wonder the elderly woman slumbered, considering their early morning ransacking of Sir Lewis's old sitting room.

The ballroom would not be quite so splendorous as a field of gold cloth, but Lady Catherine was sparing no expense to impress her guests and ensure their envy. Let her. Most likely, it will be the last time my mother—or Rosings Park, for that matter—hosts such an event.

Despite her grumblings to the contrary, Anne was fond of her mother. However, on the Fitzwilliam side of her family—with the exception of the colonel—there was an inherent arrogance she could not endure. And she supposed Darcy had inherited the same from his mother.

The de Bourghs, however, were neither titled nor did they feel in any way entitled. Instead of being imperious, they were fun-loving, adventuresome people. Anne missed them all. And, unfortunately, she was the last of that line of de Bourghs. It would end with her, as she was unwilling to have children of her own. It was not her intention to become maudlin that morning, however. Recollecting herself, she picked up the abandoned needle and resumed stitching while across the way Dubois added embroidery to another garment.

Lady Catherine had not seen her daughter's full-dress gown since witnessing its last fitting, a painful experience Anne still remembered well. Showing an abhorrent lack of respect, Dubois—miffed for some reason or other—had pricked her not once but

several times with her nasty little pins. I suppose I should be thankful it was not a guillotine.

Anne assumed her mother still took for granted that the full-dress gown was the same pale, wholesome, unadulterated, bespoke garment they had commissioned in London months prior during a horrendous winter excursion. While the gown retained its modesty with no striking resemblance to Brinton's depiction, Dubois had altered it to better flatter Anne's small frame. And the trim she worked onto it perfectly matches my eyes—at least according to my dear maid. Daily, they prayed Lady Catherine would not demand another peek at the gown before the ball.

Having just then finished embellishing the robe, Dubois offered to lend her expertise to the item her employer was fashioning. Anne thanked her but declined. The work must be mine and mine alone. She was, quite literally, working her fingers to the bone to complete the garment.

Besides, Dubois had only a few days in which to add her magic to Miss Bennet's gown.

Time had grown short, and since most of those invited would not travel on the Lord's day, houseguests might start arriving at any moment, and her ladyship would expect Anne downstairs to receive them.

Making rapid stitches, she stabbed herself. A ruby-red droplet of blood beaded on the pad of her thumb. Staring at it, Anne grew lightheaded and clammy.

"Dubois, do fetch the salts. Everything is going quite...white. I fear I am going to..."



Sixteen

On the morning of the eighteenth, Darcy thanked God that Elizabeth had not departed for London as originally planned. This past week would have been interminable without her.

With cheerful eagerness, he greeted David, the footman stationed by the front door. Then he consulted his pocket watch and immediately regretted it. Deuce take it! Not yet one o'clock. He thought it rather vexatious that a gentleman was expected to adhere to proper morning call hours while visiting the lady he fully intends to marry and wake up with every morning.

Standing about like a statue and looking out the window, he thought he might write to his sister. Then he recalled that her most recent response had indicated her difficulty in keeping up with all the correspondence he had already sent.

So, it was either go for a brief ride, stay and play a solitary game of billiards, or give a few chapters of *St Irvyne* a second reading. He wondered why he had not thought to bring more books from his own extensive library. Because I had not intended to remain here for such a duration, that is why.

“Nephew!”

In the serenity of his own homes, Darcy was imperturbable. However, at Rosings, his aunt had an unsettling ability to startle him and disturb his peace.

“Where are you bound at this hour? You cannot be going for a ride attired like that,

and it is too early for calls. No. You must remain within doors today. Anne and I shall need you on hand to help receive our houseguests. And of course, you will sit at the foot of the table as host.”

But I do not want to be host. Strictly in his own mind, Darcy reverted for an instant to the spoilt little boy he had been before maturity, respect, and gallantry asserted itself. “But of course, Lady Catherine.”

Later, having fetched St Irvyne , he ventured to the sitting room once preferred by Sir Lewis. Taking a seat by the window overlooking the kitchen gardens and berry bushes, he sat awhile, wondering why there were no cushions strewn about. Must I report another incident to her ladyship?

Just then, through the glass, his eye was caught by a familiar figure heading towards the servants’ entrance. He bolted from the chair. Gilchrist!

Dashing down several staircases, he made his way through the maze of passages used by household servants.

Before Darcy could reach it, the door was flung open by a kitchen maid who said, “Oh my, Gilchrist.” Twirling a curl round her finger, the young woman provocatively leant against the door jamb. “I thought you were dismissed.”

Whatever the gardener said in return was missed as Darcy cleared his throat.

Turning at the sound, the blushing maid curtsyed and stammered. “Oh Mr Dar— Sir! I— Gilchrist here is asking for Miss de Bourgh.”

Over my dead body! “I shall see to this. Thank you.”

The gardener’s eyes grew wide when Darcy appeared in the doorway. “What do you

want, Gilchrist? And, no, you may not see Miss de Bourgh.” It took an effort for him to remain civil.

In his Scottish burr, Gilchrist explained he was returning the gloves Miss de Bourgh had left at his bothy. He had found them, he said, while removing his belongings.

Accepting the proffered items, Darcy scoffed. “Oh really? Strange. Anne has not been out of the house for days. And the last time I was at your cottage, her herbarium was there, but her gloves were not. I gifted her these and would have noticed them there. So, are you Brinton’s messenger now? I assume that is where my cousin left them. She was at Rara Avis five days ago and was not wearing her riding gloves when she left. No matter. I shall see that she gets them. Good day.”

He closed the door and turned. The maid was still there, still red-cheeked, gaping at him.

“Return to your duties.”

Why do members of the fairer sex blush in my presence? Darcy was neither stupid nor blind. He knew he was not ill-favoured.

His thoughts then flew to Elizabeth Bennet and her pretty blushes, and he prayed she would not suppose he was voluntarily absenting himself from her society. For his part, being deprived of her company was most wretchedly felt.

“Darcy!”

Does Lady Catherine lie in wait ready to pounce when I walk by?

Her ladyship had accosted him on his way from the billiards room to his cousin’s apartments. Darcy had needed some form of physical release after his confrontation

with Gilchrist.

“Why on earth are you carrying Anne’s riding gloves about with you like that? Are you a mooncalf? Ah! I see.” Her ladyship gave him a crisp nod. “I shall have Dubois cut a lock of my daughter’s hair, though it would be more fitting if the request came from you.”

That never will happen. “I was just about to have these gloves returned to Anne. She left them...somewhere.”

“Where on earth is some where?” His aunt clutched her throat. “Were they found at Gilchrist’s cottage?”

“They were not.”

For but a moment, Lady Catherine’s eyes closed in relief. “You must not disturb Anne at present. She is indisposed. The noble blood flowing through my daughter’s veins means she is not as robust as those of the lower classes. Your poor cousin is so very fragile.” She made a sad little sniff. “The dear girl needs a husband to look after her.”

Why had I never before noticed the similarities between Mrs Bennet and Lady Catherine?

Faster than Wickham disappeared when there was work to be done, her tone shifted from compassion to authority. “Therefore, you will make your offer on Monday, and I shall announce the engagement at Anne’s ball later that night.” Lady Catherine gave a nod of supreme confidence. “Yes, that is how it must be done, and...”

Darcy let her prattle on. And prattle she did, without intermission, until her housekeeper came and requested clarification on which direction her ladyship wanted

the folds in the table napkins to face.

His head throbbed, and Darcy realised he had not consumed nearly enough coffee to face the day.

After assisting the butler with the choosing of wines to serve during the celebratory supper, Darcy decided to station himself in the library. As requested by his aunt, he was to be readily available to cheerfully greet arriving houseguests. An obligation I shall perform merrily and enthusiastically when pigs fly.

He would, of course, be most welcoming and polite.

With a steaming cup of coffee at hand, he had just settled in a comfortable armchair and cracked open his book when a carriage was heard, followed by a rap of the knocker. He checked his watch. By Jove! Where has the morning gone? It was half past three o'clock.

The rest of Darcy's day was spent welcoming and conversing with various members of Kent's gentry and what seemed like a quarter of London's fashionable society. He prayed none of them had packed treasures to tempt the pilferer, whoever he or she might be. Images of all the trunks, portmanteaux, and valises being unloaded and sent to the guest wing made him cringe.

Because her ladyship wished to keep the distinction of her own rank preserved, excluded from the guest list were those of the aristocracy, the one exception having been the inclusion of the Earl and Countess of Matlock and their sons, the viscount and the colonel. Lady Catherine remained put out that none of those relations were available to attend.

Darcy regretted not only his male cousins' absence but also his own sister's. Georgiana would not participate in the ball, but she could have met Elizabeth Bennet,

her future sister.

During that evening's dinner and afterwards in the drawing room, while Darcy's thoughts were half a mile distant, he fended off flirtations from Miss Harriet Roche, conducted under the watchful eye of her marriage-minded mother.

Seventeen

Sunday, April 19

On the quietest day of the week, there arose an uproar in the rector's home.

“But, my dear wife!” Flapping his wide-brimmed hat against his thigh, Mr Collins paced—if it could be called that—in mincing little steps. “Such shocking transgressions simply must be addressed in this morning's sermon.”

Standing between her cousin and his wife, Elizabeth watched and listened as the previous evening's discord continued, her bonneted head turning one way then the other.

The lady of the house, also in pelisse and bonnet, calmly replied, “Having received Lady Catherine's approval of today's homily, you must not risk her displeasure by altering it now. Nor should you risk her indignation at having her misfortunes made public. She has not informed us of the situation and must wish it kept secret. Besides, it is merely hearsay.”

“But I have heard the rumour from three unconnected sources. The thief or thieves responsible must be made to feel guilt and remorse and to make appropriate reparations.” Sitting while the ladies stood, Mr Collins wiped his brow. “What a quandary! I dare not act in such a way as to incur the wrath of my patroness, however?—”

Elizabeth consulted the mantel clock. “If I may interject, you certainly shall incur her

ladyship's wrath if you dilly-dally much longer."

Her cousin's eyes grew wide as he confirmed the hour. Scrambling to his feet, he gave his wife a disapproving look. "My dear, you could have said so. Lady Catherine greatly objects to unpunctuality, and I shall never forgive myself if I have made her ladyship wait."

They reached the church with seconds to spare and to a nave packed with the faithful.

It seemed some, if not all, of Rosings Park's houseguests had arrived. With heels raised and weight upon the balls of her feet, Elizabeth quietly followed Mrs Collins, edging towards their assigned pew and feeling the disapproving eyes of not only Lady Catherine but the entire congregation upon her. Sliding across the highly polished wooden seat, she bowed her head and, beneath her brim, sought the one person she most wanted to see . The one who did not call on me yesterday. Notwithstanding that lapse, she felt somewhat appeased upon discovering his unwavering gaze fixed upon her, and she wondered what his deep blue eyes were trying to say.

Turning her attention to the assemblage, she noticed other rapt female eyes, young and old alike, resting not upon the perspiring rector but upon Mr Darcy's fine person.

His intense regard, however, had not strayed.

In the churchyard, while chatting with Mrs Jenkinson, Elizabeth watched Mr Darcy walk towards her. On his left arm was his cousin, on his right another young lady.

Despite being summoned by Lady Catherine, Anne simply gave her mother an acknowledging wave before leaving the other two behind, rushing forwards, and grasping Elizabeth's hands.



“Good day, my friend. I must not linger. Her ladyship grows increasingly restive and impatient. But Dubois has something for you, and she is just over there.” Anne pointed out her maid’s location. “Remember to fetch it before leaving. I am so looking forward to tomorrow evening!” She gave Elizabeth’s fingers a squeeze. “Until then.”

Mr Darcy then stepped forwards and bowed. “Miss Bennet, may I introduce to you Miss Harriet Roche of Brier Lodge in Westerham and currently a guest at Rosings. Miss Roche, it is my great pleasure to present to you Miss Elizabeth Bennet of Longbourn in Hertfordshire. She is a guest at Hunsford parsonage.”

The two ladies curtsied and voiced all the civilities and courtesies expected of genteel people, all the while assessing one another. At least Miss Roche was being judged, and she was found to possess a remarkable combination of symmetry, intelligence, and elegance. Elizabeth wanted to like her. And I would like her...if she would just stop holding onto Mr Darcy’s arm in the same manner my little cousin Michael holds onto his well-loved blanket.

Mr Collins, lurking nearby, also seemed eager for Mr Darcy’s attention, and Elizabeth feared he might introduce the rumour of Rosings Park’s purported vandalism or theft.

When her cousin sidled up, bowing and scraping as was his obsequious wont, Mr Darcy curtly made the necessary introductions before saying, “Would you three please excuse Miss Bennet and me for a moment?” Without awaiting an answer, the gentleman bowed and removed Miss Roche’s hand from his arm and replaced it with Elizabeth’s.

“How I have missed you,” he whispered, as they moved away. “Shall we walk the churchyard’s perimeter, pretending we have some particular destination in mind, someone with whom we are desperate to speak? Just keep moving and smiling.”

“Conveniently, I do have a destination, sir. Dubois has something for me.”

“So be it.” His gloved hand briefly and discreetly covered hers. “I longed to call on you yesterday, but Lady Catherine kept me busy greeting houseguests. But enough of that. Are you well?” Beneath the lichgate, he stopped and stood before her. “Judging by that charming smile I so admire, I trust you are very well.” His dimple made another rare appearance while he and Elizabeth gazed into one another’s eyes.

“Nephew!”

She could not be sure, but Elizabeth thought Mr Darcy flinched. Beneath her fingers, she had felt the twitch of an arm muscle.

“Watch your step, young man!” The point of Lady Catherine’s walking stick came perilously close to the gentleman’s booted toes.

Letting go of his arm, Elizabeth surveyed the ground, expecting to discover a gaping chasm nearby or, at the very least, an angry adder, but the only evident danger appeared to be that pointy stick and the pointed look in Lady Catherine’s eyes.

“Miss Bennet, it seems you are capable of leading astray not only my daughter but her intended as well.” Her ladyship’s chin was up, her neck exposed. “And as for you, Darcy, Anne and our houseguests await. Come now. I shall brook no opposition.”

Squaring his shoulders, Mr Darcy spoke in a clipped tone. “I assure you, Miss Bennet has led no one astray. I shall be along directly, after I escort this decent, lovely lady to the parsonage. You may make my excuses to the others.”

Lady Catherine huffed and walked away, nose in the air.

Elizabeth could not refrain from saying under her breath, “With her head held so high, Lady Catherine should be warned to watch her step.”

Laughing aloud, Mr Darcy took up Elizabeth’s hand, and she was certain he was going to kiss her gloved knuckles. Instead, he peeled back the cuff of her pelisse and brazenly placed his lips upon her wrist, and there they lingered until a feminine throat was cleared.

“It seems I am not the only one who has something for you, mademoiselle,” said Dubois, grinning. She winked, handed the valise to Elizabeth, and turned away.

Face and neck flushed, Elizabeth fought an overwhelming desire to drop the bag and embrace her defender, the inimitable gentleman whose lips had lingered on her pulse, a kiss felt not only upon her wrist but in her heart.

“Clever lady,” he said, watching Dubois walk away.

“Oh yes.” Elizabeth nodded. “I quite like your cousin’s maid.”

“And me?” Mr Darcy stood close, very close, eyes only for her, the toes of his boots kissing hers. “Do you, perhaps, like me , even a little?”

Unbalanced, the scale of approbation had tipped heavily in his favour. “No, Mr Darcy.” Elizabeth shook her head but leant in, smiling into his eyes. “I definitely do not like you a little .”

After accompanying Elizabeth to the parsonage, Mr Darcy stood at the door, seemingly transfixed, eyes resting on her face with a remarkable expression of tender solicitude. “I do not like you a little either, Miss Bennet.” He winked at her, then bowed over her hand. “Until tomorrow evening, madam.”

Basking in the warmth of his affection, she watched until he vanished from view.

Eager then to discover whatever alterations Dubois had made to her gown, Elizabeth spent a few moments in polite conversation with Mr and Mrs Collins before inviting the latter to join her above stairs. Dashing up to her bedchamber while her friend followed more sedately, she opened the valise, withdrew the folded garment, and shook it free.

The lady of the house stood in the doorway, hands clasped beneath her chin. “Oh, how lovely! Is that the ivory gown you wore to the ball at Netherfield?”

“Yes. Yet it is not at all the same.” Elizabeth held the garment against herself. “How does it look on me?”

Mrs Collins sat on the bed, reverently touching the blond gossamer netting. “As you know, I am not romantic and never was, but mark my words, tomorrow night you and that sumptuous garment will tug at Mr Darcy’s heartstrings so strongly he will cleave to you and never let go.”

Eighteen

Monday, April 20

He was enervated, and it was not quite a quarter past nine o'clock.

Darcy swore he never would forgive Fitzwilliam for being in the army, the viscount for being violently in love with a lady of the north, or the earl for being in Derbyshire. He was of the opinion that one of those gregarious Fitzwilliam men should have been there in his stead, playing host to the odd assortment of elegant, eccentric, and inebriated guests continually invading Rosings.

Still, there was no sign of Elizabeth although her contingent had the shortest distance to travel. Darcy's own coach had been dispatched to the parsonage to fetch them three tedious quarters of an hour ago, at about the same time as Lady Catherine's fit of pique over some drastic alterations that had been made to Anne's gown.

Farther down the hall, another clamour proved to the late arrival of the Hunsford party.

While footmen and maids accepted cloaks and hats, Lady Catherine and Anne greeted the party and accepted compliments on the latter's beautiful gown. Mr Collins, tripping over his words, upbraided his wife and cousin while simultaneously trying to exculpate himself and apologise to his patroness for their tardiness.

In no little agitation, Darcy strode towards them, and upon reaching Elizabeth, he bowed. "Good evening. Is everyone well? I thought your party might never arrive."

Tugging at an elbow-length glove, she gave him a playful smile. “Had I known you were so eager for my cousin’s company, I would have suggested his second choice of cravat was superior to the first or third. Charlotte and I were already in our cloaks and waiting by the front door each time Mr Collins came down to ask his wife’s opinion. Now it seems she and I are entirely to blame for our being tardy.” She glanced at the others. “I hope Lady Catherine appreciates the effort he took on her account.”

Smiling and looking at her intently, Darcy whispered near Elizabeth’s ear, “You are the handsomest woman here.” She was glorious in gold, as precious and as warm as the metal itself. How could any man fail to be affected by her loveliness? “An eternity stretches before me until I may claim your supper set. I doubt you will be without a partner all night, but I hope this evening may afford us an opportunity to engage in a private conversation.” Invigorated by her presence, Darcy brought the lady’s hand to his lips, thus marking his admiration.

“I shall count the hours, sir.”

He had yet to release her hand. “Having agreed to stand up with Anne for the first set, I should go. Never before have I opened a ball, but hopefully I shall remember how the minuet is done. At her mother’s insistence, my cousin is to call that old, stately dance.” When the hired London musicians stopped tuning their instruments, he reluctantly said, “I must go.”

Her gloved fingers slid from his, and she walked away.

Words raised in anger drifted again from the entrance door’s direction. Her ladyship. Unable to place the calmer male voice, Darcy turned towards it.

Brinton! Why had he not considered the possibility of the master of Rara Avis being invited? Lady Catherine could not abide the man, so his cousin must have sent the invitation.

The newcomer, flourishing proof of his right to be there, wished felicity upon Anne, who soon hastened over to Darcy.

“Please, Cousin, do not let Mother turn him out.” She cast a worried look over her shoulder as the commotion subsided. “Ah, it seems to be sorted now, and I believe Mr Brinton has just secured Elizabeth for the first set. Both being so terribly fond of dancing, they will be quite delighted with one another.” She tugged on his arm. “Come, it is time for us to open this ball.”

Ushering Anne to the ballroom, Darcy glowered at the gentleman accompanying Elizabeth. At another tug on his arm, he led his cousin to top position, all the while thinking Brinton would have been better off with a plain waistcoat rather than one with such gaudy, golden embroidery. He is a popinjay with a ridiculous sense of fashion, at least compared to my austere style.

Freezing in place as the minuet began, he recalled seeing something that very morning while re-examining the curtains in the back sitting room— Dubois. By the berry bushes, handing something to Gilchrist. By Jove! Was it my indigo waistcoat?

As Darcy and his cousin danced with controlled, ceremonious, graceful steps, he watched Brinton and Elizabeth doing the same. The deep blue fabric and gold embroidery of the gentleman’s waistcoat perfectly matched that of Anne’s open robe, and it could not be mere coincidence.

It was intolerable. Utterly galling!

After standing up with Mrs Collins, Darcy had danced the supper set with Elizabeth and had thoroughly enjoyed both the reel and her repartee, but following that delightful half an hour, as host, he was obliged to lead Lady Metcalfe into the dining room. Darcy sat at the lower end of the table with that lady at his right hand and Anne at his left, while farther up the table, Brinton had secured for himself a more

delightful supper companion.

Throughout the evening, Lady Catherine had pestered Darcy about dancing a second set with her daughter, but he could not always be dancing, particularly with his cousin. It was, after all, his duty to ensure their guests' needs were being met, and each moment of that responsibility seemed to bring fresh agitation. Since there was a plethora of single gentlemen in attendance, other than his sets with Anne, Elizabeth, and Mrs Collins, he had not asked another to stand up.

From the corner of his eye, Darcy noticed his cousin's attention more often than not was taken up by the buzz of conversation taking place amongst Binton and those nearest him. I , not he, should be sitting next to Elizabeth, engaging her in conversation, pouring her wine, serving her delicacies, earning her smiles.

Binton, turning towards Elizabeth, placed his hand on the back of her chair and made a remark that instigated sweet laughter. Darcy wondered of what they spoke, knowing he never could compete with the man's sarcastic wit. Binton is too exuberant, too theatrical, and too vibrant, while I am restrained.

After absently serving portions of flummery to Lady Metcalfe and Anne, Darcy trained his eyes again on the gentleman serving Elizabeth.

I should like to knock the spoon from the popinjay's hand and bounce it off his head, flummery and all. Stifling a sigh, he smiled at whatever Lady Metcalfe had just said to him.

Half an hour later, as a hush descended over the room in anticipation of Darcy's speech, he discerned a boisterous remark extolling Elizabeth's appeal.

"Miss Bennet," cried Binton, "has thrown me into unceasing delight tonight with her uncommon union of grace, brilliancy, and wit."



