



# My Dear Friend (Love in London with Mr Darcy #2)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** They never get along whenever they unfortunately cross paths. But when a matchmaking service anonymously links them up, will they pen a romance?

Elizabeth Bennet is an excellent judge of character. Eager to prove to her brokenhearted sister that worthy men do exist, the spirited and witty young woman subscribes to the new matchmaking service taking London by storm. And she's pleasantly surprised when the female-empowering agency anonymously connects her with a fascinating correspondent.

Fitzwilliam Darcy is determined to move on from unwanted feelings for the alluring but inappropriate Bennet girl. He hopes his captivating prose partner from the matchmaking service might be the distraction he needs. But when he inadvertently reveals his inner thoughts, he can't keep the letter-exchanging relationship from becoming something more.

As Elizabeth starts to fall for the mysterious man, her dislike for Mr. Darcy only grows whenever they meet in person. While the man in question still admires Elizabeth, he realizes in alarm that he may have also given his heart to his anonymous correspondent...

Have their letters opened an unexpected path to happily ever after?

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

Elizabeth Bennet looked up from reading on her bed in her uncle Gardiner's London home when Jane entered, and she knew instantly Miss Bingley's visit had not gone well. Jane's face was awash in disappointment. Elizabeth had hidden herself away when that lady had finally returned Jane's call, but now Elizabeth wished she had stayed in the room to support her sister.

"Was Miss Bingley not in better spirits than when you called on her four weeks ago?" she asked.

When Jane had called in Grosvenor Street, she was hurried from the house, but not before Miss Bingley told Jane that Bingley was so much engaged with Mr Darcy that she scarcely saw her brother. That Miss Bingley had not deigned to return Jane's call until a month had passed told Elizabeth all she needed to know about that lady's character and her true feelings for Jane.

"It was humiliating, Lizzy," Jane said, covering her face with her hands. "I have been entirely deceived in Miss Bingley's regard for me."

Elizabeth put an arm around her. "I am sorry for the pain she caused you. She was very wrong in singling you out as she did and then treating you poorly."

"It was evident that she had no pleasure in seeing me. And she said not a word of wishing to see me ever again."

"Bingley might defy his sisters and call on you." Elizabeth was not sad to see the end

of Miss Bingley's friendship, but perhaps Jane's relationship with Bingley could be restored. "Although he might not even know you are in town."

"He knows of my being here," Jane said, dropping her hands and striving to be composed. "I am certain, from something Miss Bingley said when she persuaded me he had no intentions toward me." Jane sniffed and took a deep breath to calm herself.

Elizabeth shook her head over it. "There is a strong appearance of duplicity in all this. Is he attached to Miss Darcy, or does his sister only wish it to be so? If he is, Bingley's character sinks under this, to be sure. But it would not surprise me if Miss Bingley and Mr Darcy are to blame for the way he left you."

"We cannot think like that. I will endeavour to banish every painful thought about him—and Miss Bingley, of course—and think only of what will make me happy. Like how happy I am that my aunt convinced you to come to town this winter too." Jane gave her an affectionate hug before returning to the drawing room.

Although she put on a calm face, Elizabeth was certain that Jane still pined for Bingley.

She was glad that her sister would no longer be duped by Miss Bingley, but Bingley was now in the custody of his selfish friend. Mr Darcy would never suffer him to call on Jane. As she went downstairs with her sister, Elizabeth felt renewed irritation at Mr Darcy and Miss Bingley, and an acute sadness for Jane's disappointed hopes.

When they entered, her uncle rose with an amused look in his eye. "Well, girls," he said, holding out a large piece of paper, "I have got my hands on the infamous advertisement."

A handbill first printed a week ago had excited London's curiosity, although most people had yet to read it for themselves. All week it had been talked of while visiting

or when meeting friends at the shops, with questions of “Have you read it yet?” and “Is it meant to be taken seriously?” flying from everyone’s lips.

The girls exclaimed their astonishment and ran to their uncle, eager to read the shocking advertisement for themselves.

Elizabeth took it and read aloud, “A New Matrimonial Plan. A respectable man of business possesses an establishment where persons of all classes have an opportunity of meeting with proper partners. Every person of either sex who desires to enter into a treaty of marriage is first to subscribe a certain sum depending on their class. All ladies and gentlemen are then to describe themselves as they may choose.”

Mrs Gardiner laughed. “How absurd! And how are people to describe themselves? Are they to announce their fortune, or rather their personal attributes?”

“Do not laugh, because you are pretty much right. There are five tiers of ladies and five tiers of gentlemen.” Elizabeth read aloud the ladies’ examples provided.

“First Class: I am twenty years of age; heiress to an estate in the county of Essex of the value of 30,000, well-educated and of domestic habits; of an agreeable disposition, and genteel figure.

Second Class: I am thirty years of age, a widow, in the grocery line in London—have children; of middle stature, fair complexion and hair, temper agreeable; worth 3,000.

Third Class: I am tall and thin, a little lame in the hip, of a lively disposition; twenty years of age, live with my father who, if I marry with his consent, will give me 1,000.

Fourth Class: I am twenty years of age; mild disposition and manners, allowed to be personable.

Fifth Class: I am sixty years of age; income limited; active and rather agreeable.”

“What happens after the single people describe themselves?” Mrs Gardiner asked, frowning.

“Why do you sound cross?” Elizabeth asked. Her aunt looked dubious, but said nothing. “Well, I think this is a marvellous undertaking.”

“But why?” Jane asked. “What good could come of such a thing?”

“Because being proposed to by an odious man who said I could do no better than him made me think women ought to have a little more influence over who proposes to them.”

Everyone avoided her eye, but they all knew the story of Mr Collins’s terrible proposal and how desperately Mrs Bennet had wanted Elizabeth to accept it.

When the silence became awkward, Elizabeth continued to read. “It then says that ‘subscribers are to be furnished with a list of descriptions in the class of their choosing, and when one occurs likely to suit, the parties may correspond through their office, and if mutually approved, an interview may be afterwards arranged.’”

“Wait, this is a serious plan?” cried Jane. “I thought it was a satire, or a mere joke.”

“It is legitimate as far as anyone can tell,” Mr Gardiner answered. “The handbill has circulated in a few places, and there is a business at the direction mentioned.”

“I think it sounds like a horse auction,” muttered Mrs Gardiner.

“No, my dear,” said her husband. “There is nothing shameful about it. Besides, friends and parents make matches for their dear ones all the time. This method just

gives the people who want to wed more say in the matter.”

“But they are appealing to strangers, Edward,” her aunt said, “rather than a mutual friend.”

Elizabeth sat on the sofa, staring at the advertisement. What did anyone truly know about a new man who appeared in the neighbourhood? Were they not strangers too? Bingley had seemed devoted to Jane, but his friends had persuaded him to give her up. And even Wickham’s apparent partiality for Elizabeth had subsided: she had learnt from her mother’s letters that he was now the admirer of someone who recently inherited ten thousand pounds.

And Mr Darcy was behind both Bingley’s abandonment of Jane and Wickham’s need to marry for money.

As much as Elizabeth was ready to blame the proud Mr Darcy for anything, it was not his fault that Mr Collins suggested she should be grateful for his proposal since she was unlikely to receive another. Mr Collins was a pompous fool, but she knew there was some truth to what he had said. She had no money to tempt a worthy suitor, her father would not take her to where she might mix more with the world to find one, and her mother would throw her at any man with a purse and a pulse.

She and her sisters were victims of her father’s neglect and her mother’s manoeuvrings, and there was little chance a worthy man in want of a wife would ride into Meryton. This matchmaking endeavour might be the reassuring proof she needed that there were respectable men capable of loving her and Jane. And, if not, then it would at least be amusing to read the descriptions of eligible gentlemen.

“Jane, what do you think? It might be worth trying.” Elizabeth grinned. “We could both do it!”

“No, absolutely not,” Jane said, turning pink. “It would mortify me.”

“What? Why? It is no worse than Mamma pushing you at every single gentleman with a fortune and telling them what an angel you are. This way, you could write to a gentleman who appeals to you, one who is genuinely considering marriage.” It might be just the thing to raise Jane’s spirits and show her there were admirable men other than Bingley.

“I am not considering marriage now, Lizzy.”

“Nothing says that we must marry any of the men we read about, or even meet anyone we correspond with. So long as we go in with an open mind and are honest, it could be diverting. And if we ever arrange an introduction and decide we might suit, well, who could say anything against that?”

“But what about one’s family connexion to verify these men’s status, their character?”

“Who vouchsafed for Bingley, or for Wickham?” Elizabeth asked. “Mr Collins is a respectable man, but he still insulted me dreadfully when he proposed.” Jane sighed but made no reply. Elizabeth turned to her aunt. “May I try this matchmaking endeavour?”

“But who knows what sort of men might subscribe. What would your parents say to the scheme?”

Elizabeth laughed. “My mother wants us to find husbands, and my father would merely laugh at us for trying this manner of finding one.”

“My dear,” her uncle said, sitting near to his wife, “it is a reputable business, if a little unconventional. The list is kept private, after all. And who else will help Lizzy, or

any of our nieces, find eligible young men?"

It was mortifying, and it was true. There was no one to introduce them to wider circles, and they had no fortune to attract anyone's notice, and they travelled no farther from home than Cheapside.

Mrs Gardiner gave her a long look. "It is not that the matchmaking service is inherently disreputable. But I worry about dishonest men, ones who have no intention of marrying, or who lie about their prospects." Mrs Gardiner held out her hand, and Elizabeth crossed the room to take it. "And I worry about you breaking your heart."

She might not have looked at Jane, but Mrs Gardiner's tone said that she did not want another niece longing for a man who proved false. "Oh, I would laugh myself out of any little heartbreak," she cried. "You know that I would. Besides, it is all anonymous until we decide to meet—if we do at all—and then my uncle can investigate the gentleman until you are satisfied."

If Elizabeth corresponded with a man who was respectable, with a decent competency, and who showed greater constancy than Bingley, she could prove to Jane that there were other worthwhile men who would consider marrying a woman of their circumstances. For the sake of improving Jane's spirits, she could write to a few men to show her sister that there were loyal and respectable marriage-minded men in London.

Elizabeth could see her aunt wavering. "Edward, would she have to go to this office in Bishopsgate?"

"No, it said that personal attendance was not necessary," Mr Gardiner answered. "A statement of facts and payment is all that is required at first, and I can arrange that."

Her aunt finally smiled. "If your uncle will investigate any man you wish to meet,



you may subscribe and choose one from the list. I will not have you writing to a dozen men at a time and then meeting all of them.” Mrs Gardiner laughed. “Your mother would encourage you to meet them all. But choose wisely, Lizzy, because I can only countenance you meeting with one gentleman.”

Elizabeth hugged and kissed her aunt. She did not actually have to meet with anyone. She only had to write to a respectable man for a little while to prove to Jane that there were worthy men in the world. Gentlemen who were more faithful than Bingley and not under the sway of arrogant, selfish men like Mr Darcy.

Fitzwilliam Darcy sat to the side in Brooks’s Great Subscription Room, watching other men gamble. It had been an hour since he had grown tired of cards, tired of exchanging the same coins back and forth. The card tables were tedious for him with no conversation.

He took a slow sip of his port, intending to make this glass last the rest of the evening. Bingley was still at a table. It was good to see his friend cheerfully occupied. For all of January, Darcy had had to encourage him to be social.

The concern that Bingley still had thoughts of Jane Bennet pressed on Darcy’s mind. Miss Bingley had said she was in town, and until he could be certain his friend had moved on, it was best to keep him from meeting Miss Bennet. Bingley might be compelled to marry her if he believed she came to town because she loved him—and not because her mother had sent her after a wealthy man.

Darcy rolled his glass between his hands, staring into the ruby liquid. Every time he considered his friend’s autumn in Hertfordshire, he thought of the lovely and lively Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth’s situation was just as unsuitable as her sister’s, but time and distance had not been the aid in forgetting her that he had hoped.

It seemed to him that Elizabeth had gained more charms between the moment he first

laid eyes on her and the time he first spoke with her; and from then on, he was entirely under her spell. She was handsome, kind, witty, and he held a great respect for her. She seemed at ease with anyone and was clever and well-informed.

And she had no trouble arguing with me. He laughed fondly into his glass at the memories of her time at Netherfield.

Had he stayed in Hertfordshire a week longer, he might have offered his most fervent affections, and devoted himself to her for the rest of his life. But he could not forget her lower situation in life or her deplorable relations.

It was a shame, really. While he was in no hurry, he was twenty-eight and would like to be married. He had even attempted to be more in society since he had returned to town. But every woman he had encountered this winter failed to compare to Elizabeth, and he still thought of her constantly.

Raised voices and laughter drew his attention from his distracting thoughts of a pair of pretty dark eyes. A small group crowded near the fireplace, looking at a sheet of paper they passed between them. He considered getting up to join them to learn what was so amusing, but then he saw his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam stride in from the cold.

Darcy hailed him from the sofa with a wave, and Fitzwilliam gestured he would get a drink and join him. On his way back, he stopped to speak with the men by the fireplace. They exchanged several words, a few smiles, and after hearty laughter, the group broke apart, and one of them handed Fitzwilliam the paper.

“What do you have there?” Darcy asked as his cousin settled in next to him. “They were having a long laugh over whatever it is.”

“It is the handbill,” he said, smiling. “Have you read it yet?”

Darcy sat up. "I thought it was all a joke?"

Fitzwilliam shook his head and handed it to him. "It is a legitimate enterprise."

He read the handbill to himself until he got to the part that explained how to describe oneself. "And how does one do that?" he asked contemptuously. "Fortune and connexions first, and personality and appearance, after? Or perhaps no need to bother with the latter once you announce your income?"

His cousin gestured to the paper. "They give examples of how to describe yourself."

Darcy read through them. The first-tier example described an affable, affectionate young gentleman, stout made, well-educated with an estate of five hundred per annum and ten thousand in the three per cent consolidated annuities. Fortune and status descended from there until the fifth tier of man was mentioned as being twenty-five, a mechanic, industrious, of sober habits and of respectable connexions.

He lifted his eyes. His income was twenty times higher than the first tier's example, and his invested wealth was more as well. Darcy scoffed as he read the last line. "'All letters to be post-paid.' Well, they must be, with all the letters flowing in to be distributed to their selected desperate and lonely." He tossed the handbill to the table.

His cousin started. "Desperate and lonely? I thought this would be perfect for you."

Darcy coughed on his drink. "Perfect for me?" he rasped, still choking on his port. "Why would you think that a list of bachelors and spinsters registering a catalogue of their allegedly beautiful qualities to be fitted with a husband or wife would be perfect for me?"

Fitzwilliam snatched up the handbill. "You hate the season, do you not? But you want to marry. You do not actually want to sit alone in Pemberley for half the year while

all your friends marry and have children?”

“In theory, yes.” Darcy avoided his eye, and also tried to avoid thinking of a charming and beautiful girl in Hertfordshire. “But there is quite a leap from expecting to marry—as any independent man of means would—to submitting myself to this humiliation to hurry the process.”

“Why is it humiliating? It is all kept private; it is just systematised matchmaking.”

He shook his head. “Matchmaking is the sort of thing done amongst friends, sisters, parents, even the vicar. Not as a business.”

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “This just gives the individual more power in a similar process.”

“That may be true for the woman, but men need no further agency. They can pursue a woman at will.”

His cousin leant forward. “I know it is irregular,” he said. “But I thought this was not a bad idea for someone like you.”

Darcy blinked slowly. “Someone like me?”

Even in the evening lamplight, he saw Fitzwilliam turn pink. “Well, you are far better with the written word than...you know.” He gestured vaguely. “And you do not enjoy small talk or dancing, let alone flirting.”

Darcy set down his glass with a clang. “Yes, it is a miracle that I can string words together to anyone in a skirt.”

“I am sorry to offend you, but I truly thought this would appeal to you. You said

yourself that marriage should be more than a strategic tool to ensure family fortunes remain intact, that you won't marry our cousin Anne because you want a true partnership with someone you can have a clever conversation with."

Elizabeth's lively manner and one of her impudent speeches flashed through his mind. "You actually expect me to find a woman to love, the woman who will be the most important person in my life, through a subscription agency?" He plucked the handbill from Fitzwilliam's hand. "It is scarcely better than putting an advertisement in the agony column."

"Is it so odd?" Fitzwilliam recoiled under the look Darcy threw him. "Well, yes, it is odd, but there is nothing clandestine or improper about it. Like you said, it is better than the agony column, and one can get to know a woman without the pressure of an anxious mother or fearing what could be misconstrued by merely crossing the room to hear a woman's performance."

He felt the truth of it and shifted in his chair and pretended to read the handbill again. "Well, it, it is just not the sort of thing for wealthy or for well-disposed persons. I suppose it is useful for someone who has no one to introduce them into the world. In fact," he went on just as Fitzwilliam opened his mouth to argue, "it is just the sort of thing useful to a man of dissolute character." Wickham would probably write to every woman with a fortune and misrepresent himself to them all.

"But you are not such a man, so who cares?"

He cast about in his mind for a reply. "Or it is intended for a low woman trying to raise herself."

"Any woman does the same thing dressing for a ball, and with society's tacit approval. At least by going through this agency, they are candid about it."

“If it is such a grand idea, why do you not try it?” Darcy asked smugly, certain that he had turned the tide of this debate.

“Oh, I intend to.” Darcy felt his mouth fall open. “Not to find a wife, but I knew before I got my hands on that advertisement that I would have to subscribe to get you to do it. Just don’t tell my father. He still holds hope of marrying me off to the wealthy daughter of Lord Stewart. She is taller than I am, and three stone heavier. And I am not certain she bathes.”

“So a stranger off the subscription list would be a marked improvement for your prospects.”

Fitzwilliam laughed and took a drink. “Maybe it would be. And maybe I will fall in love before you do.”

“You cannot fall in love through letters,” he cried. “It is not sound; you know it is not sound.”

“I say it is, and the only way you can prove me wrong is to write to a few women and then feel nothing for any of them, no inclination to meet any of them, no inclination to know any of them better.”

“Absolutely not,” Darcy said, reading through the handbill again. He wanted to marry, but it was far too soon to think that someone with his wealth and connexions, and, if he was being honest, his age and appearance, would have trouble meeting and earning the affections of a worthy woman. He had only not met her yet.

The thought that he had perhaps met her, and had left her in Hertfordshire because of her embarrassing family, pressed heavily on his mind. He knew that he loved Elizabeth even then, but he still left. Darcy sighed and avoided his cousin by staring harder at the advertisement.

“It is an institution that unites people seeking matrimony,” Fitzwilliam said gently. “You eventually want to get married, you do not want to marry Anne, you hate parties, and you excel at writing long letters. They may as well have personally invited you to become a subscriber!”

He had to forget Elizabeth Bennet, and pouring himself into spending a month or so getting to know a correspondent would at least be a distraction. And for the sake of appeasing Fitzwilliam, he could write to a woman, and with that came the added pleasure of proving to his cousin that no one fell in love through letters.

“You will do it?” his cousin asked eagerly. Fitzwilliam knew him well; he must have seen the agreement in Darcy’s eyes. “Subscribe for the season, that is all I ask. Write to a few women to learn if any of them might suit you.”

“One,” he mumbled. “I will write to one.” He could not imagine the effort it would take to know several women at a time through a series of letters. Heaven forbid he mistake a Susan for a Sarah and write to the wrong lady.

“One at a time?” Fitzwilliam’s voice lilted hopefully. He agreed with a nod. “Excellent! We can go to Bishopsgate Street on Wednesday. You might be married before the season is over.”

“Are you wanting to lay a wager?” Darcy teased. “That I shall find a wife through this matchmaking business before you do?”

“Oh no, I will not take that wager,” he cried, shaking his head.

Darcy smirked and crossed one leg over the other. “Then you have little faith in the business, after all.”

“No,” his cousin said firmly, setting down his glass. “I won’t take that bet because

you are going to meet your future wife from that list, and I would not have her hate me or you when she learns about us wagering over ever finding her.”



## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

The office in Bishopsgate Street was in the City—within the gate and nearly in the shadow of St Helen’s—before it became Gracechurch Street. The ward was filled with warehouses, inns, courts, and merchants, and near to number five there appeared also to be a ready-made linen warehouse, a stationer, and a shipping and insurance broker.

“Look, I can select a bride and then cross the street to the stationer,” Fitzwilliam said cheerfully when the hackney driver stopped. “I will need plenty of paper for all the ladies I plan to write to.”

Darcy watched the steady stream of passers-by and watched a man enter number five. He had the look of a clerk or a merchant. “Are you certain this is wise?”

His cousin threw him a dark look. “Give me your description. Go home, and I will subscribe you so you cannot change your mind. That is a respectable business, and you agreed to conduct this business.”

Darcy saw the truth in it, however nervous he now felt about the scheme. He drew out a small envelope with his description. “Just place me in the first tier and be done with it.”

“Against people from trade?” he teased. “Too high and too conceited for the second class?”

“Not at all,” Darcy said, drawing back. “Bingley is from trade, and he is one of my

closest friends.”

Fitzwilliam’s eyes brightened. “Why not marry Miss Bingley and save yourself a few quires of paper writing to a stranger?”

“You are not nearly as funny as you think you are.” His cousin laughed anyway. “You saw the example descriptions: an independent gentleman, with ten thousand a year and passably handsome, would be in the first tier.”

“True, but a lady who puts herself in a lower tier would not act as superior as Miss Bingley, and she with her superciliousness, twenty thousand pounds, and titled connexions would put herself in the first,” Fitzwilliam reasoned. “A lady who puts herself in the second would not expect to make a grand match—although, of course, you are one,” he added with a solemn mock bow.

Darcy was more troubled by a woman without an intelligent thought in her head than someone earnestly expecting a fine match. A stupid lady would make letter writing tedious and prove the entire enterprise a waste of time. “Would you do the same?” he asked, doubting the affirmative. “You are an earl’s son; you would put yourself in the first tier, so do the same with me.”

“I think I would find a better match in the second, but does it even matter? You are certain you won’t find a bride.”

“Would you please just take care of this for me?” he cried. “Please,” Darcy added quietly, as an apology. “I am already wavering.”

“Very well. I will take care of you.”

The way he heavily said “take care” would have made Darcy afraid had he not written his own description. He handed over the envelope, and to his surprise,

Fitzwilliam opened it to read, and immediately shook his head.

“This makes you sound dull, Darcy. You might as well have said you have an unyielding temper, you hate strangers and dancing, and you prefer to stay at home.”

“That would also be true, but I thought it best not to lead with my worst traits.”

“Let me make a few changes?—”

“Leave it!”

Fitzwilliam realised he had pushed too far and left for the office. Darcy sat back with a sigh, wondering if this was a mistake. The people going in and out of that building were willingly opening themselves up to marriage, either out of desperation or a sincere desire for companionship. Whereas he was only somewhat curious if this matchmaking enterprise was feasible.

And he was curious if a short correspondence with another woman could help him forget Elizabeth Bennet.

Fitzwilliam arrived at Darcy’s house in Charles Street later that night while he dressed for an evening out.

“Here are our lists,” he said as he entered Darcy’s chamber. “They arrived in the four o’clock post.”

Darcy started. “So soon?”

“This is the latest list, although you are welcome to submit weekly for an updated list of your class. It is rather short since the enterprise has only been a fortnight in operation. I understand there are currently more men than women.”

“How does it work?” he asked while tying his cravat.

“I guess you should have come in with me,” Fitzwilliam said with a teasing look out of the side of his eye. “You pay a subscription fee to access the list, select the ladies you want to write to, and if any have likewise chosen you, the office arranges your correspondence. You are identified by number, and all letters go through the office in Bishopsgate. They release the names and directions only on mutual consent granted in person.”

“And is there a finder’s fee upon a marriage?” Darcy asked drily.

“One per cent of the bride’s dowry, or fifty pounds.”

“Truly?” he cried, turning from the mirror. “I was joking.” Fitzwilliam shrugged and set them down. “Do not put it aside. We may as well begin.”

“You want to choose now?” His cousin sounded surprised, but he picked up the sheets. “In the carriage this morning, you seemed ready to run back to Berkeley Square.”

Darcy felt his cheeks warm. “But I subscribed. It is done, and now I had best get on with it.” He had agreed to do this, and it was always best not to leave a task for later that could be done immediately. A duty, even a disagreeable one, ought not to be put off. And he thought about Elizabeth nearly as often as he breathed. A distraction was necessary. “Let me select a woman to write to. It shall not take long.”

“I will read as you get ready. Where are you going, anyway?”

“Dinner with my sister, and then a musical evening,” he said while choosing a waistcoat. “It is a compromise because she does not want to join me and Bingley and his sisters at the panorama, but I thought she ought to mix a little more this season.”

“Her reluctance has more to do with the company than the panorama itself. You know how Georgiana struggles with Miss Bingley.” Fitzwilliam shook the paper straight and theatrically cleared his throat. “I am nineteen, genteel figure, mild manners, income limited.”

Darcy shook his head. “She won’t have any conversation.”