Darcy rolled his shoulders and watched Elizabeth lift a glass to her lips. He supposed the sip of wine was meant to either conceal the fine blush overspreading her cheeks or to wash away the bad taste such extravagant praise had left in her mouth. She seemed so awkwardly circumstanced that Darcy's heart cried out to hold her close. Beyond the pale! A gentleman flatters delicately, never in a forward or intrusive manner. Clearly, Binton's attentions are making her increasingly uncomfortable.

Desperate to intercede, Darcy was compelled to remain in his place and propose a toast congratulating Anne on having reached the age of majority. Quite an accomplishment, apparently.

The instant that duty was performed and the grand dining room and adjoining parlour began to empty, Darcy saw Elizabeth stand abruptly, say something to the others, curtsy, then walk out of the room. He signalled David, the footman, and quietly ordered him to keep a discreet eye on Miss Bennet and ensure her well-being.

Consoling himself with the fact that he, not Binton, would have the honour of standing up with her for the final set, Darcy lost no time in striding over and taking the seat Elizabeth had occupied.

"Binton, a word." Accepting a decanter of port from a footman, he poured two glasses and handed one to the younger gentleman. "Your voice carries, and I could not help but overhear your comments to Mrs Godsell about Miss Bennet. To speak in such extravagant praise is inappropriate at the best of times but particularly ill-suited to a supper table. Did you not take into account the discomfort of those two ladies or the others within your proximity?"

Binton's eyes narrowed. "Never could I be like you, so rigidly opposed to anything not dictated by decorum and formality. Why is it wrong for an artist, or any man, to admire a beautiful woman? Do you not think Miss Bennet a darling in every feature and every gesture?"

To himself, Darcy admitted he, that very night, had wondered how any man could fail to be affected by her loveliness.

Slouching a bit, Brinton seemed absorbed in his own thoughts of her. Then, sitting up, chin jutting, he declared, "Miss Bennet will be my Muse, and I shall capture her radiance in oils, in song, and in verse." He slid his untouched glass towards Darcy. "I no longer partake of either alcohol or opium, remember? I am entirely happy without them. Life is to be lived, not tranquillised." Gaining his feet, he added, "By the bye, I am thrilled to have Gilchrist back in my employ. I was sorry to lose him after he and I had a little tiff around this time last year. Now, if you will excuse me, I am in pursuit of inspiration."

Back in the ballroom, Darcy prowled about in search of Elizabeth. He checked his pocket watch. Two o'clock. Two dozen couples were in place, ready to recommence the dancing, which he feared would continue for five more hours, at which time breakfast would be served.

What a devilishly long night! Though small talk was the bane of his existence, he exerted himself to mingle awhile, reminding people of the availability of tea, wine, negus, orgeat, and cake. Weaving in and out amongst a milling crowd of more than one hundred guests, he caught whiffs of perfume and perspiration as well as snatches of gossip he would rather not have heard.

Amidst the general hubbub, a lively Scotch reel began, and the floor shook from all the fancy footwork. Craning his neck, Darcy looked over the horde. His cousin was standing up with Mr Tottle .

But where is Elizabeth? She was not dancing. He was taller than most, still he could spot neither her brunette curls nor pale gold gown. There also was no sign of either Brinton or the assigned footman.

Extending his search, he moved room to room and asked those acquainted with her if they knew Miss Bennet's whereabouts. None of the ladies had seen her in any of the rooms in which they occasionally sought comfort, and Darcy's manners were at once deprived of their usual composure. Returning in haste to the ballroom, he reached his cousin just as Mr Tottle was escorting her to a chair.

"Anne, have you seen Miss Bennet recently?"

When she replied she had not, Miss Roche, standing nearby, said, "I have. She ran up the main staircase not five minutes ago." She tittered behind her fan. "With Mr Brinton hard on her heels."

Unsavory images pressed upon Darcy's thoughts and sent his heart racing.

### Nineteen

Moving with haste through the manor's maze of dim galleries and long, unlit passages, Elizabeth expected to encounter a maid or a footman, but she supposed they were bustling about below.

She turned another corner. Nothing looked familiar. It was just as she had predicted days ago, and she despaired of ever finding her way. Why on earth had she run instead of seeking Mr Darcy or Mr Collins? Was she a stranger to common sense? At least she seemed to have escaped Mr Brinton.

Having worked herself into a state of distress at that gentleman's persistent pursuit, she had made the excuse of needing to fetch something from her cloak in the ladies' retiring room. Which is not above stairs. So why did I stupidly follow Miss Roche's misdirection? What am I doing up here? And where is the elusive staircase?

At supper, Mr Brinton had flattered her beyond reason. Then, in the ballroom, he had importuned her about capturing her likeness in oils. Going on and on about what a vision she was in that gossamer gold netting, he had been insistent on her wearing it while sitting for the portrait. The slightly indecent one of Anne had come to mind, and Elizabeth presumed the artist meant for her to wear the netting and nothing more.

Descrying a sliver of light escaping beneath a door and surmising someone must be within, Elizabeth ran towards the glow, her spirits rising apace. When lightly tapped, the ajar door creaked open, and she stumbled inside, eyes adjusting to the light of a lantern and candles.

“Dubois! Oh, I am so very glad to see you. I beg your pardon for invading your bedchamber.”

The room was tiny. Spools of metallic threads glittered in the candlelight, and through a window, the waxing gibbous moon illuminated stacks of cushions in a corner.

“This is a sewing room, Miss Bennet.” The lady’s maid frantically stuffed bobbins and shuttles into work baskets and bags. Looking then towards the doorway, she wrung her hands. “Are you alone?”

“Yes,” replied Elizabeth.

“No,” said a deep, male voice.

After thanking someone named David, Mr Darcy stepped inside the room.

Soft, hurried footfalls from the hall padded closer, and the three inside turned in their direction. Rounding the doorway, Anne was stopped short by her cousin’s chest.

“Darcy!” She rubbed her nose and sounded indignant. “What are you doing here?” Peering round him, she gasped. “And Elizabeth!” Shoulders slumped, she heaved a sigh. “Well, Dubois, I believe our bit of sport has come to an end.”

Mr Darcy shook his head at her. “I suspected the perpetrator was a young lady with no notion of a waistcoat’s worth, but I never suspected you ...until earlier tonight.” He pulled something from his fob pocket. “I believe this is yours, Anne.” A gold guinea gleamed in his hand.

“I do not understand.” Elizabeth frowned. “Oh! Is this about the thievery?”

Anne stamped her foot in its dainty dancing slipper. “It is not thievery! Any gold threads removed from this manor’s textiles belong to me , and I care not a fig if a few fripperies and cushions do not glitter as brilliantly as before.” Under her breath, she added, “Besides, all of this soon will seem utterly inconsequential.”

Elizabeth held a section of her gown’s netting up to a candle. Gossamer, pale blond silk shimmered. Darker gold embroidery glinted in reflected light. “Are these?—”

“Yes, madam.” In a sardonic tone, Darcy said, “I suspect the golden threads forming those pretty little flowers were extracted from cushions in what once was Sir Lewis de Bourgh’s favourite room.”

Even in dim light, Elizabeth’s embarrassment was evident. “Is that true, Anne? Am I attending an elegant private ball wearing pieces of your late father’s cushions ?” Palms covered her face.

“They look beautiful on you,” Mr Darcy said, Anne echoing the sentiment.

Elizabeth’s shoulders shook, and the others offered comforting words until Anne cried, “Elizabeth Bennet, are you laughing ?”

“Yes! Yes, I am. And as Mr Darcy knows, I dearly love a laugh.”

Darcy whispered something in Anne’s ear. She nodded and took a fond look about the room.

“Come along, Dubois. Our work here is done.” To her cousin and Elizabeth, she said, “Do not linger, you two. I have something of paramount importance to relate to my mother, and I should like both of you there with us.”

Once mistress and maid had gone, Mr Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “I have an apology

to make. You were distressed earlier by something Brinton said or did, and I did not rush to your aid. Please forgive me.” He took up her gloved hand in his. “I swear with my life and until the end of my days, if you would allow it, I will care for you and safeguard you whenever you need protection.”

Love swelled until Elizabeth feared her heart might burst. “I understand you had other duties, sir, and I am beginning to suspect I was in no peril at all. In fact, I would be surprised if there is not some sort of scheme afoot. Did you happen to notice that your cousin’s robe perfectly?—”

“Matches Brinton’s waistcoat? Yes, I did. But enough about them.” Mr Darcy had yet to release her hand. “Let us not waste this golden opportunity, Miss Bennet. I wish to now have that private conversation alluded to earlier.” His voice had become husky, and he cleared his throat. “Every night for the past eleven days, I prayed to God that you might remain a part of my life and that I may be welcomed into yours—to be your friend, to laugh with you, and to wipe every tear that falls.”

With a hoarse voice quavering with emotion, he begged her pardon. “I have spoken so much in the past few days that I fear the words I wish to say to you might remain forever lodged in the back of my throat.”

“If you are like other gentlemen and carry a flask in that coat, I shall not object if you take a sip.”

He thanked her and turning away, did just that. Facing her again, he reclaimed her hand and admitted he had first admired her at Lucas Lodge. “Each succeeding encounter built upon that initial admiration until it became immovable affection. Even after you refused me, I knew you were the only woman in the world whom I could ever be prevailed on to marry.”

Elizabeth blushed to hear her own words repeated back, but the fervent, burning look

in his eyes told her she was loved.

“You are more precious than all the gold in the world, and I— I love you.” More emphatically, he repeated, “I love you.”

Those three words produced in her the tremors of a most palpitating heart. Tears welled in her eyes, and unable to help herself, she sniffed as a salty drop slid down her cheek.

“Here, now,” Mr Darcy whispered, wiping it away. “This is not the time for tears...unless they be mine should you say no.”

“To what, sir?” She sniffed again. “You have yet to ask a question.”

“Then let me be explicit. Miss Elizabeth Bennet, may I be your husband? Will you be my wife, my helpmate, my partner? Will you share with me life’s joys and sorrows? Will you be my lover and the mother of my children? Will you grow old with me? Will you stand with me before an altar and say I will?” He waited. “Now would be an excellent time to say yes.”

“Yes!” She was laughing; she was crying. “Yes, I will marry you, Mr Darcy.”

“My heart is yours,” he whispered, though no one else was near.

“I shall carry it with me for evermore.”

With a stuttering intake of breath, she felt his hand on her nape, drawing her closer. Then his mouth was on hers, tender and tasting of brandy and of heavenly delight. When both his hands cupped her face, the kiss contained all the pent-up passion of the past five months.



Her sentiments towards him were all that was respectful, tender, and exquisite. I love him to the utmost, to the very top of the cup, quite brim-full!

From the ballroom far below, music grew louder, the cadence faster.

Mr Darcy stepped back and extended his hand. “Do you not feel a great inclination to dance a reel?”

Throwing back her head, Elizabeth laughed.

In that sewing room with faces beaming, Elizabeth and Mr Darcy danced. Golden threads in the floral hem of the lady’s gown sparkled by candlelight.

The smile on his face had not subsided. “I have not felt so young, so alive, so carefree since boyhood.” He stopped dancing. “Dearest Elizabeth, how I love you!”

“And I love you, dear sir, not merely a little .” When he remained silent, she asked if he was not diverted.

“Oh yes. I am diverted. Diverted by that smile. Diverted by those lips as soft as rose petals.” He dipped his head towards Elizabeth’s mouth.

“Ahem.” The voice belonged to a fair-haired young footman whose face grew increasingly red. “I beg your pardon, but Miss de Bourgh requests your presence in the back parlour.”

Mr Darcy whispered in Elizabeth’s ear, “Let Anne wait.” Again he determinedly dipped his head to her lips.

### Epilogue

April 20, 1822

In the mistress's rarely used bedchamber at Pemberley, while Elizabeth and Benjamin slept, Darcy attempted to attend to his book.

It was a futile effort. Try as he might, he could not concentrate on Virgil's Georgics . What were ancient agricultural verses to one's newborn son?

Setting aside the poem, he carefully moved towards the cradle to peer yet again at the precious, dark-haired bundle nestled therein. Could life possibly supply any greater felicity than this? Crouching, he set the rockers in gentle motion.

He was no novice to fatherhood. The infant was their fourth child and second son. Following each birth, Darcy's heart had filled to overflowing with love and gratitude for his extraordinary wife—mother of Anna, William, Isabelle, and little Benjamin.

At a rustle of bedclothes and a whimper from across the room, he rushed to Elizabeth's side.

"Fitzwilliam, have the Brintons arrived?" Drowsy, she shifted on the mattress and grimaced. "My timing—or rather, our perfect but impatient son's early arrival—could not have occurred during a more inconvenient week."

Darcy placed a lingering kiss upon his wife's forehead, then took his seat at her bedside. "Rest easy, my love. The travellers have yet to arrive. However, while their

husbands play poorly at billiards, Georgiana and Jane have everything and everyone under good regulation—with the assistance of one governess, two nursery maids, and our new housekeeper-in-training, all under the watchful eye of dear old Mrs Reynolds. At present, my dear Mrs Darcy, your only duties are to recover and, of course, to nourish Ben.” Drawing her hand to his lips, he pressed a kiss upon Elizabeth’s fingers.

Elizabeth held fast to Darcy’s hand. “I am certain time means little at all to the Brintons. They, Dubois, and Gilchrist are dictated to by clocks only when they must catch a ship or some such conveyance. As Anne has written, our time on earth is far too short. Life is to be lived in the present. Tomorrow holds no guarantees.”

As well I know. Each of his intrepid wife’s labours to bring a child into the world had filled Darcy with terror.

“What is the time?” Elizabeth squinted at the clock upon the mantel. “Anne promised they would arrive today.”

“‘Tis not yet eleven.” Darcy stood and fussed with her coverlet. “Sleep now, my darling. Anne will no doubt dash up here to see you before a maid can even remove her pelisse. By the bye, our little Anna hopes, in her own words, ‘Mr and Mrs Brinton will come bearing gifts from afar’.”

Elizabeth sighed. “I suppose that is my fault for telling Anna about Rara Avis and its many treasures. I also read to her the Brintons’ descriptions of lands of incredible sights, sounds, and smells.” Rubbing sleepy eyes, she mumbled, “Briny sea breezes in Tuscany...cinnamon and saffron in Constantinople...the clean, crisp, piney air of the Swiss Alps...”

Darcy bent and placed another kiss on Elizabeth’s brow as she drifted towards slumber. “I shall take you to all those places one day, my dearest love.”

Hours later, propped up against downy pillows while suckling Benjamin, Elizabeth took a sip of barley water and listened to Anne Brinton—née de Bourgh—who sat upon the bedside chair.

“Benjamin is beautiful, truly. You know I never wanted children of my own, but Laurence and I are honoured that you and Darcy asked us, along with Mr Bingley, to be Ben’s godparents. I am certain we shall spoil him terribly.”

“Indeed. I have heard about the rocking horse, the pewter soldiers, and a toy theatre complete with scenery. Anna was thrilled with the doll you brought her and all the little gowns for it. I particularly liked hearing about the gold one with floral embroidery in metallic threads.” Elizabeth gave her a pointed look.

“Hah! I should like to claim credit for that, but Dubois made it with, I believe, some old scrap of fabric from the year twelve.” Anne heaved a sigh. “Can you credit the passage of exactly a decade since my celebratory ball?”

“Not at all.” Elizabeth stifled a yawn. “Yet, so much has happened in both our lives during those intervening years.” Benjamin’s nurse lifted the sleeping babe from his mother’s loving arms. “Remind me again of what transpired that night at Rosings. Especially,” Elizabeth added with a grin, “while your cousin and I were more agreeably engaged in the sewing room.”

“Humph! You mean while I was worried sick about what might have been keeping the two of you.” Anne winked, then poured herself a glass of Elizabeth’s citrus-flavoured barley water.

“A maid should be here directly with refreshments.”

“No, no. This is fine. Now, as I remember it, while most of my guests were in high revel, I asked Mrs Jenkinson to have my mother meet me in Father’s old sitting room.

When her ladyship arrived and had taken a seat, I told her I was to be wed. Ecstatic, she assumed I meant to Darcy. When I said, ‘No, not my cousin,’ Mother flew into a rage.”

Anne set aside her glass, and in a credible imitation of Lady Catherine’s voice, cried, “‘Heaven and earth, child! You cannot wed a man of inferior birth and no importance in the world. This match, to which Gilchrist has the audacity to aspire, can never take place. Such an alliance would be a disgrace. Honour, decorum, and prudence forbid it. I am ashamed of you for even thinking it.’ My scheme had gone according to plan, but I felt dreadful all the same. ‘No, Mother,’ I said to her, ‘not Gilchrist.’

“My mother was at once both relieved and suspicious, and she asked, ‘Who, then?’ Laurence must have been waiting outside the door because he walked in then and bowed to her ladyship. His tailcoat was open, and his thumbs were hooked in the pockets of the indigo waistcoat—the one I had taken from Darcy’s dressing room and lovingly embroidered with golden threads. It had been my engagement gift for him.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Ah yes, those infamous golden threads.”

The maid entered with a tea tray, and Anne poured two cups and passed one to Elizabeth. “Laurence had liked the waistcoat and praised my embroidery skills. Later, though, when he discovered from whence those golden threads had come, he helped me understand why parfilage was wrong. People far less fortunate than I had toiled long hours to create the beautiful tapestries, curtains, cushions, and such that I so thoughtlessly ruined. Similarly, on our trips abroad, my husband disparages travellers who purloin another country’s antiquities.”

Elizabeth reached over and squeezed Anne’s hand. “As you once told me, Mr Brinton is a rare bird.”

“Oh, that he is! Laurence thinks highly of you, Elizabeth, but back then his interest in

you was a ruse, as was mine in Gilchrist. Of course, Mother was put out that I was to wed Brinton, not Darcy. Her ladyship did not care for the master of Rara Avis. He was too free-spirited for her liking. She, however, could not object as violently to a wealthy gentleman as she had to a gardener. The scheme Laurence, Gilchrist, and I had concocted—the impression of a liaison with my master gardener—had succeeded. I would have married Laurence nevertheless, with or without Mother’s consent. I was twenty-one years of age then, had reached my majority, and no longer required her permission. Still, I had hoped for her blessing. Then, when I revealed our other plans, she was at no pains to conceal her vexation or repress the peevishness of her temper. ‘ Sell Rosings Park? No. I shall not have it!’

“Referring to her as such for the first time in my life, I said, ‘Mama, you are correct. You will not have it. Rosings is mine, and Mr Brinton and I have decided to sell. You and Mrs Jenkinson may live in the dower house or in London. Provisions have been made for such accommodations.’ Laurence then placed his hand upon my shoulder and said, ‘Lady Catherine, what would your daughter and I do with this pile? We have Rara Avis. Besides, it is our plan to travel abroad for years.’

“My mother then cried, ‘Travel abroad? For years? Heaven and earth! What about children?’ I remember taking a deep breath, then my words rushed forth. ‘There will be no children to inherit either Rara Avis or Rosings.’ Aghast, her ladyship shrieked, ‘No children? Stars and garters, Anne! It is a woman’s duty to give her husband children.’ Laurence supported me by saying, ‘Your daughter and I are in complete agreement. There will be no children.’

“Taking her hands in mine while she sat there in gloomy dejection, I said, ‘Mama, I apologise for ruining your ball and for disappointing your hopes. Nevertheless, I am resolute.’

“That is when you and Darcy finally made an appearance. But apart from Laurence and me standing up together for a third set, followed by the announcement of our

engagement, all had been said and done by that point.

“At least Mother lived to see me married.” Anne sniffled. “How I wish I had been able to say my last farewell to both her and Mrs Jenkinson, but we were in Greece by then. I still mourn them.”

A tap sounded at the door, and the nurse, holding Benjamin, opened it to admit her employer. The proud father relieved the woman of her burden and told her to take a short respite.

“I have come with a summons from your husband, Anne. You are to leave poor Elizabeth alone and repair to your own chambers to dress for dinner. Had you not bolted up here before being shown to your quarters, you might now know where to find your dressing room and Brinton. Fortunately for you, the footman stationed beyond this door can be of service in that endeavour.” Darcy smiled at his cousin while making a shooining gesture.

Alone with her husband and their youngest child, Elizabeth reached out, inviting them to join her on the bed. “How I wish I could dress for dinner and join everyone.”

Well, not everyone. Mama and Papa remain at Longbourn with the Collinses. No one is happy with that arrangement, but Papa is failing, and his heir needs preparation for taking his place. Mary and her husband are settled in Meryton, and Captain and Lydia Carter are who knows where. Elizabeth’s youngest sister foolishly had set her cap for Mr Wickham, who was subsequently taken by a press gang and shipped to Lower Canada. Lydia then set her sights higher. Colonel Fitzwilliam, however, remained a bachelor, and she settled for a captain in the regulars.

Holding Benjamin, Darcy carefully settled beside Elizabeth and kissed her cheek. “Everyone understands, love.” He bestowed a reverent kiss atop the babe’s head before shifting him to his shoulder. “Oh, the Marshalls have arrived. Kitty should be

in to visit you and her newest nephew any minute now.” He gave Elizabeth a look of disgust as Benjamin spit milk onto his superfine coat.

She laughed. “You should be well accustomed to that by now, Fitzwilliam, although it has been two and a half years since Isabelle last did that to you.”

Initially, Elizabeth could not understand Anne’s decision to remain childless, that is until Darcy explained that the Brintons had a peculiar sort of marriage of convenience. Anne’s husband and Gilchrist were more than employer and master gardener. They were friends . While an under-gardener tended plant life at Rara Avis, Gilchrist accompanied the Brintons on their journeys and collected botanical specimens for their estate. While the men were otherwise occupied, Anne and Dubois saw the sights, shopped, and sampled local cuisine. Together, the four of them made memories, going wherever the breeze took them, quenching their thirst for new places and new experiences. Opportunities, they said, were everywhere.

Content to remain at Pemberley until her children were grown, Elizabeth knew she and Darcy would travel eventually, perhaps with their sons and daughters, perhaps just the two of them.

In the meantime, she snuggled against her husband’s side and, catching a whiff of his shaving soap, nuzzled his firm jaw.

“Mr Darcy,” she whispered, “you must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire you, how greatly I respect you, and how very passionately I love you. Now and for evermore.”

“Even when we are old and grey, Mrs Darcy, I never will grow tired of hearing?—”

Benjamin’s lusty wail spoilt the moment, but his very presence was testament to his parents’ grand and everlasting love.



The End

One

September 19, 1812

Mrs Bennet looked about her drawing room, feeling more satisfaction than she had in many a month. It had little to do with the decoration—although it was as fine as it could possibly be, given her husband's income—or the refreshing late summer breeze entering through the open windows. The smile on her face was because of the gentleman sitting beside her eldest daughter. Mr Bingley, about whom she had harboured so many hopes the previous year, had returned to the neighbourhood. He was as handsome and jovial as she recalled. More to the point, his only interest at present was looking at and speaking to Jane.

A warm but cautious contentment settled in Mrs Bennet's belly. Her dearest dream might still come true. Her daughter might be mistress of Netherfield and have a rich husband! Any mother would be proud of such an accomplishment, and it would be a relief to know that she need not worry about the future once Mr Bennet died and the disagreeable Mr Collins inherited Longbourn. Besides, Jane had been despondent since Mr Bingley had gone away. Her dear girl did not think Mrs Bennet had realised, but she had, and what kind of mother would she be if she did not long to see Jane happy?

Mrs Bennet's eyes took in the room's other occupants. Kitty looked bored, and Mary frowned and quietly sewed. Neither contributed to the conversation, which was just as well. It meant Mr Bingley's attention could remain on Jane. Mrs Bennet fought against a scowl when her gaze fell on Mr Darcy. In addition to insulting Elizabeth, he had been rude to everyone when he was last in the neighbourhood. Why had he

accompanied Mr Bingley? Apparently, it was to sit in her drawing room, being silent and sullen. Mrs Bennet regarded her second eldest daughter. Elizabeth had been different since her return from travelling with the Gardiners and the... difficulties of the summer. Usually lively and quick with a joke, she had been quiet and serious. When Lydia and Mr Wickham had visited, Elizabeth had seemed angry more often than not, despite her attempts to hide it. Well, it was nothing Mrs Bennet should waste her time contemplating. After all, when had she ever understood Elizabeth, and was it not more important to ensure Mr Bingley and Jane finally married?

“Mr Bingley, you are quite in our debt, if you recall. Last autumn, you promised to take a family dinner with us, but then you left. I insist on setting a date at once. Will Monday do?” Mrs Bennet said.

With a grin on his face, Mr Bingley tore his eyes away from Jane. “That is very kind of you, and I am happy to accept. Monday would suit me very well.” He turned to gaze at Jane again.

Because she knew it was expected, Mrs Bennet turned to her other guest, only to discover he was staring at someone instead of at his hands, as he had been. She thought it might be Elizabeth and suspected the odious man was reminding himself that he did not find her handsome. Her Elizabeth was lovely, and if he could not see it, he was very stupid indeed!

“You are welcome too, Mr Darcy,” she said, managing to sound polite but wishing she could tell him to leave her home.

“Thank you, madam.”

She struggled not to roll her eyes, knowing his politeness was feigned. To keep vexation at bay, she watched Jane and Mr Bingley. They were a handsome couple. What a great match it would be!

I shall do what I must to see them at the altar before Christmas. It begins with dinner. What shall we have? I hope we can get decent fish.

Mrs Bennet successfully forgot about Mr Darcy's presence until she was called upon to say goodbye. Perhaps he would soon go away. After all, he had never shown a liking for the neighbourhood, and no one there wanted to see him.

Elizabeth slipped out of the house shortly after dawn the following morning. She intended to return before any of her family awoke, and as long as the housekeeper did not see her—she would tell Mrs Bennet—she might evade questions about why she rose and left so early. She could not admit that she had hardly slept, plagued by her maddening thoughts. Her mother and sisters would want to know what had disordered her peacefulness, and to admit it was Mr Darcy was impossible. She hoped an invigorating walk would ease her agitation.

Not even Jane knew what had happened in Derbyshire. When Elizabeth and the Gardiners had returned to Longbourn the previous month, everyone had been consumed with Lydia's situation—understandably so—and there had been no interest in the tour. Elizabeth was exceedingly glad of it. Whatever connexion she and Mr Darcy had been forming had ended the instant Lydia had fled Brighton with Wickham. Just as Elizabeth had admitted to herself how much she admired Mr Darcy, all hope of their future together was ruined, leaving her heartbroken and full of regret for her failure to understand him sooner.

And I am angry, very, very angry at Lydia for her stupidity and recklessness and at Wickham for taking advantage of a young, impetuous girl.

Despite being thankful the couple had married, Elizabeth hated thinking of them because their union had come at the expense of the future she and Mr Darcy might have had.

Seeing him enter the drawing room yesterday was a shock. One slight glimpse of his tall, handsome form was all it had taken for Elizabeth to be suffused with love for him. How she had longed to fly into his arms and cling to him!

But he had not been there to see her. That much had been evident within the first few minutes. Mr Darcy had greeted the Bennet ladies politely and then taken a seat removed from them. He had not spoken a word other than to thank her mother for inviting him to dinner. Elizabeth had been embarrassed at her initial exultation, and her bitter disappointment at his indifference had robbed her of her tongue. He had only come to keep Mr Bingley company and perhaps to judge for himself whether Jane truly cared for his friend. If his impulse had been also to demonstrate that he had not turned his back on the Bennets despite knowing about Lydia's rash actions, then it was generous of him.

Elizabeth paused by a walnut tree and leant against the rough bark. A deep sigh crossed her lips, and she allowed sorrow to take over for a moment. It left her body weak, and if the ground was not damp, she would have sunk into a seated position against the tree.

"It is an impossible situation. I accepted that long ago, and seeing Mr Darcy now should not matter so much, but, oh, how I pray he goes away soon. I shall not always be able to keep my feelings to myself," she softly whispered, as though saying the words aloud would make her feel less lonely.

Several minutes later, she pushed herself away from the tree and began to walk home. She would devote herself to Jane and permit her sister's joy at Mr Bingley's return to lift her spirits and forget her feelings for Mr Darcy.

Two

“That was an excellent dinner, my dear. Rather more elaborate than I had expected,” Mr Bennet said.

He, Mr Bingley, and Mr Darcy had just joined the ladies in the drawing room. Mrs Bennet was pleased with the compliment but less so with his expression. She knew that quirked eyebrow of his all too well. He was laughing at her for taking pains with the menu, but she did not want Mr Bingley to realise the ‘family dinner’ was more than what the Bennets would usually have. She could not offer him just soup, a ragout, and another dish or two. She would make him understand Jane’s quality, and that meant demonstrating that her dear girl came from a family who knew how to host their neighbours correctly.

“I am sure you know best, but do be careful not to...do too much.” Mr Bennet awkwardly patted her shoulder. She scowled at his retreating form as he went to his favourite chair. What did he know about seeing their daughters suitably settled? It was not as though he would do anything about it.

Mrs Bennet forced her thoughts away from him and regarded her eldest daughter and her gentleman suitor with a fond smile. Mr Bingley was as caught up in Jane as he had been the previous year. That had been obvious when he had called on Saturday and from the moment they had met this evening. She anticipated them being engaged within the fortnight. Mr Bingley did not have the air of someone willing to wait long for what they wanted.

Thank God the Lydia... affair had been successfully resolved. What a disaster it

might have been!

What would have happened to my other girls if Lydia had been ruined? Stupid girl! Certainly, Mr Bingley would not have come back.

Mrs Bennet adjusted her cap and soothed herself. Mr Wickham was not as bad as they had reason to fear. He was nothing to Mr Bingley, to be sure, but he had married Lydia. If Mrs Bennet was deliberately ignorant of his true character, if she hid the truth of how the union had come about, what did it matter? It helped her sleep at night, and she would not blame herself. She had responsibilities to fulfil, and if she were forever moping and anxious about how Lydia was, what good would she be to anyone, especially her dear daughters?

I allowed Lydia too much freedom. Lydia had been her last baby, and it had been unexpectedly difficult to admit she was growing up and no longer the playful, innocent little darling who loved nothing quite so much as entertaining her mama. Lydia was terribly stubborn—more so than even Elizabeth—and Mrs Bennet prayed it would not land her in trouble with her husband. He did not seem like the kind of man who would be endlessly indulgent or respond kindly to being told what to do by his much younger wife.

I shall keep a closer watch on Kitty, even if Mr Bennet forgets his resolution to ensure she improves her mind. Kitty would find her mother a much more careful chaperon than she had been in the past.

At the moment, Mr Bennet was barely hiding his ennui. He yawned, only patting his hand over his mouth at the end of it. If he sat closer to his daughters or either of the other gentlemen, he would have someone to talk to, but he insisted on taking the horrid old armchair in the corner.

One of these days, I shall have it tossed onto the rubbish heap when he is not looking.

I will set fire to it so that it is destroyed, and he cannot demand we keep it. The other chairs and sofas are comfortable enough.

“Mama, do you think the weather will continue to be as pleasant as it has been?” Kitty asked.

“I cannot say. Do you suppose I have become a witch of some sort who can predict the future?” Mrs Bennet’s brow furrowed.

Kitty’s visage turned pink. “N-no, it is just that you always say your left knee aches when?—”

“Yes, well, I am sure I hope it remains fine. Rain would make it more difficult for Mr Bingley to enjoy his sport, and we would not want that, would we, Jane?” Mrs Bennet spoke before Kitty shared her ailments with Mr Bingley. And Mr Darcy—she must not forget he was there, even though he said so little that it was easy to overlook him.

“Oh, I would not mind if it did, Mrs Bennet,” the affable gentleman said, hardly able to tear his eyes away from Jane to look at his hostess.

“Why?” Kitty said, evidently responding to Mr Bingley’s statement.

This time, it was his face that took on colour. Since he was gazing at Jane with affection that practically screamed out to the entire county, Mrs Bennet did not judge him for it.

“I would not find it in the least bit difficult to amuse myself on even the rainiest of days, not when there is such excellent company to be had,” he said.

You very well might if there was so much of it that you could not leave Netherfield and had only Mr Darcy’s disagreeable company!



As Mrs Bennet covered a dismissive huff with a quiet cough, her sight landed on Mr Darcy, and she saw the most curious thing ever. He was watching someone with an expression you would use for a dearly loved child...or wife ! There was no one in the room upon whom he might bestow a paternal feeling; thus, it could only mean he liked one of her girls. Shock robbed her of her breath. Surely, it could not be! But she was not mistaken. There was a softness about his eyes, and his smile, although slight, was somehow powerful—even more so than one of Mr Bingley's grins—because Mr Darcy rarely wore such a gesture of approbation. The gentleman quickly schooled his features and turned away from the object of his scrutiny.

Which of her daughters had he been observing? Based on where Jane sat, it was not her, thank goodness. Despite it being a romantic notion, Mrs Bennet knew it would, in actuality, be terrible if the two gentlemen fought over her most beautiful daughter.

To call such a man my son-in-law would be something! But did it even matter that Mr Darcy harboured such an affection? None of the girls takes any notice of him. I doubt they have thought of him since he left Hertfordshire last November, and Lizzy positively despises him. Yet he is so rich and high-born.

Mrs Bennet then recalled thinking that he was observing Elizabeth the other morning. But that was a look of disapproval, surely! The pair had never liked each other, and—Mrs Bennet forced her jaw closed to avoid gaping at her daughter. Elizabeth—Elizabeth! —had glanced at Mr Darcy, her countenance showing what appeared to be sadness and regret!

Suddenly overcome by these startling events, Mrs Bennet excused herself from the room for several minutes to regain her composure in private. When she returned, she ignored Jane and Mr Bingley to study Mr Darcy and Elizabeth. Sure enough, throughout the remaining hour that the gentlemen were at Longbourn, the pair often stole peeks at each other, although their eyes never seemed to meet.

Could there be more to their connexion than she, Elizabeth's own mother, knew? Had Elizabeth's feelings for him changed that much?

Mr Bennet stood at her side as they said their goodbyes to their guests.

"Thank you, madam," Mr Darcy said, as solemn as a vicar at a funeral—not that she had ever been to one—before he turned to Mr Bennet and then the girls.

"I had an awfully good time. It was very kind of you to have us," Mr Bingley said.

"Yes, yes. You are very welcome, I am sure." Mrs Bennet had little time for him. Mr Darcy was about to speak to Elizabeth, and even if it was just to wish her a good night, she wanted to observe their interaction!

Once the gentlemen were gone, Mr Bennet asked, "Are you quite well, my dear? You were...unusually quiet after dinner."

"Oh, quite, quite well. Pray, excuse me, I must have a word with Mary before she retires."

She fluttered her handkerchief and hurried away. Mrs Bennet only recalled that Mr Darcy was from the north when he was politely bowing. Elizabeth had been on a northern tour with the Gardiners. Where exactly was Mr Darcy's estate, and had her brother's route taken them anywhere near it? Was it possible Elizabeth and the gentleman had met that summer and somehow become friends?

It became a matter of some urgency to ascertain the location of Mr Darcy's home. When Mary murmured that she was going to her room, Mrs Bennet decided her third daughter was just whom she needed. Mary hoarded facts like they were precious jewels.

Chasing up the stairs after her daughter, Mrs Bennet hissed, “Mary. Mary!”

Mary paused and looked at her. She said nothing but quirked an eyebrow, an irritating habit she had inherited from Mr Bennet.

“I must talk to you.”

Mrs Bennet continued walking, soon reaching Mary, taking hold of her arm, and tugging her until they were in the first room at the top of the stairs. It was Kitty’s, but that hardly mattered.

“Yes, Mama?”

“From where is Mr Darcy? What is his estate called?”

“Derbyshire and Pemberley.” Mary gave her a puzzled expression.

“Do we not know someone from the north? Not Mr Darcy, but another person?”

There was no mistaking Mary’s disapproving sigh. “Aunt Gardiner lived in Derbyshire for some years as a child.”

“Did she? Oh, yes, of course. I wonder if it was near Mr Darcy’s estate.”

“Why are you curious about him all of a sudden?”

“Never you mind.” Mrs Bennet nibbled on her lower lip, trying to remember what she had been told of the Gardiners’ travels. Derbyshire sounded familiar, but that might simply be because she had heard it talked of as Mr Darcy’s home county or her sister Gardiner’s old one. Nevertheless, the coincidence was very interesting.

“Very well. I am going to bed. Good night.”

It took Mrs Bennet a moment to realise Mary had left the bedchamber. She looked heavenward and shook her head. Of all her girls, Mary tried her patience the most. Elizabeth might think she was cleverer than other people—and she might be, though Mrs Bennet would never admit it out loud—but she hid her sense of superiority with smiles and laughs. Mary just went about looking dour and disdainful.

Speaking to her reflection in the dressing table mirror, she said, “I simply must have more information, and there is no time to waste. If Mr Darcy has tender feelings for Lizzy, I shall see them married. Lizzy must have discovered something to like about him, and he is Mr Bingley’s friend. Everyone has some redeeming quality, do they not? Even Wickham does, though it might only be his good looks and ability to charm people.” She shook her head and forced her thoughts back to Mr Darcy. “There is surely something about him to admire. I shall find it and use it to convince Lizzy she loves him—if she does not already. To think of my daughter married to such a man! Ten thousand a year!”

### Three

For Jane's sake, Elizabeth was glad Mr Bingley was attentive, but she would have appreciated a longer separation from Mr Darcy than the mere two days since they had last called. As soon as the hour was reasonable, he and Mr Bingley were at Longbourn on Wednesday. It was difficult being with him and having to acknowledge that the friendly intercourse they had experienced in Derbyshire was gone. To add to her present woe, her mother was acting oddly, following Elizabeth about the house and mentioning Mr Darcy, which she never used to do. She seemed to want to ask something or expect Elizabeth to share her thoughts of him, which she never would. While it might be a relief to tell someone of her disappointment, she did not wish to burden Jane, who had long been her dearest confidant, and she did not trust her mother and Kitty with her secrets. Mary would be disinterested or, worse, it would make her disgust with Lydia even more severe to know her actions had cost Elizabeth the man she had fallen in love with.

"Darcy and I came to ask if the Miss Bennets would care to take a walk," Mr Bingley said.

"An excellent notion! I am sure they would be most happy to accept. I always say nothing is quite as good for the body and soul as a country walk." Mrs Bennet's gaze went first to Jane, then to Elizabeth, who unaccountably felt her cheeks heat.

She spoke a little longer, Elizabeth inwardly laughing at her mother's purported appreciation for exercise in the open air. Even for the short journey to Lucas Lodge, Mrs Bennet preferred taking the carriage—unless the horses were not available and she had an urgent need to gossip with Lady Lucas, in which case, she would walk and

complain about her sore knee and feet for days afterwards.

“I do not wish to go, but thank you, Mr Bingley,” Mary said.

Mary gave the appearance of politeness, but beneath it, Elizabeth sensed her displeasure. Given his behaviour the previous year, Mary’s opinion of him was low. Between that and her general dislike of society, Elizabeth was not surprised she had no wish to join a walking party.

“I think it is a jolly good idea! There is so little to do,” Kitty said.

“Now, Kitty, you know that is not true. Why, you are ever so busy. Do you not recall our conversation the other day? Besides, you would find it too...hot and tiring, I am sure. You had much better stay at home where you can attend to your chores and rest.” Mrs Bennet’s voice was slightly higher than usual, and Elizabeth saw her wink at Kitty, who looked puzzled.

“But, Mama?—”

“Lizzy would never say no to such an excursion, and Jane will enjoy it immensely, will you not, my dear?” Mrs Bennet said.

“I-I would.” Jane apparently had noticed the strangeness of their mother’s manner.

“Excellent!” Mr Bingley predictably smiled at Jane.

The warmth in Elizabeth’s cheeks grew as she felt someone—or some two—watching her. She knew her mother did, but she was too afraid to determine whether Mr Darcy was the other person whose eyes were upon her. How she wished he was and that it was because he wanted to be by her side, the two of them chatting about everything and nothing at the same time, just as they had in the gardens at

Pemberley after their unexpected encounter. Elizabeth reflected on the memory with great fondness—the marks of his favour, his desire to please her, the feeling of comfort at having him so close, to say nothing of his readiness to explain what they saw and the history of his home, all offered in his smooth, deep voice.

If only I had known then that I should take care to recall each word he said because such occasions would be so few.

Jane and Mr Bingley would want to talk only to each other, and perhaps when they were alone, Mr Darcy would exhibit more friendliness. If Elizabeth saw any sort of mark that he might still care for her, she would latch on to it and never let go.

“I shall fetch my bonnet,” Elizabeth said, feeling both anxious and hopeful.

Darcy found it impossible to stay away from Elizabeth, despite it being evident she did not wish for his company. Part of him knew he ought to return to town and leave her in peace, but it was as though a thick, strong band connected him to her. He supposed if she told him definitively to go away, it would break the binding, but until that happened, he would remain.

Miss Bennet and Bingley were soon some distance ahead of him and Elizabeth, evidently content to ignore their presence. Her hands were clasped behind her, and he longed to grasp one of them, to entwine their fingers. Her blue gown added warmth to her complexion and highlighted the richness of her hair, which was partly obscured by a straw bonnet. If only he could take it from her head and throw it into the tall grasses at the side of the path! Her lovely—and loved—face would be exposed to his greedy eyes.

Elizabeth took in their surroundings, but she never looked at him.

Just once , I want our gazes to meet so I might have the exquisite pleasure of looking

into her beautiful, expressive eyes.

“It is a fine day. We...have been very fortunate in the weather,” he said when he could no longer bear the silence. He thought he heard a soft chuckle before she replied, likely because it was an inane observation.

“I suppose it will change soon, now that September is almost over.”

Nothing more was said for several minutes. Darcy then recalled a subject that might be easy for them to discuss.

“How do Mr and Mrs Gardiner fare?”

“I received a letter from my aunt just yesterday. They are both well. Thank you for asking.”

Was that surprise in her voice, as though she did not expect him to wonder about the couple? A sort of tickle in Darcy’s mind alerted him to the possibility of the observation. He carefully considered his next words.

“I am sorry your trip with them was cut short.” Would she take the hint he was offering?

“As was I,” she said after a noticeable pause.

“I believe you were finding it...agreeable.” It? he silently repeated. It was such a small word for everything it meant—seeing him again and the changes he had made to his way of thinking and behaving towards others, viewing Pemberley, the home he so desperately wanted to give her, the evidence of his continued devotion and desire to take her as his wife.



Elizabeth turned her chin even further away from him, denying him even a tiny sliver of her face. Her response was a long time coming.

“I was. It is a shame it had to end as it did.”

It felt as though the air was violently pulled out of him. Voices were screaming four words over and over again: it had to end. She did not love him, not enough to forgive him for allowing her sister to be left vulnerable to Wickham. Perhaps if they had had more time, if she had come to feel for him what he did for her, then they might have overcome the barrier of his past errors. But they had not, and she was lost to him forever.

Four

Mrs Bennet studied the two couples when they returned from their walk. She had spent the period of their absence day-dreaming of her daughters' weddings and indulging in sorrow at how much she would miss them once they were wives. Jane and Mr Bingley gave her nothing but pleasure. One glance was enough to know their connexion was progressing as it should.

Elizabeth and Mr Darcy were another matter altogether. Elizabeth's cheeks were red, but Mrs Bennet could not tell why. Was she angry? Disappointed? Frustrated? Whatever emotion Elizabeth was experiencing, between it and the way she and Mr Darcy were acting, Mrs Bennet was convinced something interesting was brewing between the couple. They sat apart and tried to give the impression they did not even know the other was there, yet frequently glimpsed in the other's direction. It was plain even to Mrs Bennet that, while Elizabeth might not understand her sentiments towards the gentleman, he knew what it was to love. And to think he had been so dismissive of Elizabeth's beauty when they had first met, only to fall madly in love with her! Why then was he not sitting with her, talking to her, and trying to earn her favour? Mr Bingley was giving him an excellent illustration of how a man should act towards the lady he wished to have for his own.

I shall just give him a little nudge in Lizzy's direction. Encourage him. What could it hurt?

It required some contrivance, but she managed to have a short, private conversation with him. She imagined him admitting to liking Elizabeth and requesting Mrs Bennet intercede on his behalf. He was sure to present her with a very fine gift when her

efforts were successful.

Goodness, he is tall! Mrs Bennet had never stood quite so close to him before, and she found him rather imposing. She wondered if Elizabeth did too, and if that might be part of the problem. It would be just like Elizabeth to tease him out of his attraction as a way to mask how he intimidated her!

“It is so charming to meet again in such a manner, is it not?” She smiled broadly.

“Ah...yes. Yes, it is, madam. I thank you for being so welco?—”

Spying Mr Bingley preparing to step towards them, Mrs Bennet hastily spoke.