“How do you know?” his cousin cried. “Mild manners could mean she is demure and polite.”

“Her description was nine words.”

Fitzwilliam acquiesced. “Next is, ‘I am twenty-seven years of age, a widow, of a large family, full-made and tall, worth four thousand, enjoy poetry and plays.’ Large family?” He pulled a concerned face.

“As in many brothers and sisters, or in her brood of fatherless children?”

“I say no on your behalf. Let us move on. What about, ‘I am a young lady in the county of Surrey, worth one thousand, fair hair and small, very affectionate, active spirit, fond of conversation and cards.’ Fond of conversation would be good for you.”

The lady from Surrey sounded as if she wanted late parties with friends every night. “If she has to say ‘fond of conversation,’ she has been told she talks too much.”

His cousin swore. “You only look at women to find a blemish! Not enough talking, too much talking.” While Darcy put on his coat, Fitzwilliam read down the page. “What about, ‘I am thirty years of age, widowed and no children, father was in banking, fair hair and complexion, well-tempered and sociable, enjoy riding, worth fifteen thousand pounds.’ It is not every day you find a woman with a heart for riding.”

Fitzwilliam's approving tone stopped Darcy while he fastened his coat buttons. If his cousin was interested, he could not select this woman even if he had wanted to. "This is the first tier of ladies, is it not? Their dowries and incomes are not as high as I would have thought, aside from this woman."

"Are you marrying for money?" his cousin asked after a pause.

"No!" He abhorred being pursued for his fortune and income; he would never allow that to be what drew him to a woman. "I was only surprised that most of the ladies in this first tier have small dowries. What about you? You need to marry with attention to money."

"My per diem in the Foot Guards is two pounds a day, thank you. I can well afford a wife." Darcy held his gaze, and Fitzwilliam looked away. His father supplemented his income, but his brother would not continue the practice after he inherited. "Yes, it would be helpful if she had her own money," he muttered.

"I suppose it would help if she was handsome also?" Darcy said, to lighten his mood. "Or enjoyed riding?"

"Always." Fitzwilliam grinned.

If there were few women of means subscribing to this curious scheme, he ought to let his cousin write to those ones. Besides, it was not as though he was actually going to meet any of these ladies. "I am uncertain about the banker's daughter. I will pass. Read on."

"I am twenty years of age, of middle stature, tolerably pretty, lively disposition, fond of books and the country, with one thousand on the death of my parents."

Darcy reflected for a long moment. Lively meant her correspondence might be

engaging. Fond of books might mean she was well-educated. Fond of the country might mean a gentleman's daughter, although he was a spendthrift if she had only a thousand pounds after he died.

For the first time, he felt a small amount of excitement about the enterprise.

"Nothing?" Fitzwilliam asked. "Then what about 'I am of age, auburn hair, short but with?—'"

"No, the last one was suitable. I pick her."

"Are you certain? There are four others I have yet to read."

"That lady will suit the purpose." A diversion from lingering thoughts about a different lively woman was all he needed. "Leave me that lady's number, and I will write to the office to see if she will correspond with me. The rest of the lovely spinsters I leave to your witty correspondence."

Elizabeth sat at the table in the drawing room with Jane, the papers from the matchmaking office spread between them. Her uncle had gone to the office in Bishopsgate yesterday, and in this morning's two-penny post came the list of eligible gentlemen. There were two sheets full of descriptions to read through. Her aunt, who pretended to have no interest in the enterprise, sat nearby with her work. Elizabeth suspected she was attending to their every word.

She stared at the sheets but hesitated to read them. What had seemed an amusing diversion a few days ago was now a reality. These men were considering marriage. Even if she was not ready to commit, if she wrote to a gentleman, she would have to do it with the honest intention of getting to know him.

"You do not have to write to anyone, you know," Jane said, patting her hand when

Elizabeth still had not begun.

It was natural to feel some nerves, after all. And to be anxious was not entirely bad. One could feel anxious before something exciting just as much as they might feel anxious before something alarming. But if she was to hint to Jane that there were charming and respectable men in London who were open to marriage, men more faithful than Bingley, she would have to prove it so by writing to one.

“Of course I do,” she said cheerily. “I am eager for the endeavour to begin, and you must help me choose—unless you see one for yourself.”

Jane smiled. “I leave all the bachelors to you.”

Elizabeth scanned the list, looking at the incomes down the page. “I put myself in the second tier, but with my lack of fortune, I could have been in the third.”

“You are a gentleman’s daughter, my dear,” her aunt said. “For that reason, you ought to be in the first.”

“My worth is fifty pounds a year,” Elizabeth said flatly, “and that is only after both of my parents are dead. I think I am fortunate to have a claim to the second class.”

“A worthy man would not care at all about that,” said Jane.

“Wickham did,” Elizabeth mumbled. “And he was a worthy man.”

“Was he truly?” her aunt asked, her fancy work forgotten in her lap. “It would have been an imprudent match, as I told you at Christmas. He ought not to have encouraged your interest, knowing he could never support you. And then,” she went on when Elizabeth opened her mouth, “as your mother wrote, he turned to that young lady and her ten thousand pounds.”



“Perhaps he is not the best of men, but he is not hatefully mercenary.” A man needed something to live on, just like the gentlemen who subscribed to this institution. Anyone who wrote to her would know how limited her fortune was. “You admitted Wickham was a most interesting young man, and he is from Derbyshire, so you cannot think too ill of him.”

Mrs Gardiner smiled and took up her work, gesturing to the table with it. “You and Jane focus on the task at hand. Choose wisely.”

Elizabeth smiled as she read the first description. “I am forty years of age, stout and tall, well-tempered, have a situation in the Excise of four hundred per annum and a small estate of the annual value of one hundred.”

She turned to Jane and silently asked her opinion. “Five hundred a year is a decent competence,” Jane said cautiously, “and perhaps the estate could be improved. And if he works in the Excise, you would live in town.”

“Forty is rather old for me, is it not?” Elizabeth frowned. “My father is forty-seven.”

Jane agreed and read the next one. “I am thirty-three years of age, a widower with an estate in Sussex valued at two thousand. I am of a healthy constitution, sociable.’ Oh, he is younger, and sociable would be perfect for you.”

“He wants you to raise his children,” Mrs Gardiner muttered, not looking up from her work.

It was wise to have her aunt’s input. Her advice was always worth listening to. “Thank you for helping. I know you do not approve of the arrangement.”

Her aunt shook her head. “Your uncle has convinced me the endeavour is private and respectable. I am just afraid of your being disappointed, or misled.”

Elizabeth was in no danger of having her heart broken. She only wanted to show Jane that there were kind and loyal marriage-minded young men in the world so she could forget Bingley. She had no real expectations for herself. The gentleman she wrote to would have to be delightful for her to agree to meet him.

Elizabeth picked up the second sheet. “What about this one? ‘I am thirty years of age, have a situation in the Foot Guards, am well-tempered, lively, fond of travelling and home.’”

“He sounds lovely, Lizzy,” said Jane. “You should pick him.”

Elizabeth frowned. “He does, but he would have to choose me, too. This soldier might not be able to afford to marry a woman with no money of her own.”

“Oh, hear this one,” Jane said, reading from her sheet. “‘A young gentleman, tall and slender, dark hair and eyes. I have an estate without debt or drawback; well-educated, of domestic habits, fond of books and the country.’ He used the same phrase you did. You have something in common.”

Elizabeth took the sheet to look for herself. She had also written “fond of books and the country.” Her heart beat a little faster at the idea of matching with someone. She was curious about him, but it was too soon to become eager.

“He sounds interesting, but he does not say his income. What could he mean by that?” There was no point in writing to a gentleman who could not afford to marry a woman like her or Jane.

Jane shrugged, but her aunt said, “He means he has an estate and can support a wife, and does not want a horde of ladies writing to him because of his income. That is what you want,” she said, pointing, “a responsible young man who does not run to debt.”

“That is true, but let us read through them all. What about, ‘I am twenty-four years of age and about to be a barrister, middle stature, active and rather agreeable, enjoys cards.’”

“He sounds promising, Lizzy,” said Jane with enthusiasm. “An agreeable barrister would be perfect for you.”

“A gadabout, I am certain,” said Mrs Gardiner, frowning. “He will gamble away all his income when he becomes a barrister. Aim higher than a man who does not have a proper situation. Do not undervalue yourself, and certainly not for a man like that.”

Elizabeth smiled. Her aunt might as well have stood on a ship’s bow and waved a red flag. “True, but they do not all mention their physical attributes, either. Should that alarm me, too?”

“Did you mention your appearance?”

“Why, yes,” she said, giving a sly look to Jane. “I said I was tolerably pretty.”

Her aunt gave her a surprised look. “But you are a very striking girl.”

She shook her head. “You are family and biased in my favour. My being scarcely acceptable as pretty is a verifiable fact. Mr Darcy once announced my tolerableness to an entire ballroom. No, I cannot claim a fortune, and I had best not over-promise on my beauty either.”

Mrs Gardiner laughed. “Do not worry so much about their appearances, then,” her aunt said. “You and your sister read through the rest and make your choice.”

She and Jane read every description. Jane found something favourable about every single one, but Elizabeth was more discerning. Some sounded dull, some gave not

enough information to make it worth their being her sole correspondent. Others were too old, or could not afford to marry her, or her aunt found an implication that alarmed her.

“You know, if none of these men suit, nothing says you must write to anyone,” said Jane when they were done. “Or wait a week and see if a new subscriber appeals to you.”

Elizabeth turned back to the first page. Something about the tall, dark-eyed young man had struck her. He was a responsible estate owner, who could talk of books, was not as old as her father, and cleverly phrased his description to give enough away to someone paying attention.

Mrs Gardiner came near. “Did you choose one, my dear?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, pointing to the description. “I will ask my uncle to arrange it, and I will show you all that it is a reputable enterprise that can unite like-minded people.” Elizabeth’s enthusiasm fell. “Although if this young man does not also choose to write to me, I must select another one.”

“Every man who reads the list would choose you,” said Jane, putting an arm around her.

“You forget my history with young men as of late.” Elizabeth smiled sadly. “Wickham did not because he could not afford to, and Mr Collins only did because I was present, not for my good qualities.” Her sister and aunt were giving her sympathetic looks, so she added brightly, “And Mr Darcy never would choose me because I am only tolerably pretty.”

Mrs Gardiner squeezed her shoulder. “Well, this tall young man with an estate and an interest in books and the country seems a sensible one, so of course he will want to

write to you.”

### Chapter Three

Lizzy,” her uncle called up from his library as Elizabeth and her aunt and sister were about to go into the drawing room. As they came down the stairs, he held out an envelope. “The gentleman you selected yesterday has signified that he would be glad to correspond with lady number seven in the second tier.”

It took her a moment to comprehend him. “He wants to write to me?” she cried, taking the letter. “Is this from him?”

“Was there any doubt that you would match?” Jane asked, grinning. “Any man of sense would want to know you better.”

Jane loved her so much that she believed any interest in her must be natural, but Elizabeth had doubted her lack of fortune would garner her any attention. “We must not be too excited. This gentleman likely wrote to every woman on the list who seemed to have all of her teeth.”

Jane refuted this, and then Elizabeth noticed her aunt looking at the envelope. “Do you want to read it first?” Elizabeth asked, holding it out.

“No, my dear,” Mrs Gardiner said, shaking her head. “I have been convinced the plan is reputable, and I trust you to have sense in what you say to this young man. Until you decide you want to meet him, you may write to one another in private.”

“Unless he writes something very romantic,” Jane said slyly. “Then we will all want to read it.”

“Not me,” said her uncle, and they all laughed. “Until I must return to that office and arrange a meeting with this gentleman, I want to know nothing at all about what the young lovers say.”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks get hot. “I am writing to demonstrate that amiable, respectable, marriage-minded young men exist. I have no expectations beyond that.” She did privately hope that Jane might join the exercise, but she could not convince her to recover from her disappointment over Bingley. The only way was to show Jane by example.

She opened the envelope from the office in Bishopsgate to find another folded letter within, with nothing written on the outside other than “Ladies No. 7.”

“How amorous,” her aunt said, peering over her shoulder.

She was being teased. “The manager who arranges the correspondence wrote that. The gentleman and I do not know one another’s names or directions.”

Elizabeth admitted to herself that she was a little excited by the prospect of the plan truly beginning. Even though this matchmaking was only to help Jane, her heart gave a brief flutter at her choice selecting her, too. What if she really did find a man she could admire and esteem?

“Go on, then,” said Mrs Gardiner, smiling. “Go read it and sigh over it, and then write him back.”

Elizabeth composed herself to give her aunt a serious look. “There will be no sighing, nor tears, nor kisses pressed into my reply.”

Her uncle stepped aside and gestured that she should enter the library to read. When she was alone, she ran a finger over the plain seal. There was nothing to distinguish

it, no coat of arms nor words pressed into the wax. She exhaled a deep breath and opened the envelope.

Friday, January 31

Dear madam,

I have never engaged in a scheme such as this, and have never allowed my friends to match me to any of their neighbours, sisters, or cousins. It is strange to choose a lady from a list, but it is done through a respectable business with attention to privacy. It is not as indelicate as I first presumed, and I see nothing wrong in the venture. At worst, it feeds imaginations with notions of romantic escape or social advancement.

And with that in mind, I must begin with the honest confession that I am not entering this business with the assumption or even the hope that I will find a wife. I have no immediate views to matrimony. I cannot engage in deceit or disguise, and I would not have you accuse me of making promises I am not currently willing to make. I am engaging in this business with a degree of doubt and under some duress from a well-meaning friend.

I am, however, open to writing to know you better. I suppose I will consider meeting you, although that is not at the forefront of my mind. I am writing to no other woman but you. I do not scruple to say that although this matchmaking enterprise is not an immoral one, it feels deceitful for any man to court multiple women at a time; and although this correspondence is not a courtship, it would go against my conscience to engage in an intimate correspondence with anyone other than you.

Your description struck me, particularly your claims of having a lively disposition, and I admit to some attraction to the idea of you having a playfulness of mind. None would say my manner is lively, and the best I can claim is being told my humour is droll. However, I will write genuinely and do my utmost to be as engaging a



correspondent as I hope you will be.

If my unwillingness to immediately or perhaps ever offer any sentiments or promises does not disappoint you, I await your letter.

Your servant,

F

Elizabeth read it twice, making certain she understood what F was saying. His friend wanted to prove the matchmaking scheme could work, and F was willing to go along with it, even though he had reservations. He was hardly a man eager to be led to the altar, but she was not any different. She was only doing this for a diversion and to prove to Jane that there were marriageable men aside from Bingley.

And perhaps some part of her heart was doing it to prove she could gain the interest of a man who was in a position to marry and who was not disrespectful, unlike Wickham and Mr Collins had been.

She had no expectancy of finding an amiable, respectable man who admired her. A girlish hope, perhaps, but no genuine expectation. But was this F a man who was worth her time?

There was something flattering about knowing she had roused his interest, even if it was only by a few lines on a subscription list. And he was not writing to anyone else. How charming of him to be so forthright, and how becoming it made him seem that he would write to one woman at a time. There was no way to know this for certain, but he seemed a direct man, unwilling to lie.

He said exceedingly little about himself, but maybe he was not shy or tiresome. It was only the first letter, and it would not be kind to judge him on this first

impression. It might even be pleasant to draw him out a little.

Elizabeth went to her uncle's desk and mended a pen, thinking about how to begin. It felt odd to address it to 'sir', although that would be the politest way. He had signed it F, but it felt just as odd to address a letter to an initial. She thought a moment before she began.

Saturday, February 1

Dear Friend,

I hope you forgive my presumption in claiming you as a friend after a single letter, but 'sir' and 'F' felt impersonal, and beginning with "dear my newest acquaintance" is ridiculous, so unless you beg of me otherwise, I will address my letters to my friend.

You write of people with romantic notions or aspiring to raise their status through marriage, but you must not find it disgraceful for the sexes to correspond in hopes of mutual improvement and perhaps matrimony, since you are a participant. We subscribers are not all desperate maidens, bashful bachelors, or lonely widows. I think young people now want an affectionate marriage, not a transaction, and this is simply a modern means to do that.

However, I will match your honesty with my own. I am doing this to prove the method a good one for others rather than for my benefit. My sister has recently suffered a disappointment—nothing improper or scandalous, just a little crossed in love as happens to all young ladies—and I want to show her that this method might be worth her time. I am not opposed to marrying a man met by this means, of course, but it is not my goal, so you and I may write without the pressure of any expectations.

You seem a responsible young man, and clever enough to say so without announcing

your income for all to know, and such cleverness appealed to me. I am afraid, however, aside from the promise of a droll humour, you said little of yourself. Are you a shy man lacking courage with the fair sex?

In case you are not inclined to talk about yourself, you may tell me about your family and what you enjoy doing in London. You are in town for the season, I presume? I am in town until early March. As today is February 1, that gives us five weeks to become acquainted while we are both in the same city and can exchange letters quickly. While I am here, I hope to see some concerts and walk at least once in one of the parks, but I am at the liberty of my friends and the weather. If you want to know my taste in music, ask me.

I ought to add that I would not want to be teased or held in disdain, even with the anonymity of the enterprise, so I expect you not to show my letters to all your friends. Ladies, as you know, often pass letters round, but since those with whom I am staying in town approve of the venture and of my judgment, there is no expectation that I share your letters with them.

Your friend,

L

“Lizzy?” Jane called from the door. “My aunt wishes to know if you still want to go to the panorama with us?”

“Yes, of course. I am nearly done.” She folded the letter and wrote “Gentlemen No. 16” and then enclosed it and addressed it to the matchmaking office. As she ran upstairs for her coat and hat, Jane followed her.

“What have you to say about the tall, slender man with dark hair and eyes?” she asked, leaning against the doorjamb as Elizabeth dressed.

“His description was more expressive than his letter,” she said. “I know nothing about him.” She reconsidered while she did her buttons. “No, that is not true. In his own way, he showed that honesty is important to him, perhaps to a fault, and he does not want me to be disappointed if we do not suit.”

“That is considerate of him. I suppose this format of beginning a new acquaintance allows one to be candid about one’s intentions. But remember, you can stop writing at any time.”

If she wanted Jane to take this opportunity for herself, she could not stop writing soon. She would have to be more confident about the scheme.

“In his own way, he complimented me. He thought I sounded lively and that I would be an interesting correspondent, and that while he has no expectations further than writing, he also is not writing to any other lady. He thought it would be disingenuous.”

“That is an admirable sentiment.” Jane’s eyes widened in approval before they went down the stairs where her aunt and uncle were waiting.

“I thought so too,” she said, her cheeks warming at the thought.

“Well, my dear, he must be charming for you to look like that,” her uncle said as they went to the carriage. “Do I need to arrange a meeting at the office? When will the banns be read?” he asked with a smile.

“He seemed a little serious, but hopefully he won’t be a dull letter writer,” she said primly, refusing to rise to the good-hearted taunt.

Darcy waited until Miss Bingley had turned away to look at the panorama scene before shrugging his shoulders. He tolerated Miss Bingley’s presence, but her

constant prattling ruined how immersive the experience was meant to be. The panorama was a large, circular room that placed the viewer at the centre of an enormous painting that stretched entirely around them. It was a total view of a scene as it appeared to an observer turning in a complete circle.

Views of Paris, or the interior of Dublin, the Bay of Naples and the eruption of Vesuvius, or a military siege, it did not matter to him. All were magnificent.

He enjoyed visiting the new pictures displayed each season. When Bingley agreed to join him in viewing this year's exhibition, there was no way to refuse his sisters after Bingley said how much they were also wanting to see it.

"Mr Darcy," Miss Bingley said, coming to his side yet again. The platform was thousands of square feet, but she insisted on pressing as close to him as socially permissible. "What did you say that tower was?" she asked, pointing into the distance.

He held out the sheet that labelled every sight in the scene. "You are welcome to take this for yourself."

"Oh, I could never. I know how much you look forward to viewing the panorama."

Darcy held back the question that if she knew that, then why would she talk to him so much that he could not look one moment at the scene without her interrupting him?

"Did the others see enough? Would you be good enough to ask Bingley if he is ready to leave?"

Miss Bingley agreed to do his bidding, and he enjoyed one minute of quietly appreciating the scene before Bingley, Hurst, and the ladies joined him. As they went down the stairs, he decided to come back another time on his own.

As they waited for their carriage to return, a hackney stopped between Leicester Place and Cranbourn Street at Mr Barker's panorama. A fashionable-looking man descended and handed down a woman about his age. Darcy started when he saw the next lady, and not believing what he saw, he turned away.

Was he now going to imagine seeing Elizabeth Bennet all over town? It was bad enough he thought of her nearly every waking moment. He hoped there was a letter from the woman from the matchmaking office waiting for him when he returned home. If he was envisioning every brunette of average height to be Elizabeth, he needed a distraction more desperately than he realised.

"Miss Bennet!" Bingley cried, and a second later he added, "And Miss Elizabeth."

Darcy's stomach now resided somewhere near his throat. He tried not to look at her in case his gaze involuntarily betrayed every feeling in his heart. He wanted to look at her, wanted to talk with her, wanted to know how deep were her affections for him. But she was just as unsuitable in February as she had been in November. Had he not gone to the trouble of corresponding with a stranger, hoping to forget her? And now here she was in front of him.

He felt overwhelmed by all sorts of distressful feelings.

Before he could so much as pass an eye over Elizabeth, he caught Miss Bingley's pale face and saw her lips were pressed into a thin line. Secrets had a way of not staying buried, and a falsehood was about to be unearthed right now. While he could not say he regretted separating Bingley and Miss Bennet, he now deeply regretted every lie and omission attending to it.

Introductions were dispatched, and Darcy could admit to a little surprise that these well-mannered people were the aunt and uncle in trade. He greeted everyone and was certain not to show Elizabeth any more notice than the others of her party. Elizabeth

seemed reserved, only saying “How do you do” without looking at him.

During the bows and curtseys, Bingley had inched nearer to Miss Bennet. “You must have just arrived in town,” he said cheerfully. “Otherwise, my sisters would have mentioned seeing you.”

Darcy felt so ill at ease it was painful. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst avoided looking at anyone but each other. It was plain to him that Miss Bennet was not comfortable. She stood silent, with a pained expression and pink cheeks. No matter what her feelings for Bingley were, she had just learnt her friend had lied. And Elizabeth was giving him a bitter look as though she somehow, impossibly, suspected his involvement.

The silence stretched, with Bingley looking at Miss Bennet for an answer she was not about to give. She may have no love for Bingley, but Darcy respected that Miss Bennet refused to abandon Miss Bingley and tell her brother what his sister had done.

After staring at Miss Bennet for a long moment, Elizabeth said to Bingley brightly, “Did you not know we were in town? We have been here since just after Christmas.” Bingley’s jaw fell open. She then looked at Darcy with the same glint in her eyes. “Did you also not know that we were in London, Mr Darcy?”

Elizabeth put him in an awful position. No, he had put himself in this position by keeping the truth from Bingley. He still did not think Jane Bennet loved his friend, but he could not continue the deception. “I remember Miss Bingley saying she had the pleasure of seeing Miss Bennet in Grosvenor Street in January.”

Elizabeth held his gaze, and it seemed like she was determined to make him feel his guilt. “So you must have known at least Jane was here,” she finally said to Bingley, “since she called on Miss Bingley a month ago.”

“Is this true?” Bingley asked his sister. “Why did you never mention it?”

Miss Bingley, who had been looking at her sleeve’s cuff, looked up and said, “Oh, did I not? I must have. If you are too busy with your other friends, like Mr Darcy and his sister, to remember the comings and goings of my acquaintances, I do not blame you.”

Miss Bennet looked anywhere but at Miss Bingley. Darcy could see that she knew her former friend had deceived her, and this entire conversation was an injury to her. Mrs Gardiner put an arm through hers, and Mr Gardiner looked disapprovingly over all of them.

“No one ever mentioned to me you were in town, Miss Bennet.” Bingley looked delighted. “How long do you intend to stay?”

Bingley and Miss Bennet spoke, he with great animation and she with a less engaging countenance than she typically wore. Miss Bingley was silent and red—from mortification or anger, Darcy could not tell—and the Gardiners were trying in vain to say some pleasant nothings to Mrs Hurst.

He and Elizabeth looked at one another, and he felt in danger of their sinking into total silence. He was torn between wanting to ask if he could call on her and not wanting to open his mouth until it was time to take his leave.

“How suddenly you all quitted Netherfield last November, Mr Darcy.”

He heard the suspicion in her voice. He bowed and said, “It was a rather hasty departure.”

She looked at him, but he added nothing else. She then purposefully looked at Bingley and Miss Bennet. “Were you expecting Mr Bingley now to be less sensible



of Jane's merits than when he first took leave of her in November?"

Darcy wondered when would the carriages arrive. Elizabeth was too clever by half. "I could not speak of my friend's thoughts and feelings any more than you could speak of your sister's."

"Ah, but in this case, I think I can," she murmured, still with an unyielding look in her eye.