“My dear Lizzy is particularly glad. She is so lively, so quick-witted, and she relishes having a greater diversity of people with whom to talk, especially those with such wise conversation to offer. She is a good girl, as I am sure you have noticed. She is quite different from Jane in both looks and manner. I understand Jane more than I do her, I admit, but I am very fortunate to have such a daughter. Very fortunate indeed.”

Her brow gently furrowed, and her eyes drifted to Elizabeth, who stood apart from them. What Mrs Bennet had said to Mr Darcy was true, although it had never struck her before. Elizabeth was a good person, and she used her intelligence and sense to help those around her, including Mrs Bennet, who always struggled with the household accounts. And had Mrs Bennet not just been considering how much she would suffer when Jane and Elizabeth were married? Why had Mrs Bennet not recognised her value before? It would be terrible to admit it was only because Elizabeth was Mr Bennet’s favourite.

Just because I am dissatisfied with him does not mean I should let it influence how I see my daughter! Worse would be to acknowledge she had only seen her error because Elizabeth had attracted a gentleman of Mr Darcy’s quality.

As though fighting against a great weight of water, Mrs Bennet tore her eyes away from Elizabeth and searched the room until she saw Mary, her other least favourite—but still very much loved—daughter. Was there more to Mary than she had realised? Very likely there was, but how was she to discover it?

The sound of the front door closing shook Mrs Bennet out of her reverie. The moment of distraction had robbed her of hearing Mr Darcy's reply. No matter, she decided. Vowing to remember her questions about Mary, Mrs Bennet followed Elizabeth as she picked up a book and left the drawing room.

Mrs Bennet followed Elizabeth into the small sitting room at the back of the house. She was staring out of the window, the book still clutched in her hand.

"There you are, Lizzy, my dear."

Elizabeth turned towards her and appeared to sigh.

Thinking about Mr Darcy, I hope!

"Did you require my assistance?" Elizabeth asked.

"No, no. Come sit with me." Mrs Bennet went to the old settee and patted the place next to her. Once Elizabeth was sitting, she continued. "What a good thing it is that Mr Bingley has returned for Jane."

"Yes. I am happy for her." Elizabeth's hands were folded about the book, and she looked at it rather than her mother. Her voice betrayed nothing of her mood.

"You agree with me that he shows every indication of being in love with her? Do you think he will offer for her soon? I think he will, but that is also what I believed last year, and, well, we know how that ended. I spoke to your father about it last

night—or rather, I tried to, but he made one of his jokes instead of treating the matter with the seriousness it deserves!” The man vexed her more and more each year.

Elizabeth glanced her way, and Mrs Bennet might have heard another soft sigh, but she was not certain.

“I do agree, but I could not say when he will propose. Likely, he is waiting to be sure of her feelings.” She made the oddest sound, almost like a bitter bark of laughter, which made no sense to Mrs Bennet; thus she chose to ignore it.

“Oh, I do hope so! What a relief it will be once— But that is not why I wanted to talk to you. Were you surprised that Mr Darcy accompanied his friend?” Mrs Bennet offered her daughter a fond smile that was meant to encourage the sharing of confidences, but Elizabeth did not see it because she continued to look downward. However, Mrs Bennet noticed the way her daughter started at the gentleman’s name.

“Why would I have an opinion on the matter? I could hardly know how Mr Darcy is likely to act.”

“I was thinking, my sweet, Mr Darcy is a very fine gentleman.”

When Elizabeth regarded her with narrowed eyes, Mrs Bennet tittered nervously, but she had come too far not to carry on.

“He is so...educated, and-and I believe he likes books a great deal, just as you do. Have you ever considered that you and he might be well-suited?”

“Really, Mama, I believe the excitement of Jane and Mr Bingley renewing their friendship makes you see romantic intrigues everywhere. Mr Darcy would never look at me the way Mr Bingley does Jane. If you will excuse me.”

Elizabeth sprang to her feet and, without waiting for a response, strode out of the room.

Five

Mrs Bennet grimaced as Elizabeth disappeared through the door.

“That girl is too stubborn for her own good! Can she not tell I am trying to help her? With a little effort, she could be Mrs Darcy. Ten thousand a year and a house in town! She has no notion what a comfort it would be to her to never have to worry about money or her children’s futures,” she muttered to the empty room.

Worrying her lace-edged handkerchief, she did her best to think rationally. If Elizabeth still detested Mr Darcy, there was no point wasting her time trying to bring the couple together. But did she? Since it was evident Mr Darcy loved Elizabeth, she must be the one preventing them from forming a lasting union—a phrase Mrs Bennet had lately read in the most romantic novel. In it, the hero and heroine were being kept apart by their wicked families for reasons she could not quite recall. At least that would not be Elizabeth and Mr Darcy’s fate; even though Mr Bennet did not care for Mr Darcy, he would not deny his permission if Elizabeth asked it of him, and Mr Darcy’s family could find nothing to object to in Elizabeth.

An idea came to mind, and showing more vigour than usual, Mrs Bennet went to find her fourth daughter. Kitty listened at doors, despite having been told many times not to, and might have interesting information to share about Elizabeth’s time in Kent, if she had overheard Elizabeth and Jane speaking about it. In addition, Maria Lucas was as much a gossip as her mother, and she had been there at the same time. Kitty and Maria were intimate friends, and Kitty would thus know whatever Maria did.

Kitty was in her room. Mrs Bennet let her speak for a few minutes about the trim she

was adding to one of her gowns before interrupting.

“Seeing Mr Darcy brought to mind that his aunt and Mr Collins’s patroness are the same lady. I seem to remember hearing that he was visiting her when Lizzy was with Charlotte.”

Kitty nodded and smiled. “He was, along with a cousin who is a colonel. Maria said he was not particularly handsome, even though his father is an earl, but he was amiable. She said that Charlotte said she believed if the colonel had any money, he would have offered for Lizzy. His father?—”

“Do you know if they saw much of Mr Darcy?” Mrs Bennet had no desire to hear about a penniless officer. Having one daughter married to such a man was quite enough.

Again, Kitty nodded. Her expression reminded Mrs Bennet of an eager puppy. The poor girl was likely lonely with Lydia gone, and she and Mary had never gotten along particularly well, their dispositions being so different. It might do them good to befriend each other. She set aside the notion to revisit once she sorted out Elizabeth’s future.

“Maria said that Mr Darcy called the very day he and his cousin arrived. Charlotte told her that Mr Darcy would not have done that for her , which means he must have wanted to see Lizzy. It was not to see Maria. They never said one word to each other when he was at Netherfield last year, and even in Kent, he said no more than good day to her or something like that. And Maria said she knew Lizzy and Mr Darcy walked together several mornings. She saw them or heard Lizzy talking about it. I do not remember how she knows, only that she does. Do you think he likes her? Poor Lizzy! I hope it is not always disagreeable men who take an interest in her. If I had to choose between Mr Collins and Mr Darcy, I would take Mr Darcy. He is handsome and rich. Mr Collins?—”



“Very true, my dear.” Mrs Bennet patted her daughter’s arm. Her thoughts were already elsewhere, and she stood and went to the door. Before leaving the room, she turned back to Kitty. “You ought to spend more time with Mary.”

“Why?” Kitty’s expression showed confusion and, unfortunately, distaste.

Mrs Bennet did not answer and a moment later, was in her chamber. Her daughter truly could be Mrs Darcy! Such was her excitement, she swept her elderly cat, Felly, into her arms and clutched her to her chest as she skipped about the room. Mr Darcy was a very good sort, even if his manner was a bit...aloof. He might be proud, but did he not have ample reason for it? A house in town, a mighty fortune, a large estate, and master of it before he was thirty years old! While she could not understand half of what he said, Elizabeth would, and she would find that much more interesting than being married to a stupid man. Mrs Bennet had often thought she and her husband would have done better had she been more intelligent and he less.

Mrs Bennet stopped walking and stared at the wall opposite her. It was covered with a floral pattern paper and a portrait of her mother, who had died soon after Mary’s birth. Despite knowing what a good match Mr Bennet was, her mother had advised her to think carefully before accepting him because they were so unlike. Mrs Bennet did not regret the life she had, but she better understood her mother’s caution all these years later.

“I tried to force Lizzy to accept Mr Collins. She would have been miserable with him and hated being a parson’s wife.” The realisation that she had wanted to condemn her daughter to such a marriage was shocking. “It is not the same with Mr Darcy. You agree, do you not, puss?”

She sat in a delicate bergère chair. Mr Darcy and Elizabeth were so stiff and awkward together. What could be keeping them apart?

There was a knock at the door; it was Mrs Hill. Somehow, the hours passed, and it was time to prepare for dinner.

Mrs Bennet decided to speak to Jane the next morning, as loath as she was to do anything to distract her from Mr Bingley. If anyone knew Elizabeth's true feelings about Mr Darcy, it would be Jane.

But Jane's only response was to widen her eyes and shake her head as soon as Mrs Bennet hinted there might be a romance brewing between the couple.

"Mama, please do not talk to Lizzy about Mr Darcy or even suggest such a thing to her! They are not friends, and I am afraid nothing will change that."

"Not even after they saw each other when she was visiting Charlotte? Your sister was in Derbyshire recently, very likely near Mr Darcy's estate. Did they meet there?"

"If they did, she did not tell me, which would be unlike her. She does not look on him as a friend. She learnt to dislike him long ago, and although she does not regard him quite so poorly presently, they are nothing more than...indifferent acquaintances, if even that."

Jane's hand lifted to stroke the back of her neck, which told Mrs Bennet she was not disclosing everything she knew. Mrs Bennet made a contemplative noise as she stood and left her daughter.

Jane was mistaken. She clearly believed what she said, which meant Elizabeth had not confided in her, which in turn only convinced Mrs Bennet that Elizabeth was hiding very interesting sentiments about the wonderfully wealthy and delightfully handsome Mr Darcy.

Although she supposed she ought not to interfere in her daughters' lives—and

Elizabeth certainly would not appreciate it—she would see them married. It was for Elizabeth's own good, and what sort of mother would she be if she did not do what she could for her dear girl?

Six

After returning to Netherfield, Darcy claimed a need to finish an important letter and went to his apartment until dinner. In truth, it was an excuse to be alone. He was devastated by the conversation with Elizabeth, and all he could think about was finding a cave in which to hide so that he might grieve in private.

That evening, once he had picked at his dinner while listening to Bingley talk about Miss Bennet for as long as he could bear it, Darcy announced that he would leave the next day.

“What? You cannot!” Bingley said, sounding shocked by the suggestion.

“You do not require my presence any longer. The Bennets could not be more welcoming, Miss Bennet in particular, and I ought to leave you to it.” Darcy wanted to kick himself. The words sounded ridiculous, and he always prided himself on the elegance of his speech. Then again, considering some of his exchanges with Elizabeth, perhaps he ought to give up that pretension.

Momentarily, Bingley’s attention drifted, likely to the beautiful Miss Jane Bennet. “She is an angel and far more forgiving than I have a right to expect.”

Just as Darcy thought he could slip out of the room and go tell his man to prepare for their departure, Bingley fixed his attention on him.

“You cannot go, Darcy. I insist you remain.”

“Why?” He sounded petulant and hoped Bingley did not notice.

“Because I shall go mad if left alone in this huge house. As much as I might wish otherwise, I cannot be at Longbourn every hour of the day, and you know I do not have the means to entertain myself. But more than that, I require your advice. No, do not say it. I know you will tell me I need to make my own decisions. Very well. I would appreciate your advice. Please, I beg of you, do not leave me here alone.”

After all the ways Darcy had failed Bingley as a friend, he could not deny his request.

“Of course. I shall be glad to bear you company for as long as you like.” And pray I do not go mad myself, having to see Elizabeth.

The day after the walk with Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley, Elizabeth sought out Jane to ask if she would like to take a walk in the gardens. Jane agreed, and as they strolled, arm in arm, enjoying the warmth of the sun and stillness of their surroundings, Elizabeth asked about Mr Bingley. In Derbyshire, it had been evident Mr Bingley did not know anything of what she had told Mr Darcy about Jane during their horrible exchange in Kent. She surmised that Mr Darcy had since informed his friend of it, which meant he had told him after learning of Lydia’s disgraceful behaviour.

Elizabeth appreciated it as the mark of the excellent gentleman she knew him to be. He plainly did not mean to renew his attentions to her . His words when they had been alone had made that clear—he regretted their time together in Derbyshire had ended so abruptly. He meant that he was sorry the connexion they were forming had ended. She did not blame him. Why would he want to align himself to a family Wickham was a part of? It occurred to Elizabeth that he might only have accompanied Mr Bingley to Hertfordshire to deliver this message to ensure she did not retain any hope or expectation where he was concerned.

“I shall not waste my breath to ask if you are glad Mr Bingley returned. I can see that

you are, and equally that he is very happy to be with you again,” Elizabeth said, doing her best to mask how wretched she truly felt.

“You should not tease me. Though if you did not, I would believe you were ill.” Jane chuckled and her cheeks turned pink. “I am glad he is come, and I...I hope he does still like me.”

“He is as much in love with you as he ever was, if not more so.”

“I had thought I no longer favoured him as I once did, but, oh, Lizzy, I do. I have been struggling not to permit myself to hope, but everything he says, the looks he gives me—all of it is too much to ignore. But I shall not feel secure, or not anxious, until he proposes.”

“You might consider asking him to marry you. It would alleviate your suffering—and Mama’s.” Mischief made the corners of Elizabeth’s mouth twitch.

“While it might help me, Mama would have apoplexy if she learnt I had done such a bold, unladylike thing!”

The sisters shared a laugh, and Elizabeth allowed Jane to speak of her gentleman without interruption for some minutes.

“I have been debating if I should tell you, but I think you would want to know,” Jane said.

“Oh?” Alarm stole a portion of Elizabeth’s ease.

“Mama asked me about you and Mr Darcy. It seems she has taken the notion that the two of you...care for each other. I do not know why.”

“What did you tell her?” Elizabeth asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I would have said nothing, but that would not satisfy her. I reminded her that your dislike was formed long ago, and it would be kinder not to ask you about him. Was I right to tell you?”

Elizabeth nodded but worried if she tried to speak, she would only manage to snort or sob at the irony. For her part, she was in love with Mr Darcy and could imagine nothing better than to marry him. The realisation of her true sentiments had burst upon her the instant he had left her at the inn in Lambton after she had told him about Lydia. She supposed that was the moment his wishes regarding her had died. While usually so quick to spot a possible romance, her mother misunderstood Mr Darcy terribly if she believed he harboured intentions towards Elizabeth. That she must have discerned Elizabeth’s tendre for him meant she would have to do a better job of hiding it.

Mrs Bennet strode about her chamber, Felly once again in her arms. What with one thing and another, she had been occupied with other matters all day, but finally, she could turn her mind to the matter of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy. The cat was purring, though Mrs Bennet hardly noticed as she tried to remember everything she had observed since Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy had returned to the neighbourhood—more particularly, everything that had to do with Mr Darcy and Elizabeth. All the hours watching them studiously not talking yet constantly taking shy glances at each other had been enough to tell Mrs Bennet that they were not merely acquaintances.

“I would wager my pin money for a year that they saw each other this summer, and between that and last spring, something has changed between them! I do not know what keeps them apart, but I must see the situation put to rights!”

Mrs Bennet held the cat aloft and stared into her eyes. “You would like to see Lizzy married to such a man, would you not, dear little Felly? I know I did not always like

him, but that is all to be forgot. Yes, I shall like him very well, as long as he makes Lizzy happy!”

Kissing the cat’s head, Mrs Bennet placed her at the foot of the bed where she usually spent the night. Sure enough, after spinning in a circle several times, Felly curled into a ball, tucked her nose under a paw, and went to sleep. Elizabeth had given the cat her name. It was short for felis , which apparently meant cat in Latin or some other foreign tongue hardly anyone spoke, but Elizabeth had insisted on learning. It was an odd thing to call a cat, but Elizabeth, then twelve years old, had been so proud of herself, and Mrs Bennet could not bear to disappoint her by insisting on a different name.

She climbed into bed and extinguished the last candle. With her head so full of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy’s situation, sleep was a long time coming. She must find a way to bring the couple together, to make them admit their mutual love and desire to spend the remainder of their lives together in marital bliss—or at least connubial harmony—but how? Given Elizabeth’s stubbornness, Mrs Bennet required assistance. Her other daughters would be no help. Jane truly believed Elizabeth still disliked Mr Darcy, Mary was disdainful of anything romantic—which was a problem for another day—and Kitty was too indiscreet—also an issue Mrs Bennet would need to attend to in due course.

Inspiration struck her as she was eating breakfast the next morning. Naturally, her dear sister, Mrs Philips, would be her first choice of co-conspirator, but they needed another, someone who would keep them on task. Together, she and Mrs Philips might do little but exchange fond remembrances of their girlhoods and talk over the neighbourhood news. It was only with a mouthful of toast, richly covered with butter and strawberry jam, that she hit upon the right lady: Mrs Goulding.

She is a mother and has successfully married off her daughters, and likely will have her sons married when they are an appropriate age. She did a fine job of it, too, and



will understand my feelings and need to make this match happen!

After breakfast, she went to her sister's home and insisted they call on Mrs Goulding, who had been a lifelong friend.

"I am always very pleased to see you, but it appears you have a special purpose for coming this morning." Mrs Goulding, of middle years and no longer the slim, handsome girl she had been when they were all young, adjusted the position of her glasses, which she claimed pinched her nose. She studied them, evidently awaiting an explanation.

"I have no notion what my sister's haste is, but she would not even come up when she arrived at my door. She demanded I join her in the carriage at once," Mrs Philips said.

"I shall tell you, if you let me get a word in," Mrs Bennet said. Her sister always had been excessively chatty, and it was just like her to jump in when she had nothing useful to add to the conversation.

Once her companions were quiet, Mrs Bennet told them of her conviction Elizabeth and Mr Darcy were in love. "But some silly, inconsequential matter is keeping them apart. Likely Lizzy acted against her best interests and told him she used to hate him. As if he is not rich and connected to the nobility! His uncle is an earl, you know? Can you imagine the jewels he has to present to his wife? I will see them married. He is a proud, disagreeable man, but if he loves my girl—as he surely does—and since she returns his affection, or very soon will, I have my heart set on it. I am sure to find some redeeming quality in him with time. He is handsome, which is something."

"Lizzy and Mr Darcy?" Mrs Philips exclaimed.

Mrs Bennet nodded, and she might have looked a tad self-congratulatory. If she did,

who could blame her? Mrs Goulding's daughters might all be married, but none had husbands with ten thousand a year.

"I shall tell you everything I have witnessed and discovered since he and Mr Bingley took residence at Netherfield Park again. You must promise to help me. We shall contrive ways to have them spend more time talking to each other. With any other gentleman, I would worry about him hearing too many of her impertinent opinions, but Mr Darcy must be aware of Lizzy's manner by now, and he does not object. I do not understand it, but I suppose there is someone for everyone, and she is the one he wants. That girl has caused me more vexation than all the others put together!" She tilted her head to the side. "Perhaps not including Mary."

"What does that matter right now, Sister?" Mrs Philips said.

"Are you certain?" Mrs Goulding's eyes were slightly rounded as though she were in shock.

Mrs Bennet shot her sister a scolding expression before nodding and addressing Mrs Goulding. "Oh yes, without a doubt."

"And you would want Lizzy to marry him? He is so...stern and cheerless, so different from that lovely Mr Bingley," said Mrs Philips.

"I dare say he is not always like that. If he were, Lizzy would have more sense than to like him." Mrs Bennet gave them a full accounting of what she had seen and heard, including her conversations with her other daughters.

"A card party! You know how much everyone enjoys my card parties. I shall ensure Lizzy and Mr Darcy sit together." Mrs Philips gave a curt nod.

Mrs Goulding, showing her worth as a friend, leapt into the spirit of their scheme.

“Excellent notion! You can have it soon since such affairs do not take all that much preparation, and I shall begin arranging a dinner party at once. They will keep each other company at the table, and it is nothing to make sure the meal is long. If the right people are at their other sides, they will naturally only want to talk to each other.”

“There must be music. My niece has such a lovely voice, and a man like Mr Darcy will surely appreciate it,” Mrs Philips said.

“I knew I could depend on you to help me!” Mrs Bennet clapped her hands together in glee.

The ladies spent an hour refining their plan of attack before Mrs Bennet and Mrs Philips prepared to depart.

“I shall have both Jane and Lizzy married by Christmas. You just see if I do not,” Mrs Bennet said as she pulled on her gloves.

Seven

Darcy spent a minimum of a quarter of each day wondering why he had given in to Bingley's plea that he remain at Netherfield. But Darcy had wronged him when it had come to Miss Bennet, and as long as Bingley wished for his company, he was obligated to remain and offer his support. It was doubly important that he do so since Bingley's sisters were unremitting in their disapproval.

Recently, Bingley had begun speaking endlessly about proposing to Miss Bennet.

"Do you think it is too soon? I believe she cares for me. You do, too, do you not?" Bingley said, repeating himself over and over until Darcy wanted to strangle him.

He also spoke of what he would say, and Darcy had almost guffawed when Bingley asked his advice. After how he had insulted Elizabeth when he had proposed, he was the last man Bingley should ask.

The very faint hope Darcy had retained that he had mistaken Elizabeth's meaning during their walk was gone. Whenever they met, her manner towards him was cold. Indeed, she appeared more irritated by his presence at each meeting while, to his vexation, Mrs Bennet was evidently intent on explaining the excellence of her second daughter to him.

Darcy did his best not to force his company on Elizabeth, yet he could not stay away when the opportunity to see her arose. On Friday, he and Bingley had received an invitation to a card party from Mrs Philips; it would be Monday. Bingley had accepted without asking Darcy's opinion, which was neither a surprise nor a

disappointment. Of course, Darcy would want to attend; Elizabeth would surely be there.

The necessity of attending to important letters—to his steward, solicitor, uncle, and sister—kept Darcy from joining Bingley when he called at Longbourn on Saturday, but he had the pleasure of seeing her at church on Sunday. He was certain he could hear her dulcet voice rise above all others when they sang.

After the service, he stood by himself, trying to be surreptitious in his observation of Elizabeth. She was speaking with Mrs Bennet, though it was only the matron who appeared to be talking. Then, in a movement so swift he had not time to prevent it, Mrs Bennet had pulled the evidently unwilling Elizabeth over to him.

“Oh, Mr Darcy, good morning.” Mrs Bennet sounded surprised to see him, although her actions were too deliberate to make that believable.

Darcy greeted the ladies, his eyes lingering on Elizabeth, who only curtsied.