This was not a conversation he could continue. However, Elizabeth was content to say no more about it, and it was now up to him to fill the awkward silence.

"Are you eager to see the panorama? Have you ever been before?"

She took the hint that the subject of Bingley and her sister was closed. "I have never visited," she said. "Are you here to see and be seen by good society, or to see far-off places?"

He smiled. "The far-off places, certainly. While I am there, I forget everything and everyone around me. It is a curious and incredible experience to feel immersed in a distant place while still being in London. I hope you enjoy the sensation."

She looked a little surprised, like she did not know what to say. To his great relief, the carriages arrived and everyone parted. Rather than join him back to the house, Bingley rode with his sisters. Darcy was glad he was not in that carriage; he could avoid a little longer the same reckoning Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst were experiencing.

He still thought Miss Bennet disinterested and motivated by fortune—or at least, her mother was motivated by fortune, and her daughter was complacent enough to go along with it. Darcy could admire her for not wanting to humiliate Miss Bingley in

front of her brother, but he could not think less of Elizabeth for speaking the truth.

Their manoeuvrings mortified Miss Bennet, but that did not mean she loved Bingley.

If I cannot keep Bingley from Miss Bennet, it is likely I would often meet with Elizabeth.

Parting from Elizabeth should have afforded him some comfort, but the hope of seeing her again reached his heart and made it beat faster. Darcy sighed to himself as he looked out the carriage window. He ought not to put himself in a situation where his admiration for her could grow stronger than it already was.

When he arrived in Charles Street, he asked if there were any letters, and to his relief, there was one from the office in Bishopsgate. Darcy went into his library with a request not to be disturbed and eagerly opened it. Thank goodness his candidness did not alarm the lady.

Now the endeavour felt more real. The lady's name began with an L, and the sporting tone of her letter charmed him. She wanted to know about him, and to his pleasant surprise, she too was conducting this business out of curiosity and to prove a point to a friend rather than from a desperation to be wed.

Now that Elizabeth had arrived in town and her sister reacquainted with the Bingleys, it was even more important to throw himself earnestly into his correspondence with his new friend.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:00 am*

### Chapter Four

Saturday, February 1, 8 o'clock in the evening

Dear Friend,

It is a relief to me that your opinions about the matchmaking endeavour coincide with my own. I appreciate you are as cautious as I am in this venture. For the present, I will enjoy our letters and the opportunity to become acquainted.

You commanded me to ask you about music, but talking by rule does not appear to be your natural style, so I will wait for another time to learn if you like Beethoven or sing duets. For me: yes, and no. Musical talent is something I admire in others, and particularly respect because I have no such skills myself. I would rather know how you are spending your time in town. I presume you are staying with friends since you are leaving so early. Perhaps you are in the company of your sister for whom you hope to prove this matchmaking business a respectable option? Are you visiting the shops and the public places as much as you would like?

I keep a house in town and have been here since before Christmas and will stay until Easter when my cousin and I visit our aunt. He is the one who convinced me to undertake this project, and he is also writing to ladies through the subscription agency because he knew I would never agree if he did not also take part. I am not a man guided by others. I keep my own counsel and am decided in both my opinions and actions. However, writing to you will be a more pleasant use of my time rather than spending the rest of the season arguing with him, so I conceded.

You might ask why he thought it necessary at all, and you also asked if I was a shy man made nervous talking to ladies. My cousin thinks me a better letter writer than a speaker, but I think his true concern is that I am too forthright for the world, and he is not wrong. My sister is shy, a quiet, self-conscious girl who has been timid all her life. She has a genuine fear of saying and doing wrong that prohibits her from joining a conversation. I admit I do not have the talent of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation or appear interested in their concerns. However, I am not shy and am quite disposed to share my opinion.

If you present to me any subject in these letters, I will try to argue you out of your opinion if I disagree, and I hope you will do the same with me. I have no patience for coyness or undue deference.

To that end, I will ask if you have seen this season's scene at Mr Barker's panorama? Some call it a triviality, a contrivance, but I look forward to the spectacle every year. I could spend an hour on the platform with the information sheet that describes every sight, being sure to walk all round and take in every view. One is transported to faraway places that one might never otherwise see. Now that you know my opinion of it, you must share with me your own. If you have seen them, do you think them ridiculous or enjoyable? If not, does the idea appeal to you?

Your friend,

F

Monday, February 3

Dear Friend,

I have done fewer activities than I might have liked since I arrived in town, but I am not here for my pleasure, or even for the pleasure of the friends I am staying with. I

am here for the sake of my sister, who I mentioned is disappointed in love.

She is not shy like your sister, but mild-tempered and full of every one of her friends' merits—and blind to their faults. Are you a doting older brother who spoils his little sister, or are you the younger brother who desires to take the action a man is expected to, but is thwarted by an older sister who knows all his childhood misdeeds? I am guessing the former, given how resolute and, perhaps I might even add, unyielding you seem to be. You have the manner of an older sibling and eldest son rather than one in the middle or youngest. Now I give you leave to guess where I fall in birth order and if I have any siblings other than the sister mentioned.

I admit to some satisfaction that you are not a shy man. It is difficult to engage with a diffident person. One could do it more easily in person with smiles and gestures, but in a letter, it would be trying. A serious or reserved person, I think I could draw out in person, and you do not seem reluctant toward conversation. Hopefully, you have the patience for playful discussions as much as rational ones.

You begged me to argue with you, and I suspect an opportunity will present itself, but not regarding the panorama. I hate to agree with you so early in our acquaintance, but it was like being in the scene depicted. I went for the first time recently and thoroughly enjoyed it. Do not fear that I am deferring to you or flattering your good taste. Women are instructed that is the way to gain a man's respect, and I am sorry to disappoint my newest friend, but I would never agree with you simply for the sake of catering to your taste. Let us hope I detest the next thing you say you enjoy.

You expected me to be a lively correspondent, but I fear I have nothing of interest to report. The disadvantage of many post deliveries a day in town is that I am pressured to write often, even when I have nothing to say. I suppose I am also eager to reply and am curious to know what you will say in response. When I sat to write, I had joked with my sister that I would tell you I am an orphan of a prosperous family and with the death of my last relation I am made an heiress, and write all manner of

gothic tales about my woes and misadventures in finding a husband and being lured by many villains. My sister said it would be unlike me to torment a respectable man, and she is certainly right. Besides, you might wish for a fortune, and I have been honest to say there is none. There would be no way for you to know if I am playful or serious if I wrote a story like that, and so I have no news to report to you.

Since you keep a house in town and all I have at my disposal is *The Picture of London for 1809*, what would you recommend I do to distract my sister, should she be willing again to seek some amusement? She is not a great walker like me, but I would like to see some remarkable object while in town, and if you have any suggestions, I await your reply.

Your friend,

L

Tuesday, February 4

Dear Friend,

I could not be certain whether you are the older or younger sister, and I suspect you aim to trick me and are withholding the fact that you have several brothers and sisters. You seem conscientious like a first-born child, but are generous and sociable like children in the middle often are. Perhaps you are the eldest daughter, but you fall somewhere in the middle. I do not believe you have the rebellious nature typical of a youngest child. You must decide if you want to tell me or make me guess.

I am the eldest, and there are many years between my sister and me. My sister sees me as more like a father than a brother. Perhaps you might say she is spoilt, but I am nearly all she has and would do anything for her happiness. I desire to do well by her, but I could always do better.

I thank you for not telling tales of a gothic heroine and for keeping your correspondence to the truth. I would prefer to know about you, L, rather than read whatever entertaining story you could tell. You wrote, as did I, that you enjoy books and the country, and I invite you to tell me something about one of those two interests.

Have you ever been to one of the Surrey Institution lectures? You hoped to detest the next thing I mentioned enjoying, so let your wit flow long in your complaints against the Institution if you have attended. I am pleased our opinion coincides regarding the panorama. I was prepared to argue its merits as an entertainment and educational means, but you have saved me a half sheet of paper. Now I can answer your question of what to do with your sister once she will leave home. If she went to the panorama, does that mean she is recovered enough from her disappointment to mix more with the world?

I am certain you know St Paul's, but have you been inside to see the curiosities? The church is closed except for services, but did you know that you can find admittance by knocking at the door of the northern portico? A person is ready within to take visitors to the staircase leading to the curiosities, for which he demands four pence. You can see the library, Sir Christopher Wren's model for the church, the Great Bell and the clockwork, but the most curious is the Whispering Gallery. Bring your sister with you and once you have climbed the steps, have her sit on the stone seat that runs round the gallery along the foot of the wall. They cover several yards of the seat with matting for visitors. Go to the other side near the door you entered and whisper with your mouth close to the lower and principal dome along the curving wall. Provided there is little noise, your sister will hear you.

Yours, if I hurry, perhaps this letter can make the 2 o'clock two-penny post and you can read it at 4, and then rush to Kelsey's and Gunter's, and I can have your sugarplum report at 7.

Your friend,

L

Thursday, February 6, 8 o'clock in the morning

My dear friend,

Sadly, your letter must not have made it in the 2 o'clock, for I did not get it until the 7 o'clock delivery. The great sugarplum debate between locations in Berkeley Square and Pall Mall must wait for another day. I live very near to Gunter's, however, and am more likely to frequent it than Kelsey's. I promise to be fair and impartial in my observations and report back my findings at my earliest convenience. You can always rely on me to be honest.

I have not yet read *The Scottish Chiefs*, but I have read *Thaddeus of Warsaw*. Did you know that Miss Porter has a sister who is also a novelist? Her favourite of mine is *The Hungarian Brothers*. You cannot accuse me of not being a reader of novels. I enjoy poetry and a well-constructed treatise, but I have read hundreds of novels, and my friends claim I am always buying books. I hope when asked what you are reading, you would proudly tell its name. If we were to meet in person, I think we would engage in the never-ceasing inquiry of 'Have you read this?' and 'Have you read that?' What shall you read when you are done with *The Scottish Chiefs*? If you want to continue with a similar theme, you might enjoy Walter Scott's poem, *The Lady of the Lake*.

In an earlier letter, you commanded me to talk about music, and I will answer in the hope of hearing a similar response from you. I enjoy Beethoven and any piece by Weber, especially his operas, but my interests are not confined to modern music. There is a concert of ancient music held in the Great Room every Wednesday in Hanover Square. I believe the only rule is the utter exclusion of modern music and



nothing less than twenty-five years old may be played. My sister prefers more variety, and although she is too diffident to complain, I know she only attends to oblige me. Do you take joy in music, or do you perform to seek praise? Do you practise diligently or not at all? I enjoy hearing music in the house, and if you told me you played and sang all day long, it would not bother me.

I want to write more, but I promised to meet my sister for breakfast. Friends of mine who also claim to be her friends wish for her to join us at a musical evening tomorrow, and I think she will need my encouragement. Thinking of my sister and her shyness calls to mind your own sister. How are her spirits? Does she remain at home? I hope attending to her, which is indeed admirable, has not spoilt your time in London.

Your friend,

F

### Chapter Five

Elizabeth read F's most recent letter in the drawing room while her aunt and sister talked by the fireplace. She had replied to him yesterday afternoon and would receive a reply tomorrow morning, or possibly even tonight. He was a reliable correspondent, and yet she was impatient to hear from him.

Her new friend seemed not quite solitary, but not one to enjoy a crowded room, either. He was not shy, but would probably prefer a quiet evening with a few friends rather than a lively party with strangers. For herself, she saw the value in both. She wanted to engage with the world and could mix with strangers, but she needed moments alone for introspection and to regain her spirits to be sociable once again. For all her friendliness, there were few people she truly loved, and F appeared to be the same.

F seemed like he would be a candid man when he spoke, and not likely to flatter or flirt. It was no wonder his cousin thought this correspondence was a better means for him to get acquainted with a woman and a stranger. A lady always liked to be admired a little, but perhaps F was not inclined to do that until he was certain of a lady's regard.

Of course, flirting would help improve that regard.

Did she want to flirt with F?

Elizabeth huffed to herself as she put down his letter. She did not want to flirt with her new friend. It was just a shame that women could not be forward in showing their

feelings. Men could say all manner of pretty and forward things that were still within the bounds of propriety, but if she hinted at her fondness for a man, her reputation suffered for it. Thank goodness for opportunities like this matchmaking subscription to allow women some margin to act a little more like men were allowed to.

Not that she had any interest in flirting with F.

She was, however, eager to know everything about him. In fact, she thought of him all the time, wondering what his opinion would be on some matter or what he might be doing at that moment. He had even grown a little more sporting throughout their exchanges. She doubted he would ever be truly lively, but he had seemed to relax enough to enjoy her teasing him and his replies had grown conversational and less severe. What would he be like in person? Would he listen as well as she hoped he would?