“Is it not a lovely day? I was very disappointed to hear from Mr Bingley that you and he are engaged with the vicar and his wife this afternoon. Lizzy was terribly upset when I told her, were you not?”

Elizabeth managed a smile, but she looked like she wanted to flee the awkward scene. She might have, had her mother not been holding her arm.

“Mrs Carson will give you a good meal, but I am sure you would find the company at Longbourn more to your liking.” Mrs Bennet tittered.

“Mrs Carson was kind to invite us.”

“To be sure. I was consoling Lizzy by reminding her that we shall have the pleasure

of seeing you tomorrow at my sister's. Young people do enjoy sitting down to a game of cards together. So many opportunities to talk to each other about, well, whatever they like to talk to each other about. That reminds me that I must say something to Jane. Lizzy, you stay here and keep Mr Darcy company. I cannot bear to see such a kind gentleman standing alone."

As Mrs Bennet walked away, Elizabeth's eyes closed briefly. When she opened them, she looked beyond his shoulder. She was pale, and Darcy attributed her discomfort to being forced to talk to him.

"I believe it will rain this afternoon," he said after an awkward silence that seemed to last half the morning.

She looked at the sky and then made a noise of agreement. "My mother spoke precipitously about today's weather."

Her eyes met his briefly before she again averted them. For his part, Darcy could not tear his gaze from her. In Derbyshire, he had come so close to winning the right to caress the soft curve of her cheek, to clasp her hand in his, brush his lips across hers. Not being able to do so created such a painful ache deep in his belly that he felt physically ill.

The sound of laughter drew their attention. It was Bingley, who stood with Mrs and Miss Bennet. The sight made Elizabeth smile.

"I hope my mother is not teasing him about accepting Mrs Carson's invitation. She truly was disappointed to learn of it when Mr Bingley called yesterday. She had hoped that you would spend the day at Longbourn."

And you? Were you saddened to hear we could not? Did you miss my company as I missed being able to see you?

Before he had time to think of what to say, Mr Bennet approached. He gave Darcy a perfunctory nod and said his name before turning to his daughter.

“Come, Lizzy, let us return home. I want my breakfast, and nothing short of us walking off will convince your mother to leave Mr Bingley alone. He and his friend will want to get on with their morning, just as I do mine.”

Mr Bennet took Elizabeth’s elbow to guide her. Darcy watched as they moved in the direction of Longbourn. It meant he saw when she looked over her shoulder at him. What did it signify? A desire to spend a few more moments with him? Regret at the circumstances that kept them apart? A plea for him to stay away because she found his presence difficult to tolerate?

He spent the rest of the day contemplating that look, going so far as to ignore Bingley all evening after their return to Netherfield.

Preparing for Mrs Philips’s party, Darcy felt a tremor of anticipation deep in his belly. It was ridiculous, he knew, and he berated himself for being stupid, but that final look Elizabeth had given him in the churchyard had remained with him. Something in it gave him a sliver of hope that her heart was not as closed to him as he had believed. He begged the universe to allow him to see just a speck more of it that evening. If he did, he would tell her that his wishes for their future were unchanged, and he loved her even more than he had at Easter. She could have as much time as she needed to decide whether she could return his affection; as soon as she gave him a sign that she was prepared to hear it, he would propose again.

He saw nothing to justify his hope. Instead, the best way to describe her manner was arctic. As ever, she was polite, and when they first greeted each other, she even briefly met his eye. Thereafter, she would not look at him. Was he intent on torturing himself by expecting more? His situation was not made better by Mrs Bennet, Mrs Philips, and Mrs Goulding, to whom Darcy had said no more than a dozen words

over the whole of their acquaintance. They were seemingly determined to speak to him of Elizabeth. It was as though he were being punished for every misstep he had ever taken. If he did not have relief from his misery soon, he might be tempted to throw himself into the River Lea.

“Now, Mr Darcy, you take a seat at this table. My dear niece will see that you are entertained, will you not?” said Mrs Philips.

She directed the question at Elizabeth, who appeared to clench her jaw. Her eyes flickered towards him but went no further than his shoulder.

“Of course,” she said, sounding irritated.

“She is such a good girl. What a delight she is to our entire family. My sister always says she is the most fortunate woman in the world to have such a daughter. If Mr Philips and I had had children of our own, I would have wanted a daughter just like Lizzy. I know Mrs Bennet takes it very hard that her girls will marry and go away, but I always tell her, it is her own fault for having such charming, capable girls. Naturally, they will attract very fine husbands, which is what any loving parent wants for their child.”

“I thank you for the flattering portrayal, Aunt. You are very good,” Elizabeth interjected, a puzzled expression clouding her countenance.

Mrs Philips giggled—rather silly for a lady her age, in Darcy’s opinion—and after patting her niece’s shoulder and grinning at him, went away. Elizabeth sighed and bowed her head, but an instant later, she was engaged in light conversation with the couple who shared the table with them. Darcy played poorly; he was too intent on studying the lady by his side. Even when the game required her to speak to him, she would not look at him and kept her shoulders turned away just enough to be noticeable.



Later in the evening, he was talking to Mr Stuart, one of the local gentlemen, when Mrs Goulding all but pushed her way into the conversation. She ignored Mr Stuart, who soon went to find someone who appreciated his company, Darcy supposed.

“Such a pleasant evening, is it not, sir?”

Mrs Goulding was at least a foot shorter than him, and as she stood close, Darcy’s chin nearly touched his chest as he tilted it to see her. He could not step back; there was a wall behind him. It was no wonder he felt trapped.

“It is, madam.”

“We are very glad you and Mr Bingley returned to the neighbourhood—some of us more than others.”

Her eyes flickered to the side, and she might have winked at the same time; Darcy was not certain. Looking in the direction her gaze indicated, he expected to see Bingley and Miss Bennet. Instead, it was Elizabeth, who was especially lovely in a yellow gown. Her mood had evidently improved once she was no longer required to keep him company. She was chatting easily with several young people.

“I am arranging a little dinner party and will send cards soon. I do hope you will accept, Mr Darcy. I am quite counting on it,” Mrs Goulding said.

“Of-of course. I shall be delighted. Thank y?—”

“Mr Goulding and I recently procured a new pianoforte. I am absolutely wild to have Miss Lizzy perform. You have heard her sing, I believe?” She did not pause to let him respond, though he did nod. “Does she not have the most exquisite voice?”

Darcy could not keep his eyes from again seeking out Elizabeth. If he responded, he

was not aware of it, but it mattered not. Mrs Goulding left him to his memories. He had heard Elizabeth sing a number of times, but the first stood out to him. It had been at Lucas Lodge the previous autumn, and Darcy had been entranced. That was also the evening he had noticed the unique beauty of her eyes. There was so much life and expression in them, and he would give just about anything to spend the rest of his years staring into them, doing what he could to make them dance in merriment, flash in interest, grow warm in love, and how, he wondered, would they look when she was full of passion?

That was not a thought he should be having in a crowded parlour, if at all.

Still later, Mrs Bennet approached him, a lacy handkerchief clutched in her hand. Darcy noticed it because she kept her arms folded by her chest, almost as though she were cold or anxious.

“Oh, Mr Darcy, is this not a delightful evening? Everyone adores my sister’s card parties. I was very glad when she told me she would have one and invite you.”

“It was kind of her.”

“I just happened to notice you sat beside my darling Lizzy.” The expression she gave him was one of satisfaction.

“I had that pleasure.”

“Lizzy excels at cards, but then, she is very capable. If I can be forgiven for crowing about my own daughter, my dear girl is very clever. I dare say that is not a surprise to you. She is such a help to me. No one else has her head for figures, and ever since she was such a little thing, she has liked nothing quite so much as reading about this and that.” She chuckled awkwardly and her cheeks flushed. “I admit, I do not understand half of what she says some days. I suppose many parents feel that about their grown

children, yet how can one possibly like to say it? My Mary makes me feel the same way, but not my other daughters. Odd, is it not, how five girls could be so different despite having the same parents and upbringing?”

Her voice trailed off, and for just a moment, she was more contemplative than Darcy had ever seen her—and to an extent he never would have imagined possible. She shook herself.

“What was I saying? Oh, yes, my Lizzy. She looks very fine tonight, if I say so myself. Jane is acknowledged as the beauty of the family, but all my girls are pretty.”

“They are, indeed, Mrs Bennet,” Darcy replied when the matron paused and waited for him to speak.

“Lizzy has something...different about her, does she not? I always thought it must be because she takes after her father. They are both so quick-witted, but while Lizzy does love a laugh, she is kind and, and...”

“Admirable.” Darcy had not intended to speak, but it had slipped out when Mrs Bennet could not find the word to explain herself.

A broad grin spread across her face, and Darcy felt her tap his arm. “Just so. Well, I shall leave you to your contemplations.”

Mrs Bennet might have given him a half-wink, as he thought Mrs Goulding had done earlier in the evening, but he was unsure. She wandered into the crowd.

Darcy began to feel as though he were in some bizarre dream where everyone about him knew he loved Elizabeth and was tormenting him by reminding him that he was not good enough for her.

Either that or they were trying to interest him in her. With Miss Bennet on the point of being engaged, Mrs Bennet wanted to see Elizabeth settled, and Darcy was an eligible match.

If that is their purpose, they might as well save their breath to cool their porridge.

He recalled Elizabeth saying something similar to him once. It had been at Lucas Lodge, that night he had heard her sing for the first time, and his attachment to her had sparked to life. A quiet, bitter laugh escaped before Darcy could stop it.

### Eight

Elizabeth's attempt to escape the house and take a solitary walk early the following morning failed. Unlike her mother's usual habit—one Elizabeth had been accustomed to for as long as she could recall—she was out of bed, poking her head into the corridor and beckoning to her as soon as Elizabeth opened the door to her chamber.

“Sit, sit,” her mother urged when Elizabeth entered the room.

Mrs Bennet pointed to a satin chair while perching on the edge of a chaise longue across from her. A tray of tea and biscuits was on the table between them. Elizabeth took note of the two cups, a sign her mother had anticipated their chat. A mix of emotions battled within—frustration, irritation, and trepidation most of all.

“Last night was amusing, was it not?”

“It was,” Elizabeth said with some wariness. Her mother had behaved very peculiarly the day before, examining Elizabeth carefully as she dressed for the party. She had insisted on choosing the gown Elizabeth wore, which she never did, and had demanded their maid redo her hair.

“You want to look your very best, do you not? A certain gentleman will be present, after all,” her mother had said.

Then, during the party, Elizabeth had seen her mother talking to Mr Darcy; heaven knew what she had said to him. Mrs Philips had insisted on placing him next to her at cards, and Elizabeth had caught a glimpse of Mrs Goulding standing with him. None

of this would be remarkable if Elizabeth had not also witnessed the three ladies in urgent whispers to each other and recalled the occasions on which her mother had talked to her about him in recent days. She had wanted to scream at them to leave the man alone. Worried that Mrs Bennet had seen her watching Mr Darcy and gotten the wrong impression, Elizabeth had purposely avoided him. It helped that he wanted to avoid her and that by not talking to him, it alleviated a modicum of her sorrow. He had seemed reluctant to accede to Mrs Philips's request that he sit with Elizabeth, and while he might have had letters to write on Saturday, it sounded like an easy excuse to make for not calling at Longbourn. Could he not have attended to the task in the evening?

"You were beside Mr Darcy at the card table."

"Yes," Elizabeth said, drawing out the word.

Mrs Bennet made a happy little noise and smiled. "I dare say you found his company interesting. He is quite an intelligent gentleman, which suits you well. You would hate to...converse with a stupid man."

True, yet you wanted me to marry an exceedingly foolish one.

"Mr Darcy has such an athletic air too. You like to always be active, wandering through the fields as you do. I understand he has a large estate. Mr Bingley says it is a grand place. You would like to explore it."

Images of her time in Derbyshire flashed through Elizabeth's mind; she roughly thrust them aside to attend to her mother's speech, lest she find herself inadvertently saying something she would later regret.

"He will make a fine husband. He is rich, which is no little thing. Trust me. I would not have been so anxious about you girls if your father had half what Mr Darcy

does.” Mrs Bennet took a sip of her tea and adopted a casual manner that was plainly false.

For the next few minutes, Elizabeth listened as her mother spoke about the importance of choosing one’s marriage partner wisely, all the while insinuating Mr Darcy was an excellent match for Elizabeth. Elizabeth managed to remain stoic, despite wanting to cry desperately. If her mother were another sort of woman, Elizabeth would confide in her; how good it would feel to share her inner turmoil! She would begin by agreeing whole-heartedly that Mr Darcy was the perfect man for her.

Instead, Elizabeth most desired to end the tête-à-tête and escape to the outdoors. It was increasingly difficult not to laugh. Apparently, her mother was playing matchmaker—likely with the assistance of Mrs Philips and Mrs Goulding. They were months too late. If only they—and especially Elizabeth—had recognised Mr Darcy’s true character last autumn!

Perhaps I ought to tell her the entire sad tale. At least then she would understand the futility of her efforts. Besides, Elizabeth did not believe other people could force a couple together, as it was all too easy to break them apart. If she and Mr Darcy had any future together, they would have to manage it on their own.

If? I must give up such wishful thinking. He no longer wants to marry me. His words that horrible morning were clear enough. Both those horrible mornings—the one in Lambton and more recently when he talked about our time together ending. It is utterly hopeless.

Early the afternoon following Mrs Philips’s card party, Bingley sent word that he was going out. Darcy was in his apartment, ostensibly writing letters but really staring out of the window, contemplating making an excuse and insisting he needed to return to Pemberley at once. Although Bingley did not say what errand drew him from

Netherfield, Darcy suspected his purpose was to call on Miss Bennet and propose. If he were correct, his friend surely would have no further need for his company, and he would be free to leave. Oddly, the idea increased rather than decreased his despondency. It would mark a definitive end to his connexion with Elizabeth. They might never see each other again; indeed, Darcy believed he would have to ensure they did not. It was the only chance he stood of forgetting his love for her.

Shortly before the dinner hour, Darcy's supposition about Bingley's errand was proved correct. A hastily scribbled note arrived from Longbourn, begging him to come at once.

I have done it, Darcy! Miss Bennet, my dear Jane, has made me the happiest of men. Mrs Bennet insists you join us for a celebration. It will be just the family and us at dinner. Make haste!

Dismissing the notion of claiming illness, Darcy threw a glass of strong wine down his throat, hoping it would give him courage to face Elizabeth's disinterest, and called for his horse.

Everyone at Longbourn was in a jubilant mood, which was to be expected. As soon as the housekeeper showed him to the drawing room, Mrs Bennet rushed towards him.

"We are very glad you are here, especially Lizzy."

She half turned as though to look for her daughter. Darcy wanted to tell her that Elizabeth was sitting in the corner with Miss Mary. Her back was to them.

"I offer you and your family my congratulations. Bingley is a very fortunate man," Darcy said.



She smiled, and colour blossomed in her cheeks. “That is very good of you, sir. I have always said Jane could not be so beautiful without a reason. I knew she would catch the eye of a deserving gentleman, and I am glad to see her so happy. Mr Bennet might not show it, but he is pleased to finally have a son, even though it is a son-in-law, which is not quite the same as—Oh, how I am going on! You will want to talk to someone more interesting than I am. Lizzy was reading a new book earlier today. I am sure she would enjoy telling you about it.”

The blood rushed from his face. “I-I-I pray you would not disturb her, madam. I am sure she would prefer to...think about her sister’s wedding and other happier topics.”

He executed a polite bow and went to shake Bingley’s hand before seeking a seat beside Mr Bennet, who sat apart from the others in an ugly old chair he apparently favoured.

There was no mistaking Mrs Bennet’s hope that he and Elizabeth would make a match of it. Determined to think the best of her, having been so mean-spirited in the past, he decided the matron had noticed that he and Elizabeth were particularly well-suited.

She means to do good . If I thought she could truly help my situation, I would gladly confide in her. But how could I tell her I might have prevented her youngest daughter’s marriage to an unworthy man, but I failed to act, and now Elizabeth hates the very sight of me? That supposes she forgives me for insulting her family in Kent. There is nothing Mrs Bennet can say or do to convince Elizabeth to give me another chance to earn her love.

“Quite a lot of to-do, is it not, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy was startled by Mr Bennet’s sudden speech; they were the first words he had spoken, despite having been seated next to each other for upwards of a quarter of an

hour. They had only nodded in greeting.

“The ebullience is understandable.”

Mr Bennet grunted, the sound suggesting he did not agree. “Young people have been getting engaged for centuries. Today alone, I imagine dozens, perhaps even hundreds of couples have done exactly as they have.” He dipped his chin to indicate Miss Bennet and Bingley. They were listening to Miss Catherine, who appeared to be speaking rapidly.

“I fail to see why we must tolerate all this noise about it. But that is most likely hunger talking. Lizzy assures me I am quite the curmudgeon when I am most desperate for my dinner. I am glad your friend came to the point at last. I most heartedly pray he proves himself worthy of my girl.” Mr Bennet frowned as he regarded the newly-engaged couple.

“He will. I assure you, his attachment to her is everything it should be.”

Darcy’s eyes drifted to Elizabeth. He might as well have been speaking of his feelings for her. She remained with Miss Mary, who scowled as she watched Bingley. Mrs Bennet was at Elizabeth’s other side and was chattering away, though Elizabeth said nothing.

Soon after, they were called into the dining room.

Nine

With the jostling of moving to dinner, Elizabeth tried to ensure she did not end up sitting next to Mr Darcy. Being confronted by his disinclination for her company would be difficult enough, but she knew her mother would spend half the meal watching them.

If he heard half of what Mama said to me about him and marriage, he would immediately set off to Derbyshire, even if he had to walk the entire distance!

Elizabeth had been talking to Mary, attempting to convince her to be pleased for Jane and forgive Mr Bingley for going away as he had the previous year. After all, she argued, Jane had done so, and it was wrong to hold on to resentment for his past mistakes.

“Jane is too easy on him. He does not deserve her,” Mary had said countless times over the ten days since the gentlemen had returned to Netherfield.

“No man does. Yet, I am not content to force her into a life of spinsterhood because of the failings of the male sex. Mr Bingley’s behaviour was wrong, but he knows that, and Jane is very, very happy. She loves him.”

Elizabeth had made similar arguments several times, and just today, she believed she was making progress. Elizabeth understood her sister’s disappointment with both Jane and Lydia—Jane for being too forgiving, and Lydia...well, there was no need to recall why any of them should think harshly of her. A part of Elizabeth remained vexed with Mr Bingley for being too accepting of his sisters and Mr Darcy’s wrong-

headed advice. Still, she had an added incentive to forget the matter entirely: Mr Darcy. While accepting that he would not repeat his proposal, she still loved him and considered him one of the best men she had ever met. How could she think well of him while thinking poorly of Mr Bingley?

Elizabeth was not certain how it had come about, but despite her efforts, Mr Darcy took the chair next to hers. Seeing the satisfaction in her mother's countenance, it was obvious she had something to do with it.

Thank goodness Mary does not know everything that passed between Mr Darcy and me or how he interfered with Jane and Mr Bingley's relationship. She would take up the nearest poker and beat him with it.

The image made Elizabeth press her lips together to avoid laughing. Her mood instantly sobered when she recalled how Mrs Bennet had interrupted her conversation with Mary to, yet again, sing the praises of Mr Darcy and marriage.

"Jane will soon discover how lovely it is to be a married lady. You will not wish to remain 'Miss Bennet' for long, not seeing how happy she is. I dare say the same is true of Mr Darcy. Just think—if you were to marry him, your and Jane's husbands would be good friends. You would always be together." Mrs Bennet had continued along this theme until the call for dinner had come, fortunately speaking quietly enough that no one had overheard.

Images of being Mrs Darcy danced in Elizabeth's head.

"Are you not enjoying the soup?"

Elizabeth's head swung to the side, her eyes immediately meeting Mr Darcy's warm brown ones. It had been his deep voice that had startled her. Her cheeks warmed, and she sought to hide her embarrassment by looking into her bowl.

“No, not at all. I-I mean to say, I am enjoying it, I was simply distracted for a moment. Is it to your liking?” She sipped a spoonful and glanced at him.

“Very much. Your cook is excellent.”

It was the sort of innocuous chitchat one often had with their dinner companion. It saddened her, knowing how much more interesting their conversation could be when they felt free to share opinions and observations. They would learn from each other while laughing and engaging in light-hearted debates. She forced a polite smile to her lips. His question was surely meant to show that he hoped they might become more comfortable with each other. It would help on those occasions when they would meet in the future.

I shall do my part. Holding onto the past is ridiculous, unforgivably so, considering how unlikely it was that we would ever end up married. Chance brought us together in Derbyshire, and it was never meant to be more than an opportunity for us to acknowledge that we had treated each other poorly in Kent. There. Now that I have understood that, I can be easier with him!

“My mother prides herself on setting a good table. She would be thrilled to know a gentleman of your quality and experience approved.”

He chuckled, apparently taking her words for a jest. It had been what she meant to convey, and Elizabeth drank in the way he seemed to relax.

“She does like to entertain others. Doing so well is a particular skill she possesses, and she is fully aware of it. I am sure she has already half-arranged a party to celebrate Jane’s engagement with our neighbours. As for the wedding itself, Jane and Mr Bingley had best act quickly before she makes every necessary decision for them, from their attire to the breakfast dishes. I do not expect she will allow them to choose the date, no matter how much they argue they should,” Elizabeth said.

His laugh was a little louder this time. “While Miss Bennet might like some say, Bingley will leap at the opportunity to let your mother do it all, if only because it allows him more time to spend by your sister’s side. I am very happy for them.”

“As am I. When they are kept apart by such inconveniences as it being too early or too late for even an engaged couple to visit with each other, I know Jane will want nothing more than to talk to me about your friend’s excellence and her joy. I might find myself devising schemes to escape the house before she can pin me down lest I go mad.” She smiled, and it felt more genuine this time.

There was an uncommon mischievousness in his eyes, and he leant closer. “I beg you will not do anything too drastic. I suspect Bingley will be trying my nerves by the end of tomorrow. You and I can form an alliance to preserve our sanity, despite their best efforts to threaten it.”

Elizabeth had just opened her mouth to make another joke, when her father called for her attention.

“What was it Patterson told you the other day, something about the north field right by the border between Netherfield and Longbourn? I wanted to tell Mr Bingley?—”

“Must you right now? Mr Bingley is not interested in fields, not when he and Jane only just became betrothed, and Lizzy and Mr Darcy were speaking,” Mrs Bennet said from across the table.

As her father insisted there was no reason not to talk about estate business and her mother argued there was, Elizabeth offered Mr Darcy an apologetic look. He shook his head just enough for her to notice, and they finished drinking their soup in silence.

It was just as well. Elizabeth had forgot herself, and by the gravity of his demeanour, he realised he had too. He would worry about encouraging her to hope for more than

he could offer.

Mrs Bennet hummed as she sat at her dressing table. Having just dismissed her maid, she reached into the very back of the drawer to extract a small pot of face cream she had been promised would prevent the formation of wrinkles, possibly even erase the ones she saw about her eyes. It had been enormously expensive, and if Mr Bennet ever learnt of it, he would never cease laughing at her. Did he not benefit by her efforts to retain her youthful beauty? She might have five grown daughters, but she did not need to look as though she did; she was only four and forty, after all. She saw her cat in the reflection and spoke to her as she dabbed spots of cream about her eyes and spread it in a thin layer.

“I knew Mr Bingley would not wait long to propose. Jane will soon be mistress of Netherfield Park. She will have her own carriage, and he must have some of his mother’s jewels to present to her, even though he has two sisters and his family is not as illustrious as Mr Darcy’s. If he does not, I will give him a little hint here and there until Jane has an appropriate collection.”

All she needed to complete her happiness was for Elizabeth and Mr Darcy to become engaged. Unbidden, her lips formed into a scowl. Seeing it in the mirror, she quickly schooled her features. She wanted to knock their heads together! Could they not see how much they longed for each other? There had been a brief moment at dinner when they looked especially happy and more at ease together than she had yet witnessed, and then Mr Bennet, the blockhead, had interrupted them!

“Everyone speaks of them being so clever, and they very well might be, but when it comes to him recognising that my daughter is madly in love with him, or her admitting that he loves her, they must be the most ignorant people in all of England! If you saw them together as I did, Felly, you would agree with me.”

Placing the pot back into the drawer, Mrs Bennet rose and lifted the cat from her

cushion to cuddle and kiss. Walking about her chamber, she hummed a gentle tune just as she had done with her girls when they were babies. Before long, she might have a grandchild to soothe. The thought stopped her movement for a brief moment. She closed her eyes and bowed her head as though in prayer.

“Please let it not be Lydia who has a child, not for several years at the very least. Jane is a good age to be a mother—older than I was when she was born—but Lydia...

“Oh, why am I thinking about that , especially when there is a wedding to plan! A double wedding. Jane and everyone else might believe there will only be one bride that day, but I am determined there will be two. What do you think, my darling little puss? Can I have Lizzy and Mr Darcy engaged and ready to marry by the end of November? Jane and Mr Bingley will not want to wait more than six or eight weeks, and who could blame them? A young couple does not want to delay long after reaching an understanding.”

Mrs Goulding’s dinner party was in a few days. No doubt, Elizabeth and Mr Darcy would see each other before then, and Mrs Bennet would take every opportunity to throw them together. Then, by the time they met at Hays-Park, they would be practically engaged already. Perhaps he would speak to her that night, or even before!

So delightful was the expectation that she would soon have two daughters married to rich gentlemen—one of them the grandson of an earl—that she giggled and twirled in a circle, her protesting cat clutched to her bosom.



Ten

Darcy listened to Bingley recount the details of his proposal for more than an hour. They sat in the drawing room; Darcy was glad to have chosen a comfortable chair and footstool, since it appeared Bingley meant to continue his chatter all night. His excitement was understandable, and Darcy was genuinely pleased for him, but there were only so many times one could listen to the same story before becoming bored.

“I am glad you are here with me. I would not have had the courage to approach my dear Jane again, or known what to say, if it were not for you!” Bingley held his glass, still half-full of wine, aloft in a salute.

“Thank you, but I do not believe either statement to be true.”

“No, no, Darcy, your advice has been invaluable.” Bingley shook his head. “I shall insist Jane and I name our first son after you.”

“You must be drunk to suggest naming your child Darcy, and Fitzwilliam would be even worse. Fortunately, Miss Bennet is too sensible to agree to either.”

Bingley laughed in such a way that proved Darcy correct; he was drunk, on happiness if not wine.

“Now that you have been accepted, I believe it is time to discuss my going away,” Darcy said once Bingley regained control of himself.

“What? Why?”

“You have no more need of my advice, and I expect you will want to spend every waking hour with Miss Bennet and her family.”

Bingley shook both his head and his finger. “No, no, no. I cannot see you chased away because I am an engaged man. An engaged man. Does that not sound wonderful? You ought to find yourself a young lady and follow my example.”

If only you knew . Darcy marvelled that Bingley had not noticed his attentions to Elizabeth and the Gardiners in Derbyshire, but it was just as well he had not.

“I want you to stay. Say that you will. With my sisters being so hateful, I need you. I told you about Louisa’s letter, did I not? Let me find it to show you.”

“That is not necessary. You read it to me at breakfast.”

“I cannot believe how she and Caroline continue to object to Jane. Sweet, beautiful Jane. She will be an excellent sister. Teach them a thing or two about kindness and- and being kind. You know what I mean. I ought to write that to them. Can you imagine what they would say?” Bingley sniggered.

“No good would come of antagonising them.”

“Very true. Do you see? That is why I need you to stay. The wedding will be in just a few weeks. No more than six. Mid-November sometime.” He waved a hand as though the exact date was immaterial, and Darcy supposed that, to his friend, it was, in his present celebratory mood. “If you could stay that long, I would be very grateful. I want you to stand up with me, of course. And do not forget that you promised Mrs Goulding you would attend her dinner party.”

Rightly or wrongly, Darcy allowed himself to be convinced. But then, the next morning found him on the road to London.

It was no surprise that Mr Bingley came to Longbourn immediately after breakfast the next day, and Elizabeth was pleased to see him. The joy he and Jane shared brought light to her heart and helped sustain her through her sorrow, which was made worse when Mr Darcy did not come with his friend.

“Where is Mr Darcy this morning? He is not ill, is he?” Mrs Bennet asked.

Everyone apart from Mr Bennet was in the drawing room. Elizabeth tried to hide that she was listening for Mr Bingley’s answer rather than to Kitty describing the gown she hoped to convince their mother to buy her for Jane’s wedding.

“Darcy is in excellent health, but he received a summons from his uncle first thing this morning. He is needed in town on family business,” Mr Bingley explained.

That is convenient, if it is entirely truthful. I expect he was looking for an excuse to leave. And yet...

“He is coming back?”

Looking at her mother when she spoke, Elizabeth was struck by how alarmed she appeared. Her wide eyes and the way she leant forward in her chair reflected the anxiety Elizabeth felt as she awaited Mr Bingley’s next words. She could not accept losing Mr Darcy’s company so abruptly. She needed more time, another occasion to look upon him and hear his voice.

“He promised he would. Mrs Goulding invited us to dinner, as you know, and Darcy expects to be back in time to attend. It is some estate matter or other. I cannot recollect exactly. Some property once held by a cousin or aunt that was left in an odd manner when they died, and now Darcy, the earl, and the earl’s sons have to...” He waved his hand in a gesture that told Elizabeth he did not understand the situation. He then started and turned to her.

“You met one of them, did you not? Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

Elizabeth nodded and ignored the way her mother was watching her, her eyes narrowed in contemplation or suspicion. Likely she was questioning why Elizabeth’s cheeks were red, but she could hardly help it with her emotions being tugged this way and that.

“I did. He visited his aunt, Lady Catherine, when I was staying with the Collinses last spring.”

“I saw him in town at the start of September, and he mentioned it.” Mr Bingley grinned at Jane, apparently intending to devote himself to her.

“A colonel? Maria mentioned him to me. Did you find him handsome? She did not. Did he wear his uniform?” Kitty asked, touching Elizabeth’s hand to get her attention.

“I would have thought we had quite enough of handsome officers in this family,” Mary, sitting beside Elizabeth, muttered.

“There is nothing I can tell you other than he was friendly.” Elizabeth pressed Mary’s hand. If she could, she would remove Mary from Longbourn and teach her not to be so angry.

I am sure Jane intends to take me with her and Mr Bingley once they are married, but I ought to insist she take Mary instead. I have no wish to remain at home, but Mary’s need for diversion is greater. Besides, I am safer from seeing Mr Darcy if I stay at Longbourn.

Darcy did not regret his brief absence from Netherfield. He felt the separation from Elizabeth terribly, even though he was only gone two nights. It was almost enough to

make him write to Bingley with some excuse for not returning, despite his promise to do just that. The more time he spent with her, the worse it would be when they were parted for good. He was too honourable to lie to Bingley, especially after having done so in the past, and so, the afternoon of Mrs Goulding's dinner party, he was once again in Hertfordshire. Bingley welcomed him warmly and provided a detailed recitation of what he had done during Darcy's absence. He would have preferred silence to prepare himself for seeing Elizabeth.

Should I attempt to sit beside her at dinner? It was not unpleasant when we did so at Longbourn, and perhaps we would have another easy exchange. If nothing else, I shall have it as a pleasant memory. What might I say to encourage her to talk to me? Please, Lord, let me do more than make another insipid remark about the weather!

What he would also like to avoid was talking to Mrs Bennet, her sister, or friend more than was absolutely necessary. Their attempts to inform him of Elizabeth's excellence were trying.

The Bennets were already present when he and Bingley reached Haye-Park, and as he was greeting the Gouldings, his and Elizabeth's eyes met across the room. Darcy could not make out anything particular in her expression. There was no smile to encourage him to immediately go to her, but there was also no scowl to warn him to stay away.

Mrs Goulding's chattering demanded his attention. "I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you are here, Mr Darcy. We heard from Mr Bingley that you had to go to town, and I was ever so worried it would mean you would miss tonight. Despite his assurances you would not, I was prepared to cancel the whole thing until we knew you would be in the neighbourhood again."

"That is very kind of you," he said, though he doubted she heard him, because she continued to speak.

“We are all so pleased about Jane and Mr Bingley’s betrothal. You will find us in quite the celebratory mood, and who knows? Perhaps we shall have more good news soon. One engagement often leads to another! I would love to see another of the Miss Bennets snatched up by a handsome young gentleman. I have known the girls since they were born, of course, having lived nearby all my life. Mrs Bennet is fortunate with her daughters, is she not? My own children are everything they should be. I am not one to brag about them, but I have no such concerns about singing the praises of another woman’s children. Lizzy, for example. Who could fail to recognise her many fine qualities?”

To Darcy’s relief, Mrs Goulding’s speech was interrupted by a servant announcing that dinner was ready. Anxiety briefly left Darcy feeling dizzy; he had wanted to talk to Elizabeth, to ascertain if she would welcome his company at the table. But he ought to have trusted in whatever scheming Mrs Goulding and her friends were engaged in. Somehow, she had arranged it so that he escorted Elizabeth to the dining room. Mrs Philips led Elizabeth towards them while speaking animatedly, only to abruptly stop once they reached him.

“Well, never you mind, Lizzy. I can tell you another time. Look, here is Mr Darcy. How do you do, sir? You will be so good as to take my niece from me, will you not?” Without waiting for an answer, she linked her arm with Mrs Goulding and passed into the corridor.

Eleven

They were more than halfway through dinner before Darcy could speak to Elizabeth. He was unsure if she was ignoring him, if she was content to allow others to demand his attention, or both. Having decided she would not readily talk to him, he was startled when she did.

“I hope your business in town was successfully concluded.”

“It was, and I am glad to have it over with. It has been ongoing for some time.” He ought to say something more, but the way the candlelight was making her radiate beauty and vitality made him forget how to speak. Her gown was a shade of light lilac, and he almost believed he could smell the flower too, as though she was blossoming. Once again, he longed to pull her into his arms and kiss her. Feeling like he was gazing at her like the love-struck fool he was, Darcy struggled to make his smile merely friendly and polite, which would match her demeanour.

“Did you see Miss Darcy? Is she in town or...”

“Georgiana remains in the country. We have an uncle on my father’s side, and he and his wife are at Pemberley with her.”

“I am sure that is very pleasant for her.”

“I would like to have her closer to me, but given the difference in our ages, it is not always possible.” If only you would marry me, that would change—one of the many wonderful differences our union would bring to my life. As much as I love

Georgiana, I believe it would be the least amongst them, but then, I am a selfish being and think chiefly of how I would benefit.

Neither of them spoke. After a brief interval, she turned her attention to the meal. Darcy took a surreptitious deep breath and shook off enough of her enchantment to act like a rational adult. He was not the most brilliant conversationalist, but perhaps, possibly, if they spoke more, it would open a door through which they could pass and find their future happiness. Even if there was only a slight chance, he had to take it.

“I saw Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst.”

Elizabeth fixed him with a quizzical expression.

“We met by chance. In the park. Yesterday. I was riding with my cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and his elder brother, the viscount. I wish the ladies could be happier for their brother. They are fortunate to be gaining Miss Bennet as a sister.”

“I must naturally agree.”

“I am very happy for them. I hope their joy erases the months of separation they endured,” he stated with emphasis, wanting to acknowledge his past errors and make it clear that he fully supported Bingley’s choice of wife.

Her features softened. “I am certain it will. They are both so agreeable and always see the best in everyone and everything. Jane will convince herself their relationship has unfolded just as it was meant to and their life together will be all the sweeter for...the bumpy road they have travelled.”

Their eyes remained locked on each other, and Darcy’s heart began to race. They might be speaking of their own situation; they had certainly been on an uneven path, more so than Miss Bennet and Bingley. Did Elizabeth feel as he did, that if only they



could find a way to breach the most recent barrier between them—that of her youngest sister’s marriage—they could find such exquisite joy as husband and wife?

Darcy was thankful that Mr and Mrs Gardiner had kept his role in the Wickhams’ marriage secret, as he had asked. Elizabeth would have mentioned it if she had learnt of his actions. If his greatest dream came true and they married, then he would tell her. At times, he wondered if it would help if she knew. It would demonstrate the lengths he would go to correct the consequences of his past actions. Would it make her think better of him and, yet again, forgive him? Or was the greater danger in her knowing and feeling a sense of obligation to him?

For the remainder of the evening, he and Elizabeth had little occasion to speak privately. He caught her looking at him several times, and there was something in her expression that made him think she regretted it, almost as though she had something she wanted to ask or say to him. Seeing it made his mouth grow dry, and he felt an odd tremor of mixed anticipation and dread. For the first time, he wondered if the impetus behind Mrs Bennet’s scheme was because she suspected her daughter liked him. It had made more sense to believe the matron recognised his feelings for Elizabeth, but Mrs Bennet was her mother and might understand her sentiments far better than he could.

He refused to believe it without further proof. The best course of action would be to observe her—no, better than that, talk to her, which is what I had hoped to do this evening, to little effect!

As had happened at Mrs Philips’s card party, he garnered more attention than he wanted from that lady, Mrs Bennet, and Mrs Goulding. As individuals, in pairs, and once as a trio, they sought him out with the apparent purpose of praising Elizabeth.

“My niece is lovely, is she not? She is second in beauty only to Jane,” Mrs Philips said.

“All the Miss Bennets are pretty.” Darcy did not know what else to say, but it evidently satisfied her, and Mrs Philips soon took herself off.

When he saw Mrs Bennet and Mrs Goulding walking in his direction a short time later, he imagined jumping out of a window to avoid them.

“I have always thought how much Lizzy would like to explore other counties. Even as a small child, keeping her active mind busy was such a challenge, and seeing more of the world would be a great benefit to her,” Mrs Bennet said.

“Oh yes, and when she is mistress of her own establishment, what a good job she will do!” Mrs Goulding said.

“To say nothing of when she is a mother,” Mrs Bennet interjected.

The ladies giggled, actually giggled.

“I always regretted that my son is too young for her. He is at school, you know, Mr Darcy, and is still a year away from entering university,” Mrs Goulding explained.

“I am sorry not to have met him yet,” Darcy replied when it became clear they expected him to say something.

The two women regarded each other, some silent communication passing between them, and they went to join Mrs Philips across the room. Darcy watched as they spoke in what appeared to be an urgent manner, one or another glancing his way, and Mrs Philips pointing at Elizabeth. If only he could be open and say that they did not need to tell him about Elizabeth’s excellent qualities. He was familiar with them all and would do anything to win her regard. All he wanted was a sign that she was willing to hear him speak of love and marriage, despite having once rejected him.

Elizabeth sat at the window of her bedchamber, staring into the night. The moon was bright, but she could still see countless twinkling stars. Despite her best efforts, she had been unable to ease her agitation enough to sleep since their return from Haye-Park. Her thoughts were too full of Mr Darcy. Every adjective she could bring to mind failed to adequately describe how much she admired him. She knew her love for him would overwhelm her if she let down her guard.

It had been wonderful to see him again. Her relief when he had entered the Gouldings' drawing room had been so profound that she had felt lightheaded; she had not previously realised how afraid she was that he would not return, despite his assurances to Mr Bingley. She ought to do more to control such feelings but was not strong enough to overcome them.

I am glad we spoke about Jane and Mr Bingley, she mused. It seemed like an acknowledgment that they had once argued about the couple and that the matter was finally settled and behind them. At present, Elizabeth was debating whether she was brave enough to broach the subject of Lydia and that man ? She would rather not, but she felt it looming over her, threatening her peace of mind.

I know it will be unpleasant for both of us and may make no material difference, but it seems important that we speak of it. Yet, I am afraid of hearing him say he could never marry a lady who had that man as a brother. He might as well thrust a dagger through my heart.

Still, she could not deny the compulsion that made her long to tell him that she was glad the couple had married, and she hoped never to see them again. She might thank him for keeping the truth about Lydia's elopement to himself. Did she not always say that her courage rose in the face of any attempt to intimidate her? Vowing she would remember her inner strength, Elizabeth resolved to talk to Mr Darcy as soon as possible. With that, she crawled into her warm bed and willed sleep to take her.

### Twelve

On the chance that she would encounter Mr Darcy, Elizabeth set out for a walk early the next morning. There was no sign of him, however, only birds and other wild creatures who inhabited the fields. Another day, she would have delighted in the blue sky and the beginnings of autumn colours on the trees, but it was impossible currently. Disappointed, she returned to Longbourn and joined her family at the breakfast table.

To her surprise, contrary to his recent habit, Mr Bingley was not there. Elizabeth said as much to Jane.

“Are you not missing him dreadfully? Whatever can he mean to be ignoring you thus? Pray tell me it is not because he finds Mr Darcy’s company preferable to your own. I thought better of him.”

Behind her teasing, Elizabeth’s true purpose was to discover when they would see the gentlemen so that she could talk to Mr Darcy. With Mrs Bennet already attempting to matchmake, Elizabeth could not ask directly; her mother would drag her to Meryton to order wedding clothes.

“Mr Bingley is engaged today. Did you not know? An old connexion of his father’s now lives in Hertford with one of his children. Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy visited him and will remain until Monday.”

Elizabeth did her best to hide her disappointment. It would be at least two days before she might see him again! Her appetite fled, and her courage—which she had done so

much to bolster the previous night—went with it.

Later that morning, Mrs Philips and Mrs Goulding came to call. Elizabeth and Jane sat with the ladies and Mrs Bennet in the small parlour. Mary had gone to help the vicar's wife, while Kitty amused herself elsewhere.

Elizabeth soon wished she had had an excuse to join Kitty, even if she was occupied with something inane, such as reorganising her closet. The three older ladies insisted on repeating to Elizabeth everything they had previously said about marriage, all with the evident purpose of convincing her she should secure Mr Darcy as quickly as possible. She was assured she would be envious of Jane once she was a married lady; it was only natural that she, too, would want her own home and that she would be unhappy if she remained single.

“Mr Darcy is quite the fine gentleman. The lady who captures him will be very fortunate, indeed!” Mrs Bennet said.

She accompanied her words with a wink, and the three matrons exchanged a look, Mrs Goulding pressing her lips together as though to prevent a giggle. Any subtlety they had previous employed was gone. Elizabeth supposed they felt their matchmaking was taking too long. Of course, they did not understand the situation fully.

“One of my chief pleasures in life has been that my dear friends and I married gentlemen who are friends. Despite growing up and becoming wives and mothers, we retained a strong connexion because our husbands know each other.” Mrs Goulding smiled at Mrs Bennet and Mrs Philips, sitting together on a sofa.

“Very true. When two ladies are intimate friends or sisters, I highly recommend their husbands be brothers, cousins or close friends. Even should their husbands have estates some distance apart, they will have added reasons to spend as much time

together as possible,” Mrs Philips said.

Mrs Bennet bobbed her head in agreement—or perhaps approval—at this attempt to hint to Elizabeth which gentleman she should select as her bridegroom. “Women must always find the company of ladies we know and love such a comfort. I do not know how I would have made it thus far without my nerves failing me completely if I did not have you two.”

Elizabeth dared not look at Jane. She could feel her sister’s puzzled expression, and if she actually saw it, she would be unable to keep her composure.

“Jane and I shall leave you to enjoy your visit,” Elizabeth said. She stood and glanced at Jane, who nodded and practically raced to the door, hardly remembering to say good day to their guests.

No sooner had they exited the house than Jane grasped Elizabeth’s arm to stop her from walking further into the gardens.

“What was that about, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth looked heavenward and shook her head before tugging Jane to where they were less likely to be overheard.

“Mama is attempting to make a match between Mr Darcy and me.”

Jane looked aghast. “But I told her not to bother you about him! Why would she want you to marry someone you do not like?”

Elizabeth made a noise halfway between a laugh and a snort. “When it comes to husbands for her daughters, I would not say our mother has the most discerning tastes. Do not forget she wanted me to marry Mr Collins, and she believes Wickham

is all that is charming. Fortunately, she is right to like Mr Bingley.”

“Lizzy!” Jane’s tone was exasperated.

Elizabeth led them towards the wood bench, grey with age, by a grouping of three ancient elms. Once they were seated, Elizabeth kept her gaze on the arrangement of bushes and flowers across from them.

“I do not know why my mother has decided he and I should marry. She did not like him last year, but then, few did, given his poor manners and the way he insulted me at the assembly. Now, I am sure you have seen how he has improved.”

“I have supposed it is because of what passed between you at Easter.”

“Mama might simply see a wealthy young gentleman and want to secure him for one of her daughters.”

“That is unfair. If Mama was only interested in his fortune, she would have attempted to encourage his interest last autumn.”

Elizabeth inclined her head in apology but did not know what to say. Jane was silent for a long while.

“Mr Bingley told me you saw a great deal of each other when you were in Derbyshire—as much as possible, given your short time there. I was surprised you never mentioned it,” Jane said.