“Lizzy, does your letter writer have a name?” Mrs Gardiner asked her.

Elizabeth started. “Only an initial,” she called, hoping they had not caught her with her mind wandering to F. “There is anonymity until we decide to meet, and we have both declared that neither of us is in a hurry.”

“That is wise,” her aunt said with approval in her eyes. “The right man will come along at last—and he might not be this correspondent. So, what letter does your new friend’s name begin with?”

“F. Perhaps he is a Francis, or a Frederick.”

“He might go by Frank, or Fred,” Jane said.

“Maybe his family calls him Freddy?” Elizabeth said, smiling. “We could be Lizzy and Freddy at family gatherings.”

“What if his name is actually Felix?” Mrs Gardiner teased, and they all laughed.

“Oh, a Felix I could not countenance,” she cried. “He must have a steady and dull name for me to approve of him.”

There was a noise in the hall that indicated they were to have visitors, and Elizabeth hastily put away her letter from F. People rarely approved of the subscription agency in public, and she had no wish for anyone to know she was engaged in the business.

Bingley, his sisters, and—to her utmost surprise—Mr Darcy were shown into the drawing room. Elizabeth and her aunt’s gazes could not help but turn to Jane, who looked ill at ease and wore a pained expression.

“Good morning, ladies,” said Bingley cheerfully. “I am sorry we could not call before today. I wanted to, except my sisters have been engaged all week. But they were finally free today. They have been so eager to call, and I insisted on joining them.”

A quick look at his sisters’ faces told Elizabeth that it was the other way around. Bingley was determined to renew the acquaintance despite his sisters’ displeasure. Why Mr Darcy came, however, was harder to tell. Perhaps he had a penance to pay, too. He greeted everyone and then sat on Elizabeth’s side of the room without another word. She suspected had there been a newspaper within reach, he would have taken it up and ignored them all.

That made her more eager to provoke the reserved, proud man into speaking.

“And what brings you to Cheapside today, Mr Darcy?” she asked him directly.

He paused before answering. “Bingley resides with me while in town, and when he said he was paying a call, I thought it proper to join him since I saw all of you at the panorama. Had you a pleasant time?”

She answered succinctly that she did. It had been extraordinary, but she was not about to waste her time extolling its fine qualities to him. She would save her sentiments for F, a man far more likely to share her opinion than Mr Darcy.

Even from across the room, Elizabeth could see that Jane was troubled as Bingley chatted with her and their aunt. Jane knew how little her former friends approved of her acquaintance with their brother, and she probably was uncertain what to make of Bingley's intentions. Was he merely being amiable, or did he love Jane?

"I did not know you to be in town also, Miss Eliza," Miss Bingley eventually said when she had passed too much time in silence.

"I suppose your conversations with Jane here and in Grosvenor Street were so short, and you hurried away so quickly that she did not have the time to mention it. You must be busy with your other friends."

Elizabeth smiled, but Miss Bingley did not return it and looked away. Bingley, she noticed, looked embarrassed.

The talk, as it always seemed to lately, turned to the new and astonishing subscription matchmaking business. Her aunt looked at Elizabeth, who subtly shook her head. While she felt no shame in her letter writing, there was no reason to open herself to the criticism of Bingley's sisters and Mr Darcy.

"I see nothing wrong with it, in theory," Bingley said. "However, I would prefer to pay notice to a lady already acquainted with me. How could one get to know a lady without ever having the pleasure of hearing her voice?" His eyes strayed to Jane, and a smile crossed his lips. Elizabeth watched her sister blush and look away.

The silence that followed stretched until Mr Darcy said, "Do you think that a respectable man could take unto himself a wife through such a medium?"

Elizabeth was not sure if he was speaking to her, since she sat nearest to him, or if it was a question posed to the entire room, but it was Miss Bingley who answered. “Oh no! And no woman of refinement, or who has the self-respect she ought to have, would begin a correspondence with a stranger.”

Elizabeth felt she ought to be looked at, and her aunt and sister avoided looking at her.

“And,” added Mrs Hurst, “we should chasten these men for putting their desires into print.”

“But matches are made by meddling friends or a desperate mother,” Elizabeth said. “I think this gives the subscriber more choice.”

“Yes, and it is no worse than a woman wearing cosmetics and dancing with an eligible man,” said Mr Darcy, “or a man who puts an advertisement in the second column of the front page of The Times .”

His agreement surprised her, and she looked at him for a long moment. The idea of Mr Darcy subscribing to find a spouse amused her. He was so haughty and proud he would probably expect his correspondent to accept his proposal after one letter, if he even found a woman he could deign to write. No, Mr Darcy would never subscribe. He might be more progressive than she imagined, but he was still a man who thought meanly of those outside his circle.

“It is more respectable than that,” Elizabeth finally said. “Besides, what if one has exhausted all other means that are usually employed to find a spouse? Are they then to remain single for the rest of their life?”

“Well, it may be a viable option,” said Miss Bingley firmly before Mr Darcy could answer, “but not a respectable one. My dear Jane,” she said loudly, “are you in town

for the rest of the season? You must have told me, but I quite forgot.”

Jane answered she was to stay until May, and then Bingley questioned her about all the things she might like to do while in town.

As she watched Jane and Bingley talk, her with blushes and him with great animation, Elizabeth hoped they might reconcile. She then turned to see how Mr Darcy thought of their talking together. He seemed to look at their conversation with noble indifference, and she longed to know what his real opinion was.

As they rose to part and to put on hats and gloves, since they were still a little apart on the far side of the room, Elizabeth asked him quietly, “What think you on the matter of our mutual friends?”

“Have you an opinion on it?”

His affected unconcern angered her after the disappointment Jane had suffered. “You want to know what I think?” she whispered.

“You seem inclined to tell me,” he murmured, reluctance in his tone as he set his hat atop his head.

“You seem a direct man, and that trait is frowned upon in women, but I will tell you exactly what I think.” She glanced at the others to be certain they could not hear. “I think Mr Bingley is a slave to his designing friends, and unaware of the depth of Jane’s attachment.” Mr Darcy started, and Elizabeth knew she had been right. “Jane admired him last year, enough to love him and marry him if he asked. I think you and Miss Bingley disapproved of Jane’s connexions, and you want him to marry Miss Darcy instead, so you conspired to separate them. You have been a selfish friend.”

Mr Darcy went pale, and he avoided her eyes and slowly put on his gloves.

“Whatever else may be said, no man should marry a woman who is indifferent to him,” he whispered. “It would be a lifelong punishment.”

They could say no more without being overheard, and it forced Elizabeth to hold back her reply. She wanted to say who was he to decide that Jane had never loved his friend, but they stepped apart as everyone gathered near. Bingley encouraged Mrs Hurst to give a dinner invitation for two days hence that Mrs Gardiner accepted after a quick look for Jane’s approval.

When they were gone, Mrs Gardiner sat next to Jane on the sofa, put an arm around her, and asked, “Well, my dear? How are you feeling about all of this?”

“I enjoy his conversation, but how do I wish beyond that? He cannot have any designs on me now.”

“He did last autumn,” Elizabeth cried, “but was put off by his sisters and friend. Now he has thrown off their disapproval and is pursuing you as he ought to have done.”

“But should I want to be with a man who is so persuadable, or with one whose friends are against us?”

“They did all come today,” said her aunt, “and whatever they thought before, it seems they will give the public appearance of approval, and that ought to satisfy a woman in love. But Bingley must prove his constancy—if you will give him the opportunity.”

“Yes,” Jane agreed, “but I must meet him calmly, with no other expectations.” She then changed the subject, and her aunt obliged.

Elizabeth still thought Bingley partial to Jane, and she wavered as to the greater probability of his coming today with his friends’ permission, or being bold enough to come without it. She supposed since Mr Darcy called, he must not disapprove, but



after what he said, there was no doubt in her mind that he had been the principal means of separating them.

Mr Darcy was totally unsuspecting of Jane's attachment; and Elizabeth remembered what Charlotte's opinion about Jane's manner had always been. She supposed that Jane's feelings, though fervent, were little displayed. Whatever other oppositions Mr Darcy had regarding fortune or connexions, he did not want his friend to marry a woman who did not love him.

Despite what her sister declared, Elizabeth could perceive that Bingley's calling affected her spirits. Jane seemed reluctant to believe that he cared for her, but unwilling to give up all hope. If she reunited with Bingley, there was no reason for Elizabeth to continue to write to F to prove the scheme was a good way to find a husband.

She would miss F if they stopped writing. It was disappointing to think there would never be another letter from her friend. Elizabeth would keep writing in case it all came to nothing with Bingley. Besides, she very much enjoyed her straightforward correspondent.

Bingley's sisters decided the only way to make a trip to Cheapside tolerable was to look into the shops while they were there, and so Darcy and Bingley left them the Hursts' carriage and hired a hackney to take them back to his house in Charles Street. Despite residing in the same house, it was the first time they had been together without a sister or a servant in the room since the encounter at the panorama.

"Why did you not tell me that Caroline mentioned seeing Miss Bennet?" Bingley said when they were in the carriage.

Darcy sighed, even though he knew this conversation was unavoidable. "I did not think it warranted a discussion, and I did not want to raise your hopes that Miss

Bennet came to London for you.”

Bingley scoffed. “She came to town, called on my sisters, and you still say she does not have any interest in me? Did she seem merely polite at the panorama and today at the Gardiners’?”

From another man, this might have sounded sarcastic, but Bingley was so dependent on others’ judgment that it was a sincere inquiry. Darcy considered what Elizabeth had angrily murmured at him under her breath before they left. She saw their interference, even if Miss Bennet did not. If Elizabeth was not mistaken about her sister’s feelings, then he had been in error.

“If she admires you, then Miss Bennet has a serene countenance that hides her feelings.”

“But do you think she loved me then, after all?”

He shrugged. “I assumed she was indifferent, but it is possible that her serenity hides more ardent feelings.” Elizabeth’s superior knowledge of her sister could not be disregarded, but it was too soon for him to have seen any hint as to Miss Bennet’s true feelings. “If she cared for you, though, she is likely to be cautious now.”

“And my sisters deceived her, and she thought they were her friends.” Bingley sat back with a sigh. “Do I have any reason to hope?”

“If she loved you last autumn, and you left, she may not trust you to remain steadfast. It will require some work on your side to prove that you want to marry her and that your sisters will accept your choice.”

“And what about you?” Bingley asked sharply. “Do you approve of my pursuing Miss Bennet, or will you continue to dissuade me from the union?”

Bingley was anxious—and angry, as he had every right to be. Darcy felt the guilt that had pressed on his heart since he saw Miss Bennet at the panorama. “That you are in this position is partly my fault. I readily engaged in the office of pointing out to you the evils of such a choice—and those evils are still present.” He paused, thinking about Elizabeth. “But if she loves you and you love her, then there is nothing I could do but congratulate you.”

“All of your remonstrances about her family’s behaviour, their lack of fortune and connexions...I heard them, I truly did,” Bingley said, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “But it would not have prevented my asking her to marry me.”

“I am sorry,” Darcy said quietly. “I should have told you she was here. I genuinely thought Miss Bennet did not admire you, but if I was mistaken, then I hope you know that my interference was kindly meant.”

Bingley smiled as the carriage came to a stop. “I forgive you, and I hope I have your support. Caroline and Louisa are not as willing to admit they acted wrongly, and I know they prefer Miss Darcy for me over Miss Bennet, but...” He trailed off, and Darcy suspected what he might have said: that he did not love Georgiana and did love Jane Bennet.

He had shared their hopes for an alliance between his friend and his sister when she was older, but it was plain now that it would never happen. Besides, his sister deserved someone who loved her devotedly, and Bingley admired someone else. Darcy could be a good friend, or he could pursue his own selfish aims. There was only one choice to make.

“You do not need it, but you have my full support.” Darcy held out his hand to his friend and Bingley shook it, smiling and bounding from the carriage with more happiness than when he had first entered it.

A letter from L arrived in the seven o'clock post, and Darcy did his best not to run from the room to read it alone. Before he broke the seal, he paused. Elizabeth was now in town, and he could renew the acquaintance if he desired it. Could she have an interest in him that rivalled what he still felt for her? She resented his involvement in separating her sister and his friend, but if they were reunited, she would eventually forgive him, just as Bingley did.

A marriage of unequal affections would be a trial, especially with such a mother and no connexions or fortune. Her situation in life was decidedly lower than his own, but he could overlook that. If Elizabeth loved him, could he not disregard all the evils of the match just like Bingley had, and ask her to marry him?