Tears filled Elizabeth’s eyes, and Jane wrapped an arm about her shoulders. After a short interval, Elizabeth told her what happened in Lambton.

“Can you imagine, just as I was beginning to understand Mr Darcy and see my

feelings for what they truly were— are —we learnt of Lydia's disgrace? I do not know why he returned with Mr Bingley. I have told myself it is to show the world that he will acknowledge our family, despite the gossip about us, and to demonstrate his approval of his friend's engagement. What he said to me the first time we walked together, seemed to make it plain that he cannot overlook my connexion to Wickham. I do not blame him, if that is the case."

"Do you think my mother, aunt, and Mrs Goulding see that—I can hardly believe I am saying this— you are in love with Mr Darcy, and mean to encourage you?"

"I can conclude nothing else." Genuine laughter bubbled out of her. "I have seen all three of them speaking to him, and I pray they are not so clumsy as they are with me. They are hardly subtle, as you noticed."

Grasping Jane's hands in hers, Elizabeth gave her a stern look. "I do not want you to do anything about this. I am serious, Jane. I know your instincts will be to tell Mr Bingley, but that will serve no purpose. It will only cause awkwardness, perhaps even cost Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy their friendship. It is an impossible situation, and if—mind you, I said if —there is any hope that our situation can have a happy ending, he and I shall have to sort it out on our own."

"I want you to know the happiness I feel with Mr Bingley." Jane's expression was slack, and she blinked away tears.

"I shall be myself again, whatever happens with Mr Darcy."

The sisters embraced and a few minutes later, began to stroll quietly along the paths that wound through the gardens.

"There is an assembly on Thursday. Do you realise it is almost exactly a year ago that we met them?" Jane said as they approached the house.



“How could I forget that night?”

Perhaps something momentous would happen this year, just as it had the previous one.

### Thirteen

“They ought to be engaged by now! If only Mr Darcy had not gone away. Everything would be settled, I am certain of it. First his uncle insists he goes to town—I do not care that he is an earl, it was very inconsiderate of him—and then Mr Bingley drags him to Hertford. The dear boy did not understand what he was doing, so I can forgive him, but why was it necessary to go today? Why could it not have waited until after Lizzy and Mr Darcy reached an understanding?” Mrs Bennet’s heart fluttered, and she felt alternately hot and cold. While knowing she should calm herself, how could she when her daughter’s future was at stake? She had kept her feelings to herself until Jane and Elizabeth left the room, which was quite the feat.

Mrs Goulding offered her salts while Mrs Philips fixed her sister a fresh cup of tea.

“It is not so desperate a situation as you seem to think,” Mrs Philips said.

“They were much more comfortable together last night than I recall ever seeing them. When you first mentioned wanting them to marry, I could not see why, but now I do,” Mrs Goulding said.

“I watched them at dinner, and I also noticed that. Really, you must not let your nerves get the best of you.” Mrs Philips nodded vigorously, her cap shifting until it was crooked. She never had been able to affix it properly.

Mrs Bennet allowed them to fuss over her a while longer. She finished her tea with several large gulps and pointedly adjusted her cap and shawl, hoping her sister would understand the hint. She did not.

“If what you say is true, then our efforts have had an effect, and we must redouble them! I shall not have a peaceful moment until he has proposed. If she does not accept him after all of this, I wash my hands of her. It would be unconscionable of her, especially when anyone could see they suit each other perfectly,” Mrs Bennet said.

“Yes, indeed.” Again, Mrs Philips nodded and further dislodged her cap. Mrs Goulding poked the annoying thing into a better position, to Mrs Bennet’s relief.

“We must decide on our next course of action,” she said.

Mrs Goulding waved a hand as though asking for permission to speak. “There is an assembly on Thursday.”

“Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy will attend, will they not?” Mrs Philips asked.

“Of course they will! Mr Bingley will want to dance with Jane, and naturally, his friend will attend with him.” Mrs Bennet’s brow furrowed as memories from the previous year came to mind. Mr Darcy had insulted Elizabeth, claiming he did not wish to dance with her. She grinned as inspiration struck. “Mr Darcy will not only be at the assembly, he will dance with my Lizzy. I guarantee it. They will flirt a little, and the music and the movement will sweep them up in its romance. Mark my words, by the end of the night, they will be engaged. All that will be wanting is Mr Bennet’s approval—you know he will not escort us, no matter how much I tease him—and he will not dare to refuse a man such as Mr Darcy.”

“What will she wear? It is not every day a girl gets proposed to, and she must look her best.” Mrs Goulding slid forward in her seat, her eyes round with excitement.

“You must direct her, Sister. She is young and does not know how to capture a man’s attention. Even though Mr Darcy is in love with her, if she looks especially well?—”

“It will show him that she had made a special effort to please him!” Mrs Goulding said.

“Never you worry. I know how to handle my daughter. Come Thursday, Lizzy will be almost beautiful enough to rival Jane!”

Darcy could not decide whether he was pleased at having to go to Hertford. On the one hand, he wanted nothing more than to be near Elizabeth, but on the other, he sensed a final confrontation of some sort coming, and it frightened him. If he could assure himself it would end with him and Elizabeth being engaged, he would set up camp outside Longbourn. But if heartache was in his future, he wished to put it off as long as possible, and continue to live with the dream of having Elizabeth for his own.

He and Bingley called at Longbourn on Monday. Darcy saw Elizabeth, but they had no occasion to speak. On Tuesday, rain kept everyone at home; on Wednesday, when he and Bingley again went to see the Bennets, Elizabeth was not there. Fortunately, Mrs Bennet was also absent, and he was spared having to listen to her views on marriage and her second daughter.

It was only later that he realised Miss Bennet’s manner towards him had been altered. He could not quite grasp what had been different, but it had been as though she wanted to tell him something but could not bring herself to do it. Previously, she had been polite, even welcoming, but not particularly warm. He assumed that was because Elizabeth had confided in her sister about their tumultuous past.

On this occasion, he had been sitting with Miss Bennet and Bingley, when she turned slightly towards him, giving the impression that her words were especially meant for him.

“Mrs Stuart begged Lizzy to keep her company today, since Mr Stuart had to go see someone about a piece of business. I am afraid I have forgot the details, but he will be

gone all day. Since she has had a child recently, she must remain at home and feels the want of company sorely. I am sure Lizzy will regret having missed seeing you, but she could not deny our friend.”

“It is very good of her to give up her day,” Darcy had said.

“Lizzy is the most excellent sister and friend. She is always willing to lend a helping hand. I shall be sorry to lose her when she marries. I have considered being selfish and speaking against any man she might feel an attachment to, so that I might keep her with me always, but my greatest wish is that she will know the love and joy of being a worthy man’s wife and mother to their children.”

Darcy had not known how to respond and squirmed in his seat, and avoided acknowledging Bingley’s evident confusion.

At last, it was Thursday, and Darcy was certain to see Elizabeth. The moment they arrived in the assembly rooms, Bingley left to find Miss Bennet. Darcy intended to undertake his own search for a young lady, but before he could, he was seemingly surrounded by three middle-aged women.

“Mr Darcy, how wonderful to see you tonight,” Mrs Bennet said, Mrs Philips and Mrs Goulding echoing the sentiment.

“Thank you, ladies. I trust you are all well this evening.” He struggled to keep frustration from his voice.

“He does look handsome tonight, does he not? Lizzy will—” Mrs Philips whispered to Mrs Bennet, unfortunately not softly enough to avoid being overheard.

Mrs Bennet hushed her, and Mrs Goulding spoke louder than was strictly necessary, perhaps hoping it would make him forget Mrs Philips had spoken.

“Do you not find assemblies terribly exciting? My daughters—I have three, you recall, all married—spoke of nothing else for a week before and after we attended a ball. I always find it so charming to see young people dancing.”

“My nieces are exactly the same. So much to-do over what they will wear and, my goodness, how they do like to speculate on who will ask them for a set,” Mrs Philips said.

Mrs Bennet tapped his arm, and he looked into her upturned face. “When your own dear sister is out, you will see the truth in what they say. Why, even my Lizzy, who is usually the most sensible of girls, has talked of nothing other than what she would wear for days. She is not usually so anxious to make a good impression.”

“Lizzy is a remarkable girl. I pray all my sister’s daughters find husbands, of course, and I am very glad Jane and Mr Bingley will be married soon, but I have always hoped that Lizzy, who has a little something extra to her, as my brother Bennet always says, will gain the esteem and love of a gentleman who appreciates her.”

With that, Mrs Philips took Mrs Goulding’s hand and led her away, leaving Darcy alone with Mrs Bennet. Darcy wanted to roll his eyes or let out a loud, heavy sigh. He had heard one or other of the ladies express the same sentiments many times.

The music signalled it was time for the lines to form for the opening dance.

“Lizzy is standing up with John Lucas for the first set. He asked her days ago,” Mrs Bennet said.

Her tone suggested she no more liked that than he did.

“You will ask her to dance, will you not?”

Mrs Bennet's voice was firmer than Darcy was used to, and for the first time, he could imagine her as a woman capable of keeping her children in order when she chose to. He tried to stammer an answer but was too startled by this new view of her.

"She does so like to dance, and I would hate to think that she will not have enough partners. It is always sad when there are not enough gentlemen for all the ladies. That does happen at some assemblies, as perhaps you have observed?"

"Yes, madam." Shame burnt Darcy's cheeks. There was no mistaking it; she was alluding to his mortifying behaviour the previous year.

"Very good!" She smiled, tapped his arm with her fan, and walked off in the direction the other ladies had taken.

Darcy searched through the crowd until he spotted Elizabeth. He had always intended to ask her for a set but felt compelled to do it as soon as possible after what amounted to Mrs Bennet's demand. She stood across from John Lucas. Darcy approached and bowed, but before he could greet her, she spoke.

"Mr Darcy. I did not see you arrive."

Her eyes were bright and she smiled, although she looked more nervous than pleased to see him. Quite possibly, her mother was pushing her to secure him. Had Mrs Bennet made her daughter tell her everything about their relationship? If either Mr or Mrs Bennet knew that he had proposed and written her a letter, they could insist on them marrying. Darcy would hate for Elizabeth to feel compelled to accept him.

"How do you do, Mr Darcy?"

Startled, Darcy looked across at John Lucas; he had forgot the young man was there. He greeted him and then turned to Elizabeth again.

“Will you save a set for me? Whichever you have available.”

She nodded, and he thought he saw her swallow heavily. “Mr Bingley claimed the second. Will the third suit?”

“Thank you. Yes.”

No other words came to mind, and he withdrew, going to stand where he could observe her. The more he did, the greater his anxiety grew; beads of cold sweat slid down his spine. They had to talk of Mrs Bennet’s attempts to throw them together. That was what he had been sensing of late, what their confrontation would be about. He would ask what her parents knew of events in Kent and Derbyshire. Then, he would lay his heart bare and admit he loved her as much as ever and would gladly marry her, but if her only reason for accepting him were because her parents insisted on it, he would accept whatever punishment necessary to save her from that fate.



### Fourteen

The trepidation Elizabeth felt when Mr Darcy approached her at the start of the assembly had yet to fade by the time their dance began. He had sought her out almost as soon as he arrived, and she was not sure what to make of it. She was resolved to speak to him of Lydia and Wickham, feeling certain it was important for them to acknowledge the terrible morning in Lambton.

Standing across from him, she both wanted to blurt out her words—not that she knew exactly what to say—and keep them to herself forever. Her palms were clammy in her gloves, and it was all she could do to stay upright and follow the steps of the dance.

It would help if I felt easier in my appearance, she thought, gently rolling her neck from side to side. She had spent the day trying to avoid her mother, who persisted in forcing her finer accoutrements on Elizabeth.

“You are a very pretty girl, but I shall make you even lovelier. Certain gentlemen, one in particular, will be very glad, and you never know where that might lead!” Mrs Bennet had said, accompanying the words with a wink that almost made Elizabeth scream.

While she understood her mother’s impulses were for the good—assuming as she did that Mrs Bennet wanted to see her daughter happily settled and not just married to a rich man—the lack of subtlety in her actions was vexing. Elizabeth wished they had a different sort of relationship, one in which she felt comfortable confiding in her mother, or in which Mrs Bennet would ask her openly about her feelings for Mr

Darcy. Since they did not, Elizabeth was destined to remain irritated with her mother.

In the end, Elizabeth had agreed to add lace to the neck of her gown and wear a pair of earrings that she found too heavy and showy.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, she and Mr Darcy were silent as they moved through the patterns. As much as possible, she kept her eyes on him, not wanting even to blink and miss a second of seeing him. Her mouth grew increasingly dry as she talked herself into being bold.

If only the past could be set aside! If only we had not been so foolish last year—him so prideful, me so unwilling to reconsider my first impression of him. We might be standing here as an engaged or married couple, and I would not have to hide how desperately I love him.

Even as she opened her mouth to speak, she was not certain what words would come out.

“I was writing to my aunt Gardiner lately, and it brought to mind a memory from when we were in Derbyshire.” She laughed awkwardly. “I have this fantasy that she and my uncle will decide to return to Lambton. I know my aunt did not see all the old friends she wanted to, and there were one or two nearby sights she hoped to show us. In my imagination, they invite me to go with them.”

Again she laughed, although what she really wanted to do was pinch herself for making such a ridiculous speech. Praising Derbyshire to him? What would he think? She supposed her mind thought it was a good way to approach the topic of Lydia and Wickham, but in execution, it was badly done. The way Mr Darcy gaped at her was her proof. She could not look at him, and kept her eyes on his shoulder, so strong and solid looking, and dreamt of resting her head on it, his warmth enveloping her at the same time his arms did. The dance separated them, and it was only when they were

reunited that he spoke, stammering the first words.

“W-what...? Pardon me, but I am not sure I heard you correctly. You would wish to return to Derbyshire?”

He sounded surprised—stunned, really—and she met his eyes, swallowing heavily against the tightness in her throat. Her head swam. Something noteworthy was transpiring, but what?

“Of course. The ending might have been distressing, but before that, I...”

“You?”

“I believe the short period I spent there was the most illuminating, wonderful time of my life. That it ended so abruptly will always be one of the—” She stopped, afraid of going too far, of exposing herself fully to Mr Darcy. She had meant to end by thanking him for keeping the secret about Lydia’s elopement and for being kind to her that morning, but she had ended up almost confessing that she would always regret what had happened to them.

Mr Darcy continued to stare at her, even as the steps separated them, and no force on Earth could have torn Elizabeth’s eyes from him. Coming together again, he held out his hand, and without hesitation, she placed hers in it and willingly permitted him to pull her away.

Once in the corridor, Darcy stopped. Looking into her upturned face, he tried several times to speak but was unsuccessful. In the dim light, he saw that her cheeks were deep pink, and her expression was a mix of trepidation and—if he was correct—hope. His mouth was dry, and it made his voice raspy when he finally spoke.

“Please, finish what you were saying.”

She averted her gaze. “Mr Darcy?—”

“Please,” he begged.

“I...I will always look back on that time with a great deal of fondness and regret that it was interrupted, that Lydia’s actions meant I could not remain longer and...” Her voice trailed off, and she shrugged.

Was this different from what she had said in September, the words that had convinced him she would not forgive him for Wickham running off with her sister? Darcy wanted to tear his hair out, because he did not know. Then it occurred to him; there was an easy way to resolve his confusion.

“During the walk we took with Bingley and Miss Bennet, soon after he and I returned, you said you regretted that your distressing news represented an end .” Her eyes met his. “What exactly did you mean? What ended?”

“Our holiday, the time we had together.” She made a noise of frustration and seemed to brace herself before continuing. “I wanted to stay longer. Meeting you again was an opportunity to know you properly, to show you I understood how horribly I had misjudged you, and then Lydia eloped. That was bad enough, but that it was with that man! I do not blame you. It is only natural that you would not want to connect yourself to anyone named Bennet when we are forced to claim him as?—”

“ I blame myself,” he interjected. “I thought you did too, for not warning people about him. It does not matter to me that he is your brother-in-law. I wish I could have prevented their marriage, but it was unavoidable.” Miss Lydia, as she was then, had refused to leave Wickham.

“But you said—oh, I cannot recall your exact words, but I understood you meant that you had completely given up any thought that you and I might?—”

“Elizabeth, I assure you that for a man who knows what it is to truly, deeply love a lady, nothing— nothing —would prevent him from being with her. If it was what she wanted also.”

He leant forward, peering at her, desperate for a signal that he should go on. They stared at each other for as long as it took his heart to thud against his ribs a dozen times. Almost without volition, they reached for the other at the same time, his fingers touching hers halfway in the space between them. He grasped her hand.

“Dare I believe you feel as I do? My wishes— No, I ought to speak more plainly than that. I fear miscommunication has stolen precious time from us. I love you, Elizabeth Bennet, more even than I did last spring. By telling me the faults you saw in my character, you humbled me and showed me how to be a better man. That you did says a great deal about you, all of it admirable.”

She laughed and wiped at a tear that slowly ran down her cheek. “You call it admirable that I unjustly abused you?”

“That you defended your sister and family and explained how ungentlemanly my behaviour had become, yes. Then, when we met again in the summer, I saw at once that you believed what I wrote to you. Despite every reason you had to despise me, you were willing to meet again as friends. You are a remarkable woman, and I admire you, I respect you, esteem, adore?—”

Her laughter and a hand on his arm silenced him. “I believe you have a question to ask me, sir. I assure you, my response will be very different from what it was at Easter. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

It was difficult to speak through the broad grin which stretched his mouth to a greater extent than it had ever had cause to do before. His eyes filled with tears of joy, ones matching hers. “Will you be my wife? I will endeavour to be the husband you deserve

every day, every hour of our lives.”

“Yes, oh, yes, I will. You are the only man in the world I could possibly marry.”

Darcy was not so lost to reason as to forget they were in a public assembly room; it was only that which stopped him from doing as he wished and sweeping her into his arms and kissing her soundly. Instead, he drew both her hands to his mouth and pressed his lips to them over and over again.

“I do love you, very dearly. I knew it the morning I received Jane’s letters, and I have been telling myself for weeks that, at the exact moment I realised you were the only man I would ever want to marry, any possibility of our union vanished. I believe I always admired you for your intelligence, even when I assured myself my dislike was implacable. All I wanted was a better understanding of your true character. Once I had that, I was quite lost.”

Darcy rested his forehead against hers and took a deep breath. “I wish we could remain apart from everyone else forever, but someone is sure to miss you soon, if they have not already. We must return.”

“I know we should, but I do not want to.”

“May I speak to your father tomorrow?”

She nodded. After a long look into each other’s eyes, they returned to the ballroom.

The rest of the night was spent in each other’s company, his darling Elizabeth refusing the next request for a set. Miss Bennet saw them and briefly left her partner to come to them.

“You are not dancing, Lizzy. Is all well?” Her eyes flickered to him and back to her

sister in a manner that suggested she was asking another question.

“Everything is exactly as it should be. Perfectly perfect in all ways,” Elizabeth said.

Miss Bennet kissed Elizabeth’s cheek, smiled at him, and returned to the dance.

Later in the evening, Mrs Bennet and Mrs Goulding walked by. Mrs Goulding smiled, and Mrs Bennet looked smug, but neither said anything.

Elizabeth sighed. “I do not know if you have noticed anything odd about my mother’s behaviour of late.”

“And Mrs Goulding and Mrs Philips.”

She chuckled. “A trio of conspirators. My behaviour must have betrayed my feelings for you to her. Despite my lack of encouragement, she and the others have been attempting to convince me that I long to be married and that you would make a good husband.”

“And they informed me in many different ways that you were the very best of ladies and I could not do better than to make you my wife. I hardly needed them to tell me.”

“Nor did I need them to point out your excellence. I almost wished I could confide in my mother, but I believe if I had, she would only have adopted more drastic measures. I imagine her dragging me to Netherfield by my ear and giving you a stern lecture until you agreed that Lydia’s marriage was a ridiculous reason to keep us apart and refusing to leave until you had proposed.”

He laughed. “I am glad it did not come to that, though she would not have been wrong. For my part, I think it is nonsensical that your sister’s marriage should mean we suffer. Yet, I would never have blamed you if you felt it did.”

“Let us not talk about Lydia and her mistakes. I consider her choice of husband the most grievous one she has ever made. We cannot celebrate our understanding openly tonight, but nevertheless, we are only to think about that which makes us happy.”

“As you say, my love. As for your mother and her friends, let them believe our union was all their doing. I only care that we have found our way together. This time, nothing will come between us.”



Fifteen

Before breakfast the next morning, Elizabeth went to her mother's room to announce her engagement. She had avoided being alone with her the night before, not wanting anything her mother said to disrupt the joy she felt. Darcy intended to be at Longbourn early, along with Mr Bingley, and he would talk to her father as soon as possible. Elizabeth viewed it as a formality; he would not refuse his consent or blessing.

With Felly on her lap, the cat's purrs guarding Elizabeth against an excess of vexation, she said, "Mr Darcy asked me to marry him, and I accepted."

Mrs Bennet's exclamation almost woke the elderly feline, but Elizabeth had long ago determined she was accustomed to the loud noises her mother made and was immune from being startled by them.

Mrs Bennet slapped the arm of her chair, and with a self-satisfied grin, said, "I knew how it would be. I could see it at once. The very first day he and Mr Bingley called, I told myself I would soon see two girls married. You will share Jane's wedding day next month."

"Mama—"

"I have it all sorted out. Mr Darcy will have to obtain a licence, but I am sure he knows how to go about that."

"Mama," Elizabeth said again, this time at a slightly louder volume. "Even if we were

to marry the same day as Jane and Mr Bingley—and that is not a decision I can make on my own, the three of them must be consulted—there would be time for the banns to be read. It is almost six weeks away.”

“No, Lizzy, I have decided. You and he will marry by licence. Tomorrow, we shall go into Meryton and order your clothes. I have a list of what you need, and I have my eye on some fabrics that will suit you and your new station in life wonderfully. Ten thousand a year! The very mention of it gives me such shivers all over my body. I am certain he has many fine jewels to gift you, ones that have been in his family for generations, besides what he will purchase for you. I must just give him a hint that rubies and sapphires would be best with your colouring.”

“I pray you would not.” Felly nudged her hand, and Elizabeth began stroking her, wondering if the cat realised she needed to engage in a soothing activity. The commingling of embarrassment and irritation made Elizabeth want to leave the room before she began an argument with her mother.