But what of his growing interest in L? She was sensible, had a generous nature, and was full of vivacity and good humour. He found himself eager to read every letter and, more surprising, was eager to reply. Not a day went by he did not think of his new friend. He wondered if she was happy in town, wondered what she was doing, wondered if she often thought of him.

What did L look like? Elizabeth was one of the handsomest women of his acquaintance. L had called herself "tolerably pretty," but that could mean she was aware of her plainness, or that she was handsome but modest. Darcy decided it did not matter. He liked L's character, her disposition, so of course he would like her person if he ever saw her.

He turned the letter over in his hands. Should he pursue Elizabeth, or should he actually consider L? Her fortune was no better, and he did not know what her connexions were. She seemed a friendly, lively woman, and at the moment, L did not despise him for interfering with her sister's love affair.

As he broke the seal, Darcy reasoned he need not decide anything now. He was not encouraging either woman, although thoughts of Elizabeth felt more present in his

heart than thoughts of L. For now, he would write to L and see how that progressed, and do what he could do to learn if Elizabeth would forgive his interference.

Thursday, February 6, 2 o'clock

My dear friend,

I can forgive you for preferring Gunter's over Kelsey's only for the convenience of being able to walk to it. Were it any other reason, I would be quite cross with you for disagreeing with my excellent taste.

The Scottish Chiefs might take me the rest of my visit to finish. I am now beginning the second volume. I will borrow Lady of the Lake from the circulating library when I return home. My father rarely shares his library. He says that though he is prepared to meet with folly and conceit in every other room in the house, he wants to be free from them in his own room. While he would not begrudge me a book, he does not welcome interruptions. Have you a fine library wherever it is you live when you are not a young man about town during the season? What are your thoughts on female company in a book room?

As for music, I have common enough talents to entertain friends, but am not proficient enough to put on a concert before any company accustomed to a superior performance. I play and sing, and I practise enough so I am not laughed off any stage. I do enjoy it, of course, and it is not something I would want to give up, but I have no great claim to talent. I am well aware of my skill and choose pieces that will display me at an advantage. This brings to mind another question, and were I a different sort of woman, your answer could put an end to our correspondence. However, I am only asking out of curiosity and promise not to make any judgments about you regardless of your answer: do you dance?

Before I close, you asked about my sister, and also asked if I was cheerfully occupied

while in London. We are still very little in the world, due to our situation but also because of my dear sister's spirits. Perhaps you think I am resentful of staying at home by her side rather than be busy with public places and friends? She is my comfort, and I would do anything for her happiness. If she wants to sit at home with our cousins, I will sit by her side. If she wishes to walk past the shops, for she is not one for purchases for the sake of having something new, I will go with her. We live quietly in town anyway, but I would gladly forsake parties, dinners, balls, and attractions if it was better for my sister's peace of mind. She is a little confused and disappointed still. She has recently encountered the young man in question, and is uncertain how he feels, or even how she feels, I suspect.

You have a sister you care deeply for, so I hope you can comprehend my feelings. I would do anything for her because so much of my own happiness depends on hers.

I remain your friend, even if you despise dancing,

L

## Page 6

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### Chapter Six

L's letter had arrived yesterday evening, and Darcy sat alone at the breakfast table on Saturday morning, reading it for a third time. Bingley had left to spend the day with friends, and Darcy would visit Georgiana this afternoon. In the meantime, he passed over his friend's letter, considering the care she showed her disheartened sister.

L loved this other woman deeply, and with a loyalty and constancy he admired. She generously forsook her own amusement, her own desires, to be a companion to a girl who fled a family annoyed with her for being jilted. For all her light-hearted asides, L was a compassionate woman.

He wanted to be that manner of brother and friend. As Darcy set down the letter and took a sip of cold coffee, he had to accept that he had not been the supporter that Georgiana or Bingley deserved.

He had been deceived in the character of the companion he had hired for Georgiana and had almost lost her to a scheming man bent on revenge. Darcy's chest hurt with simmering rage every time he thought of Wickham trying to elope with his fifteen-year-old sister. He was grateful nothing worse had happened than Georgiana being cruelly disappointed.

Darcy reread the part of L's letter describing her fondness for her sister. Was he as considerate of Georgiana as L was of her sister? He tried to do better by Georgiana now by spending more time with her, by carefully assessing her new companion, by encouraging her often and trying to build up her confidence.

Have I been as good a friend as I have been trying to be a good brother?

He pushed aside his plate and ran a hand over his jaw. Darcy had always thought of himself as steadfast, trustworthy. He would do whatever a friend asked of him, but in Bingley's case, he had not acted as he should have. Elizabeth had muttered that she thought him selfish. Perhaps he was when compared to someone as kind as L—but was he truly selfish?

He had separated Bingley and Miss Bennet for all the admitted reasons, but his wishes for a future alliance between Georgiana and Bingley had also preoccupied him. And his attachment to Elizabeth had troubled him because the inappropriate behaviour of her family had made him reluctant to act on his feelings.

And so he had acted poorly by Jane Bennet, who was outside his circle, and poorly by Bingley, one of his dearest friends. His conduct was disgraceful, and he felt anew all the regret and shame attending to it.

Darcy rose, snatching up L's letter, and strode into his library to his writing desk. Being alone with his thoughts no longer appealed to him, and he sat to write to a friend.

Saturday, February 8, 9 o'clock in the morning

My dear friend,

Such affectionate behaviour toward a beloved sister is to be commended. You are a generous woman to show her such care and concern. You could not know it, but your letter caused me to consider how good a friend I am—and I am found wanting. I have spent the evening and morning since receiving your letter in reflection, and now realise that as a child, I was taught what was right, but I was not taught to correct my temper. I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit. I am



an only son, and was for years an only child, and I now know that I have been selfish and overbearing my entire life.

I recently learnt I injured a woman because she did not display the temper I typically see from a lady who wants to captivate a man. Because she was pleasant to everyone, because she was not fawning over my friend, I assumed she had no feelings for him. I am often the recipient of such officious attention. You will laugh at me, I suspect, to complain about women courting my favour and acting slavishly toward me when other men might boast of it. I am sick of civility and deference, of women parroting my interests without sharing them, of women who stand at my elbow while I write a letter and compliment my handwriting and offer to mend my pen.

Still, that was not a reason to misjudge a respectable woman and convince my friend she had no love for him. I have hopes that my interference is not irreparable, but my error has made me reflective. My character and view of the world need amending.

I expect that they will reconcile, and then another friend will be added to the number of those leaving their bachelor days behind and settling into matrimony. I enjoy not having my peace disturbed, I need my moments of quiet reflection, but I admit to often wishing I was not so often alone. As reluctant as I was to subscribe to this service, I do want a marriage of equal affections. But if I am the sort of person who could act as I did toward my friend, am I a person deserving of being loved by a worthy woman? No one can answer that but myself, and soon my typical confidence will return and answer a resounding ‘yes.’ But in this moment, I can admit—to you—that sometimes solitude is intolerable and I crave a confidant, and I wonder if I will find one.

You will accuse me of being dull if I talk only of introspection, and you will not want to write again if I speak so much of my failings. I will answer your question about dancing, and at great risk to our friendship because I sense your fondness for it. I like the exercise on its own and can admit that I am good at it. However, it is a

compliment I never pay if I can help it. There are too many expectations attending to a simple dance, too many mothers watching and young ladies' hopes rising. It is rare that I ask a lady to dance. Your next question would naturally be, would I ask you to dance if I saw you sitting down in a ballroom? I hope by this point in our correspondence you know the answer.

I would write more, but my cousin is here now and has been glaring at me this quarter hour, impatient for my attention. Perhaps he has not been as fortunate as me in finding a cheerful and charming correspondent.

And you would always be welcome in my book room.

Yours sincerely,

F

“What did you want to tell me that could not wait?” Darcy asked as he sanded his paper.

Fitzwilliam peered over his shoulder, and Darcy shifted to hide his letter and folded it quickly. His cousin huffed and returned to his chair. “Why won’t you let me see what you wrote to your tolerably pretty lady?”

“Because I used four-syllable words, and I would not wish for you to strain your intellect by trying to sound them out.” His cousin made a rude gesture with his hand but said nothing. “Are you going to let me read your letters in return? Did you write to every woman who had money to marry on?”

“Oh yes,” he drawled. “I have a dozen new lady friends between the ages of twenty and thirty, each with at least ten thousand pounds.”

“How do you keep them all straight?”

“I have a little chart in a notebook.”

Darcy suspected he was lying; there were not that many subscribers who fit that description. “Did that banker’s daughter with fifteen thousand pounds agree to write to you?”

Fitzwilliam looked at him with an air of affected indifference. “If you will not share what you write, why would you think I would discuss my letters? Dozens of women’s privacy would be impinged upon. Perhaps on this subject I should be silent.”

It was plain to him his cousin would not give a straight answer. “You, silent? I thought you would overflow with useless advice for me.”

“Do you need it? How is your charming lady? Has she given you her name yet? Plan to have the banns read?”

Darcy threw him a haughty glare, and his cousin laughed. He carefully sealed his letter, eager to put it in the post. “Why are you here when you could promenade with the other people wanting to be seen?”

“That is precisely what I intend to do, and you are coming with me.”

He shook his head. “I am going to see Georgiana.”

Fitzwilliam rose and put his hat on. “Then let us go to Upper Wimpole Street together, collect her and Mrs Annesley, and then we are all walking in The Green Park like the fashionable people we are.”

Darcy agreed and dressed for the bracing winter day. When they were outside, his

cousin said, "I know you are a reserved man, but tell me one thing about your lady."

"She is not my lady. She is an acquaintance." L was his friend, if someone you only knew through letters could truly be a friend. She undeniably held sway over his behaviour by her fine example. Between her model and Elizabeth's criticisms, it was vital that he change the way he behaved toward people, especially those outside of his circle. She was not his , but was it too soon to wonder if she could be?

"What is her name?"

They were not supposed to exchange names until they agreed to meet with the understanding they were considering marriage. "I do not know her name. She signs her letters as L."

They walked past Berkeley Square to Davies Street in silence, and Darcy wondered if Fitzwilliam had written to anyone with enough feeling to have learnt her name. Fitzwilliam was the sort to pester and question, but not him. However, he asked as lightly as he could, "Do you think you will find a wife through these means?"

His cousin shrugged. "Maybe."

"Do you ever wonder if any of the ladies you write to have lied about their character, or appearance, or wealth?"

"You do not intend to get attached, so it does not matter. Right?" Fitzwilliam asked him with a pointed look. "Or were you really talking about my correspondents?"

He did not want to discuss his friend, or investigate yet if she might supplant Elizabeth in his heart. "Yours, certainly. I am only writing in good faith and friendliness. I am not planning to get attached."

“Your lady L must not be enthralling you, then. What do you suppose L stands for?”

Darcy had never thought about it since he addressed the letters to “my dear friend.”  
“Louisa?” he guessed. “Laura, maybe?”

“Maybe she is a Lucille, and goes by Lucy? Or Letitia!” Fitzwilliam laughed a little.  
“What a pair. I can see it at the altar now: ‘I, Letty, take thee, Fitzwilliam, to my wedded husband.’”

He winced, laughing. “Letitia is an unfortunate name.”

“Your Christian name is hardly better.”

He conceded the point. “Speaking of L names, I am dining at Mrs Hurst’s tomorrow. She is hosting Bingley’s friend Miss Bennet, a woman I persuaded him to leave behind last autumn when she might have expected his proposal.”

“Why put him off?”

“The situation of her mother’s family partly, but that was nothing compared to the total want of propriety betrayed by her mother, sisters, and even her father.”

Fitzwilliam swore quietly. “That will be an awkward evening. You encouraged Bingley to jilt her, but he resumed the acquaintance despite your interference. What was wrong with the lady herself?”

“Miss Bennet was not like the obsequious women who frequently throw themselves upon my notice or upon men like me, and I assumed she did not love him. I encouraged Bingley in all the other reasons against the match, but it turns out she did have an affection for him. Miss Elizabeth, her sister, confirmed it when we spoke the other day, but I suspected it myself when I learnt she came to town for the winter.

Miss Bennet may not be openly affectionate, but she is not indifferent to him. And Bingley will overlook her lack of fortune and connexions so long as she loves him.”

“So she has low connexions, and an embarrassing family, and you did not think the lady admired him,” Fitzwilliam said, nodding to himself. “That would do it, even aside from the other matter.”

Darcy turned to look at him. “What other matter?”

“That you want Bingley to marry your sister.”

He blew out a long breath and watched the mist fade in the cold air. “Not any longer. I was wrong about Miss Bennet, wrong about everything. Now I must show her and her family that I do not resent them and support the alliance if Bingley pursues her.”