It was unlikely Mrs Bennet heard her; she continued talking, enumerating the number of gowns Elizabeth would need. “I do not believe we shall find everything you need in Meryton. I shall write to my sister Gardiner today and ask that she send some silks and velvets. It might be better if we were to go to town ourselves.” Her tone became more speculative, and she looked beyond Elizabeth. “Jane’s wardrobe is not such an issue. To be sure, Mr Bingley is rich, but he does not have fine relations who will expect her to have gowns from the most celebrated dressmakers, no matter what impression those sisters of his wanted to give.” She huffed. “Not that they have bothered to even send a note of congratulations to my dear girl. I say Jane is too good for them, no matter what Lyd— Well, enough of that.”

Elizabeth gaped. Had her mother been on the point of saying something unkind about Lydia? Once it was announced Lydia and Wickham would marry, Mrs Bennet had been all smiles, acting as though she had forgot how disgracefully the couple had

acted. That her mother had criticised two fashionable ladies and her youngest daughter at once was shocking to say the least.

Mrs Bennet's gaze returned to Elizabeth. "We will make a decision about going to London today, and I shall write to your aunt, either to say we are coming or that she needs to send fabrics for you. Hmm... Perhaps Mr Darcy will want to take you to town to introduce you to his family and show you off as his betrothed. Mr Bingley and Jane will go as well, and if we remain no more than ten days or perhaps a fortnight, we can do all your shopping, attend an amusement or two, and return to Longbourn with more than enough time to finish preparing for the wedding. I have another list for it, arrangements and such. Where is it?" She stood and began shuffling through novels, magazines, and various pieces of paper.

"You are arranging Jane's wedding, Mama. Mr Darcy and I have not yet discussed it, but I think it would be best to leave any consideration of our wedding until after Mr Bingley and Jane's. I would not want to take any attention away from them."

Mrs Bennet scoffed and regarded her with a furrowed brow and puzzled expression. "Whatever are you talking about? I told you I knew how it would be. I have been planning for you to share the day from the very beginning. So much less fuss that way, which you know will please your father, and it means both of you girls will be settled before Christmas. With Mr Darcy living in the north, he will want to be at his estate before the weather becomes too much of an impediment to travel. By the by, one day, when I am not so distracted with everything that goes along with seeing two daughters married to such rich gentlemen, I expect you to tell me the truth about you and Mr Darcy. There is a great deal I do not know, and I am your mother. It is my right to know all your concerns."

Elizabeth bit her lips together to avoid laughing. Tell her about Darcy's disastrous proposal in Kent, their subsequent bitter exchange, and his letter? Never! It was also impossible to believe she would ever want to explain her slow realisation of her

fallibility when it came to determining someone's character. She stood and carefully placed the cat on the chair.

"We should go downstairs. The gentlemen will arrive from Netherfield soon, if they have not already, and it must be almost breakfast time."

"Oh, yes, yes, let us go down." Mrs Bennet immediately walked towards the door, talking and waving a sheet of paper as she did. "I must offer Mr Darcy my congratulations and tell him the dishes I selected for the wedding breakfast. He might have others he wishes to add. How many of his family do you think will come? His uncle is an earl! Can you imagine having an earl attend your wedding? Oh, my dear girl! I am more excited than I have ever been. Ten thousand a year! He must speak to your father at once, and then, after breakfast, I shall go tell my sister and Mrs Goulding of our success. They were such a help, you know?"

There was nothing Elizabeth felt capable of saying in response to any part of her mother's speech. Soon, Mrs Bennet would be calmer and even, if they were fortunate, slightly more rational. Then they could decide how to proceed with the wedding and everything necessary to prepare her to embark on her life as Mrs Darcy.

As for today, Elizabeth thought as she descended the stairs, I refuse to allow anything to vex me! I intend to do nothing more than rejoice in the love my darling Darcy and I are now free to share.

### Sixteen

To say Darcy was ecstatic would be to undervalue his joy. Immediately upon returning to Netherfield after the assembly, he shared his news with Bingley. Given how Miss Bennet had acted when she approached him and Elizabeth, he was not entirely surprised when Bingley expressed no shock, even though he would not have minded a little more enthusiasm.

“Jane will be pleased. She told me recently how much she hoped you and her sister would come to an understanding. When will you speak to Mr Bennet?” Bingley said before going on to describe his own interview with the gentleman without bothering to hear Darcy’s response.

Darcy was awake half the night writing letters to his sister, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and other family members to tell them of his engagement. He supposed he should wait until he had Mr Bennet’s approval, but he reasoned the letters would not be received until after it was done. It might be presumptuous to believe the man would give his consent, but Elizabeth assured him he would. Besides, she would be one and twenty soon and would marry him then, should her father decide to withhold his permission.

Shortly before breakfast, he and Bingley went to Longbourn, and he immediately sought out Mr Bennet in his book-room. Upon hearing that Darcy had proposed to his second daughter, the older gentleman regarded him with an arched brow for a long, awkward moment.

“Like that, is it? I should say I am surprised, but that would not be entirely correct. I have not noticed anything myself, but my good wife has been muttering about you

and Lizzy since you came back to the neighbourhood.” He laughed. “If anything, I am more shocked that she was right than that you recognise my Lizzy’s excellence. Well, I suppose if she wants to be your wife, there is nothing I can do to stop her.”

It fell to Mrs Bennet to greet the news with enthusiasm, and she did not disappoint. She insisted on kissing his cheek “to welcome you to the family” and leapt into a discussion of the wedding before anyone had a chance to tell Miss Mary and Miss Catherine about the engagement. Miss Catherine said all that was proper; Miss Mary did too, although she spoke with more hesitation in her tone and seemed to spend the rest of the morning observing him with an air of suspicion. Another time, he would ask his darling Elizabeth about it, but for today, he gave himself permission to simply be happy.

Amongst the many ideas and decisions she had already made about the wedding day—including that it would be on the nineteenth of November and coincide with Miss Bennet and Bingley’s—his soon-to-be mother-in-law insisted he obtain a licence. Darcy heard a soft noise of disgust from across the table, and turned to look at Miss Mary when she spoke.

“There is no need for that. There are enough Sundays before then for the banns to be read.” She tore a muffin into ever smaller pieces.

Elizabeth laughed. “So I told her, Mary, but?—”

“It is enough to ask the vicar to announce them for Jane,” Mrs Bennet said.

Although he was confident Mr Carson could manage both, Darcy settled the debate. “I have no objection to marrying with a licence, as long as Miss Elizabeth agrees. Miss Bennet and Bingley might prefer not to share their day with us, however. I would not want?—”

“Think nothing of it, Darcy!” Bingley interjected. “I think it is a capital notion. Do you not agree, my dear?” The last was said to Miss Bennet.

“It would only add greater felicity to the morning.”

Elizabeth indicated she would not argue against the scheme, and the matter was settled.

Over the next few days, more decisions were made, including that he and Elizabeth would go to town for the better part of a fortnight. Miss Bennet and Bingley rejected the notion of going with them, preferring to remain in the country, and Mrs Bennet insisted she had too much to do to accompany them, sending Miss Catherine in her stead.

“It might do her good to leave home now and again,” the matron said.

She would not explain herself when asked why. As Miss Catherine was pleased with the treat of a trip to town, no one enquired further.

Darcy was glad for the excuse to be away from Meryton. There were a number of tasks he could best attend to in town, including meeting his solicitor regarding the marriage contract and changing his will, and it was difficult not to find some of the company fatiguing. Most notably, this included Mrs Bennet, Mrs Philips, and Mrs Goulding, who were effusive with their congratulations and went about with an obvious air of satisfaction at their part in the engagement. Another source of ennui was Mr Bennet and his sardonic wit and endless supply of jokes about young lovers and the many ways they would disappoint each other beginning a mere year after they united their lives with promises of living together in harmony.

His favourite moments were those he and Elizabeth spent alone, and he defied anyone to see fault in that. They went for as many walks as Mrs Bennet and the weather

permitted. While she insisted they have a chaperon, it was usually either Miss Bennet and Bingley or one of the other Miss Bennets, and they left him and Elizabeth to themselves.

On one such occasion, shortly before they were to leave for London, Darcy proposed a plan for the coming months. Elizabeth's hand was clasped in his, and Miss Mary walked about thirty feet behind them.

"I thought we might spend a week in town before going to Derbyshire. It would give us time together before undertaking the long journey. Georgiana remains at Pemberley, and my aunt, Lady Romsley, proposed visiting us at Christmas or Twelfth Night, if you do not object. The earl's estate is less than sixty miles away, and as long as the weather permits, it would be an excellent occasion for you to know them."

Elizabeth squeezed his hand and gave him such a look of contentment and—there was no mistaking it—love, that his heart swelled.

"It sounds wonderful. I long to see Miss Darcy again. Georgiana, I should say." She laughed fondly.

Georgiana had sent Elizabeth a lengthy letter in which she wrote of their marriage answering a prayer she had made after they met that summer.

Elizabeth glanced over her shoulder at her sister, then, in a tone unlikely to be overheard by her, said, "What do you think of having Mary stay with us in the spring? I am worried for her."

"Oh?" Darcy stopped himself from looking at the subject of their discussion.

"Mary took Lydia's...well, she took it very hard. It can be difficult to tell with her, but when she is particularly disappointed or angry, she becomes increasingly silent.



She kept her jaw clenched so tightly when Lydia and that man were here, I was afraid she would do herself permanent injury. She is not best pleased with Mr Bingley either.”

“Why not?” This time, his eyes strayed enough towards the rear to catch a glimpse of the young woman.

Elizabeth looked apologetic. “Because of the way he left last year and how despondent Jane was afterwards.”

“Since she is polite to me, I take it she does not know about my own misdeeds?”

“Not even Jane knows everything that happened between us, and if you would please stop mentioning any errors you made in the past, I would soon forget them and my own.”

Darcy lifted her hand to his lips for a kiss. “Miss Mary is a loyal sister. I admire her for it. I would never tell you not to invite one of your family to stay with us.”

“Except for the two we shall avoid talking about as much as possible.”

He made a noise of agreement, but said, “Him I could never admit to my company. As for your youngest sister, I do not think it is impossible, though I would not ask Georgiana to see her.”

“I would never expect it of her. You are very good to be willing to entertain the notion, but I am not certain I will ever wish to have Lydia stay with us.”

In a few minutes, they came to a fork in the path, and Elizabeth paused to speak to her sister.

“Mr Darcy has never seen the stream down here, and you know how much I love the willows. We shall run ahead and take a look and meet you back on the path.”

Without awaiting a response, she pulled him in the direction she had indicated. Darcy readily followed. It soon became clear that she had other motives than showing him a picturesque view.

When they were out of sight, she turned to him with a coquettish smile. “I have secured us several minutes of privacy, Mr Darcy. What do you suppose we should do with them?”

He grinned, but only until his lips reached hers.

### Seventeen

Elizabeth, Darcy, and Kitty went to town as arranged. Her sister was overly excited, in Elizabeth's opinion, but she began to see what her mother meant about Kitty being away from Longbourn. Seeing how other people lived and behaved and understanding there was a much larger world beyond their small Hertfordshire neighbourhood would be to her benefit. Kitty's undisciplined manner was not tolerated or considered charming by her aunt and uncle Gardiner, and even after a few days, Elizabeth saw improvements in her sister. It made her more determined to see that Mary and Kitty spent time with her or Jane once they were settled in their new homes. Darcy was amenable; when Elizabeth shared her thoughts with him, he admitted to noticing that Kitty was 'calmer' and keenly interested in every opportunity to see something new.

What surprised Elizabeth the most about their brief sojourn to London was how well Darcy and the Gardiners got along. She noticed it when Darcy escorted her and Kitty to Gracechurch Street the day they arrived. The couple and Darcy greeted each other warmly, and her aunt and uncle appeared almost as pleased to see him as they were to welcome their nieces. Elizabeth was grateful for their generosity, but as the encounters increased and it became evident they were more comfortable together than their too-short time in Derbyshire warranted, she asked first her aunt and uncle and then Darcy about it. They told her an extraordinary story about Darcy following them south in August, searching for Lydia, and arranging her marriage when it was plain no other alternative would do.

To say Elizabeth was shocked was not going far enough. She stared at them, speechless, for what felt like a quarter of an hour. Her love for Darcy at that moment

brought tears to her eyes; he truly was the best man in the world, and she could not account for her good fortune to have won his devotion.

The Gardiners permitted them short visits in the parlour without a chaperon, as long as the door remained open, and when they were alone, she asked him why he had not previously told her.

He shrugged, and his cheeks took on a dusting of colour. “I was embarrassed and angry at myself for not doing more to prevent Wickham from harming other ladies and their families. I did what I knew was right in going after your sister. I only wish I could have convinced her to leave him, to allow your father and uncle to make other arrangements for her, such as marriage to a better man. I would have helped, if they had permitted it. But she would not be persuaded to abandon him. At first, I did not want you to know, afraid you would feel obligated to me. Perhaps that is doing you an injustice. If it is, I apologise. Later, since we came to an understanding, my mind has been engaged with happier thoughts, and when it occurred to me, I was not sure how to broach the topic.”

Elizabeth kissed him. She had quickly become accustomed to doing so and had learnt the many messages a kiss between lovers could represent. In this instance, it was understanding and acceptance of his explanation. As her surprise wore off, she realised what he had done was exactly like him; it was an excellent representation of his character.

Kissing was also a great deal of fun, and she was happy to take every opportunity to indulge in the activity. Those moments when their passion grew, and the air about them seemed to heat and thicken, she understood the danger and promise of a connexion such as theirs. Once they were married, the former would recede, and they would be free to explore all the joy of being young, in love, and fortunate enough not to have worries about their well-being.

After a long, slow kiss, Elizabeth whispered, “It is rare that I cannot find the words to say what I mean, but to describe all that you mean to me, is difficult. You are a wonderful, caring, kind man, and I will forever be grateful for the gift you have given me in offering to share your life with me. I promise to strive to deserve it.”

“I am the fortunate one, my darling, loveliest Elizabeth. We shall have an extraordinary life together. That is a promise I will never cease attempting to fulfil.” He ran his fingers across her cheek.

During the ten days they remained in town, Elizabeth met a few members of Darcy’s family and several of his friends. She, Kitty, and Mrs Gardiner went shopping, and—displaying one of the improvements Elizabeth witnessed in her—Kitty refrained from whining about not getting new things for herself. Instead, she enthusiastically assisted Elizabeth in selecting her wedding clothes. Kitty remarked that it would be her getting married one day; until then, she would celebrate her sisters’ good fortune and anticipate being an aunt. She did not speak of Lydia, unless it was to disparage the way she had found a husband.

By far, Elizabeth’s favourite parts of the trip were those occasions she could be with her beloved. They walked in the park, went to a concert and a museum, talked about their future, learnt more about each other’s pasts, and dreamt about their children. Every possible moment they could, they found ways to express their love and dedication.

Returning to Longbourn, they knew they would have to dive into preparations for the wedding and Elizabeth’s removal to Derbyshire. Darcy and Mr Bingley dined at Longbourn the first evening, and Elizabeth looked about the table, experiencing a pleasant, quiet sort of contentment. Some members of her family would likely always drive her to distraction—such as her mother—but since they all shared a genuine love for each other, it hardly mattered. Kitty spoke at length about her adventure in London, and insisted Mary must go too.

“Lizzy has spoken to me about making a visit to her and Mr Darcy next spring,” Mary admitted.

“You have?” Mrs Bennet said.

Elizabeth nodded, saying to Kitty, “I hope you understand. You will have your turn.”

“Mary is older, and I have just been to London. Besides, there is always Jane. She might like to have me or Mary with her this winter,” Kitty said.

“Of course I will,” Jane said in her usual sedate tone.

“We shall always be happy to have one or both of you! Any of you!” Mr Bingley, a wide smile on his countenance, looked at each person about the table.

“Unless you build a library to rival what Mr Darcy tells me he has at Pemberley, I am afraid you will have to do without my company.” Mr Bennet spoke as though serious, but he was not. He winked at Elizabeth, who promptly rolled her eyes.

They spoke briefly about Mary, who had decided to embrace the opportunity to take a holiday from her usual life and accept Elizabeth’s offer. After that, in a voice loud enough to ensure everyone was listening to him, Mr Bennet addressed Darcy.

“I wonder, have you heard from Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the esteemed patroness of my delightfully ridiculous cousin and heir?”

“I have.” With him sitting beside her, Elizabeth felt Darcy stiffen. Lady Catherine had taken the news of their engagement poorly. She had written him a letter containing so much abuse that he burnt it at once and severed the connexion.

“Would I be mistaken in saying she is not pleased with your choice of Lizzy?”

Darcy cleared his throat before admitting, “I regret to say she is not. I expected nothing different, and I assure you, I will not allow my aunt or anyone else to insult Miss Elizabeth.”

Mr Bennet waved this away. “Of course you will not.”

Mrs Bennet spoke at the same time he did. “How could you know that? And what are her objections to my girl? Lizzy is good enough for anyone?—”

“Yes, my dear, on that, we agree. Unfortunately, the world is full of people whose views are not as liberal as ours. As to how I know”—Mr Bennet pulled a sheet of paper out of his jacket pocket and held it aloft in triumph—“I have had a letter from Collins.”

It transpired that her father had written to Mr Collins to tell him about his daughters’ engagements. “I suspected it might cause a bit of mischief, but he would learn our happy news through one means or another, and I did want to assure him my girls, especially you, Lizzy, would be happily situated before long. I cannot forget that he said you were unlikely to receive another offer of marriage.”

“Mr Collins proposed to you?” Darcy said to Elizabeth, his lip curling in disgust.

Elizabeth laughed, and she, Kitty, and her mother recounted that tumultuous morning. No one mentioned that Mrs Bennet had threatened never to speak to Elizabeth again if she did not marry the man, something the lady herself had apparently—and conveniently—forgot.

As they walked to the drawing room afterwards, Darcy whispered to Elizabeth, “I cannot imagine you married to such a man. The thought of it makes me ill.”

“I would never have accepted him, and Papa would not have asked it of me or any of

my sisters, even though it would have provided security for my mother. I am grateful for that.”

Once they were all comfortably seated, Kitty asked her father to tell them about Mr Collins’s letter.

“I shall spare you his exact words—his letters are truly tedious—but the long and the short of it is that he is full of indignation, his patroness is furious, Lizzy has tricked Mr Darcy into proposing, I must not allow it, and, to my shock and horror, apparently Mr Darcy is engaged to Miss de Bourgh.”

Darcy’s expression hardened, though Elizabeth did not believe her father was the subject of his anger. “I am not, nor have I ever been engaged to my cousin.”

“Of course you have not! What nonsense! Anyone who sees you together can tell in an instant that you and Lizzy are formed for each other. That woman! That man! You hear me, Mr Bennet, your heir or not, Mr Collins will never be a guest in this house again as long as I am mistress of it. To speak so of my daughter? Ha!” Mrs Bennet averted her chin, lifting it high as though Mr Collins was there to see her snub.

Elizabeth pinched her leg to stop herself from laughing out loud. Several others regarded her mother with expressions of shock.

“I promise you, my dear, I shall not ask it of you. Our daughters are fortunate to have a mother who will guard them against such insults.” Mr Bennet spoke more kindly than he usually did.

Her mother sniffed but remained silent.

“I heartily agree, Mrs Bennet. I have never seen Darcy so pleased with himself as he was when he told me Miss Elizabeth had agreed to marry him, and watching them



together since, I am convinced that, next to me and my dear Jane, they are the most suited couple in the kingdom and will be extremely happy together,” Mr Bingley said.

Saying good night an hour or so later, Elizabeth and Darcy stood just outside the entrance. The evening was chilly, but she did not mind, because it meant they could be alone for several minutes.

“In seventeen days, we shall be married. I cannot wait to be your wife. I promise never to give you cause to regret your choice.” She laughed. “Well, not frequently.”

“I will never doubt that I made the best possible decision. The nineteenth of November cannot come soon enough.” He kissed her.

### Eighteen

Two months to the day after Mr Bingley and Mr Darcy appeared at her door again, Mrs Bennet was proud to witness them marrying her two most deserving daughters. The wedding was the most wonderful that had ever taken place in Meryton. The girls were beautiful, the gentlemen handsome, the breakfast superb, and Longbourn was displayed in such a way that reminded the many guests that it was the second most prominent home in the neighbourhood, next to Netherfield Park, of which her daughter was mistress.

Even Mr Bennet congratulated her, saying, “You outdid yourself. This is a day Jane and Lizzy will remember with pleasure for the rest of their lives.”

With that, he did a most unexpected thing; he kissed her cheek. She looked about to see if anyone had witnessed the gesture, which had become very— very—uncommon. She was not certain whether she was glad or upset that no one had. Another person could assure her she was not day-dreaming and would surely spread the news that he still held some affection for her, but, on the whole, it was better not to be seen.

Since they were travelling to London, Mr and Mrs Darcy—she delighted in calling Elizabeth by her new name—left before Jane and her husband or many of the guests. Everyone crowded by the front door to say a final goodbye before quickly returning to the drawing room to escape the damp autumn weather. Mrs Bennet stood with her sister to one side and Mrs Goulding to the other.

“You said they belonged together, and you made them see it. I congratulate you,”

Mrs Philips said.

A light blush added colour to Mrs Bennet's cheeks. "I could not have done it without you two. I cannot thank you enough."

"But you were the one who knew our efforts were necessary," Mrs Goulding insisted. "I remember when Lizzy—Mrs Darcy, I should say—was just a wee babe. Now she is the mistress of a fine estate the likes of which none of us have ever seen. When will you go?"

She shrugged, her thoughts on her daughter, not when she would be asked to endure the arduous carriage ride to Derbyshire. She would do it once at least, to see Mr Darcy's estate, but she expected Mr Bennet would rouse himself to go more often, to see both Elizabeth and Mr Darcy's library.

They will be very happy, Mrs Bennet mused as she continued to watch the Darcys. Jane and Mr Bingley were too affable not to have a comfortable sort of marriage, but she foresaw great things for her second eldest child. What a grand lady she would be! Knowing Elizabeth, she would use her new position in life to do good for Mr Darcy's dependents and those in her neighbourhood. Mr Darcy had hidden passion she was not certain he had yet acknowledged, but it would help sustain their mutual love for the long years of their lives.

Even when the ladies returned to the drawing room and the front door was closed, Mrs Bennet continued her observations through a window, unseen by the newly married couple. They stood, hands clasped, gazing into each other's eyes and exchanging a few words. There was such a look of profound joy on Elizabeth's face; it made her truly beautiful and caused Mrs Bennet's heart to swell with pride. Mr Darcy leant forwards and kissed his wife tenderly before they stepped into the waiting coach which would carry them into their happily ever after.