“You must pay the piper. What an unfamiliar situation for you.”

He nodded, feeling the weight of his interference, his guilt. He remembered the look and tone in Elizabeth’s voice when she saw through his scheme and called him a selfish friend.

As they walked on, his cousin added, “The embarrassing family came to town with her? And you have to show them civility? Can I come to the Hursts’ dinner too? I want to see this.”

Darcy threw him a dark look. “Not the embarrassing ones, although I could show them civility, thank you very much.” At least, now he knew he ought to. Days ago he would have baulked at the idea of showing the Bennets any notice. “An aunt and uncle from Cheapside who seem perfectly proper will be there, and so will her sister,” he added in a low voice.

Fitzwilliam looked askance at him upon hearing his tone. "Is she not respectable?"

"What?" he cried. "No one could censure Miss Elizabeth. On the contrary. She is lovely, pretty, witty."

After a beat of silence, his cousin said, "Rather like your correspondent."

They had turned down Oxford Street and were now about to walk up Wimpole to Georgiana's. By unspoken agreement, they ended their conversation. There was no need to discuss the subscription matchmaking business with his sister.

Dinner at the Hursts' still pressed on his mind. His letter was sent, and although he hoped for a reply today, he would likely not receive one until Monday, after he saw Elizabeth tomorrow at dinner. He would show her that her criticism was correct, that he would now be a generous friend, and he now wished Miss Bennet and Bingley to be happy together.

But once that was settled, did he want to marry Elizabeth regardless of the unacceptable behaviour of her nearest relations, or did he want to consider the possibility of falling in love with L?

Elizabeth sat on Jane's bed, rereading F's letter before they left for dinner in Grosvenor Street. She had felt a pang of sadness when she first read of F's loneliness. He would never use the word, but she identified the feeling even if he would not put that name to it. She knew that sense of one's friends moving toward something new while you stayed firmly in the past, of the solitude pressing a little harder than it did before. Although she had entered the subscription only to persuade Jane, she did want to marry. She wanted to find someone who loved her affectionately, someone who would speak the truth to her and listen to her opinions.

F evidently felt guilty about injuring his friend and the woman who admired him.

And in his wondering about his friend's love affair, he began to wonder if he would ever experience love of his own.

With Jane and Bingley likely to reconcile, it was a sentiment she could relate to. It showed a delicacy of emotion and mind she admired. F had a depth of feeling she had supposed most men did not acknowledge, or perhaps even feel at all, and she esteemed him all the more for it. She had felt a similar loneliness when Charlotte married and left Meryton, and she knew it would be worse when Jane married Bingley.

It saddened her that F—however briefly—wondered if he was capable of being loved. Her heart told her that he was deserving, and not only that, but he was capable of loving deeply in return.

“Are you pleased with your correspondent?” Jane asked.

Elizabeth heard the smile in her voice as she reread the letter. “Very much so.” It was too soon to say aloud that she thought she could fall in love with him.

The letter had come yesterday, and she had read it, considered it, read it again this afternoon, dressed for the evening out, and now had to read it again. On this examination, her notice was caught not by his feelings or his wish to be a better man, but by his attitude about women who tried to gain his notice. She was growing to like him immensely, but there was something alarmingly familiar about F disliking the intrusive attention of obsequious ladies.

“Lizzy, do you like this sash?”

She looked up from her letter. “You are lovely as always, and Bingley will think so too.”



Her sister blushed and turned away. Jane dressed with more than her usual care, and Elizabeth hoped that meant she was open to the possible conquest of all that remained unsubdued of her heart. If so, Jane ought to know that she should show Bingley more of what she felt for him. Hopefully, the disapproval of his sisters was not too much for Jane to overcome.

Jane asked, looking in the mirror, “Will you pursue an acquaintance with F in person?”

Elizabeth turned F’s sheets over to begin another perusal. A memory pressed on her mind as she read. “I am uncertain.” She felt Jane looking at her, expecting her to say more, but when she did not, Jane returned to her reflection.

F had written: I am sick of civility and deference, of women parroting my interests without sharing them, of women who stand at my elbow while I write a letter and compliment my handwriting and offer to mend my pen.

Any man of character would not enjoy being assiduously courted, but this exchange reminded her of what happened between Mr Darcy and Miss Bingley at Netherfield. Elizabeth remembered being amused by what passed between them that evening. The perpetual commendations on his handwriting, on the evenness of his lines, on the length of his letter, and the perfect unconcern with which her praises were received formed a curious and memorable dialogue.

Elizabeth specifically remembered Miss Bingley offering to mend his pen and Mr Darcy thanking her but insisting he always mended his own. Her mind spun with the fear that her correspondent was Mr Darcy.

With this horrifying thought in mind, she reread the passage about how he had wronged a woman, and now longed to make it right and act better in the future. Could he have meant Jane and Bingley? Her heart pounded, and a sickening feeling settled

in her stomach. She did not want to believe that her new friend, who seemed so likeable, so honest, so loyal, who was so often in her thoughts, was actually that proud and selfish man.

Although, if F was Mr Darcy, his regret and desire to improve was as plain as the ink on the page.

She felt restless, and begged Jane to excuse her as she paced the corridor and stairs, her hands shaking as she clutched F's pages. She could not believe that, of all the gentlemen in and around London, she was writing to Mr Darcy. There was no way F could be Mr Darcy because she liked F. His letters were direct, but she admired honesty. He seemed devoted to his family and friends. He was knowledgeable and curious. She wanted to know F better, she felt in time she could love him, so there was no way he could be that horrid Mr Darcy.

Mr Darcy would never subscribe. It is impossible, is it not?

Elizabeth blew out a breath as she reached the bottom of the stairs and turned round again to go back up. He would be at Mrs Hurst's tonight; perhaps a question about his family would settle her mind. Did he have a cousin, was his sister much younger and shy, did he regret his interference with Jane?

But it was just a coincidence, that was all.

A door across from the landing opened, and Jane looked out. "Lizzy, why are you pacing out here? I am not late, am I?"

"What? Oh, no, you have plenty of time," Elizabeth reassured her sister and re-entered her room.

Jane inspected her as Elizabeth sat on her bed. "Are you trembling? What is the

matter?”

The matter was that she was sinking under a sense of dread and disappointment. “Oh, I am perfectly well.”

Her sister hovered over her, looking concerned. “You do not look well at all.”

She could not admit her fear about F being Mr Darcy, but Jane ought to know what Mr Darcy said to her before he left Gracechurch Street. “Before we go to the Hursts, I must tell you something about Mr Bingley. Mr Darcy knew you were in town and did not tell Mr Bingley because he believed you were indifferent to him. He feared his friend would marry without affection and encouraged him to forget you. He said so to me quietly before he left the other day after I accused him of separating you because he disapproved of our connexions.”

Jane sat slowly on the bed, shaking her head. “I knew Miss Bingley’s role, but how could anyone say I was not fond of Mr Bingley?”

Jane had been deprived also by the low rank and indecorum of her family, but her own placid air had also contributed. Elizabeth took her sister’s hand. “You know I hate to pardon Mr Darcy, but in this case, he thought you did not care for Mr Bingley. Even Charlotte said to me you ought to show a little more of what you felt.”

“But you perceived my regard for him. Why could Mr Bingley not see it for himself, even if Mr Darcy could not?”

“Mr Bingley depended on his friends’ judgment. I think those who do not know your disposition could be uncertain as to your true feelings.” Jane looked terribly distressed, and Elizabeth squeezed her hand and smiled. “So you must make the most of the opportunity you have tonight.”

Jane hung her head. "Everything has gone wrong. There has been so much deception and uncertainty."

"But it can all be fixed," Elizabeth cried. "Mr Bingley now knows what his friends did, and he still called in Cheapside and made them come. So show him more of what you feel, and you will be engaged in a fortnight."

"But can I be happy in accepting a man whose friends are wishing him to marry elsewhere?"

"You must decide for yourself," said Elizabeth. "And if you find that the misery of disobliging his sisters and friend is more than equivalent to the happiness of being his wife, by all means refuse him."

"How can you talk so?" said Jane, faintly smiling. "Though their disapprobation should grieve me, I could not hesitate if Mr Bingley shows himself to be constant."

Elizabeth laughed. "Then I cannot consider your situation with much compassion. Show Mr Bingley more affection than is your wont, and it will spite Mr Darcy to be proven wrong. What a charming evening for us both."

"Lizzy," Jane admonished. "Miss Bingley tried to persuade me her brother was indifferent to me, and they all disapprove of me, but I do not blame Mr Darcy so much. He was worried about his friend's happiness."

"You are more generous than he deserves, but I can agree that Miss Bingley behaved worse by lying to you." Elizabeth kept silent on the possibility that if F really was Mr Darcy, then he deeply lamented his error. Miss Bingley showed no such regret. "I still must hate him forever, though."

Jane stood and took a calming breath, smoothing down the skirt of her gown. "Mr

Darcy called on us with his friend. I think he must feel sorry for his part.”

“I suppose it is possible, but I cannot forget what he did to poor Wickham, and he has shown no remorse for that.”

Her uncle’s voice carried through the door to say the carriage was ready. They went down the stairs, Jane with renewed eagerness and Elizabeth with a slower step. It would not be a pleasant evening for her.

She would ask Mr Darcy a question or two to find out if he might be F. He probably would be proud and silent the entire time, above his company and above being pleased. Typically, she did not give herself the trouble of talking or of listening much to him at all, but tonight it would ease her mind—and help keep him from bothering Jane and Bingley.

It was likely just a strange coincidence, and tomorrow she would laugh at herself for even considering they might be one and the same. She pushed from her mind that Mr Darcy’s name was Fitzwilliam.

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### Chapter Seven

When they repaired to the Hursts' dining room, Elizabeth watched to see whether Bingley would sit by her sister. On entering, he seemed to hesitate; but Jane looked round and smiled directly at him. Elizabeth caught her aunt's eye, and they both hid their smiles. Jane could never act by design—she was not Miss Bingley, after all—but perhaps Bingley would be persuaded of Jane's feelings before the night was out.

As the rest of the men entered, Mr Darcy took the seat across from her. She had not had one favourable impression of him since they met, but as his gaze steadily held hers, it was impossible not to note that he was extremely handsome.

F had described himself as “A young gentleman, tall and slender, dark hair and eyes.” He had not called himself handsome, but Mr Darcy still fit that description. How could she be intrigued by one and loathe the other if they were the same?

Mr Darcy tilted his head and lifted an eyebrow. Elizabeth started and realised he caught her staring. She shook her head, gave a little smile, and did her best to pretend she was only suffering from absence of mind.

“I was sorry not to see your sister in Hyde Park yesterday,” Miss Bingley said to Mr Darcy after the meal began. “I was hopeful of asking her more about the talents we heard at Lady Haden's musical evening last week. Miss Darcy is so talented herself I wonder if she struggled to keep her countenance.”

“My cousin and I joined my sister for a walk in The Green Park instead.”

Elizabeth had once found Miss Bingley's desperate attentions amusing, but tonight it made her sad for both of them. She was throwing away her pride for a man who did not want her. F had said he resented such notice from women, and Elizabeth had to suppose that Mr Darcy, or any man of sense, felt the same.

"I have not seen Colonel Fitzwilliam in a few weeks," said Mrs Hurst, when it was clear Mr Darcy had nothing to add. "That is surprising, since you are often together."

"Yes," Miss Bingley agreed. "Your cousin leaves one with the impression that he is the one who encourages you to attend evening entertainments."

Elizabeth swallowed a bite that had no taste. Mr Darcy had a cousin he was close to, someone who had some influence over him, just like F.

"If you know one thing about Colonel Fitzwilliam," Bingley called from his end of the table, "it is that he often says what he does not mean if it will get a laugh or make Darcy look bad."

She watched Mr Darcy give a dry smile.

"Mrs Gardiner, do you know Lady Haden?" Miss Bingley asked, with an emphasis on the title. "Louisa and I rode with her and her daughter in her ladyship's phaeton yesterday."

"I believe our connexions are very different," her aunt said calmly. "Had you a pleasant time?"

"Oh, yes, we saw many of our acquaintances." She turned to her sister. "Can you believe that handbill is still a topic of conversation? That business cannot remain open for long. Their cousin dared to ask her mother if she could subscribe to find a husband," she said to the rest of the table.

Elizabeth took a calming breath. Maybe in this conversation, she would learn Mr Darcy's thoughts on the matchmaking business enough to determine if he was her friend.

"It was all Lady Haden and Miss Novak could talk of," Miss Bingley went on. "This matrimony plan is still in circulation, and now people of rank are considering it. Louisa and I agreed with them that advertising for a spouse is shameful."

"I hate to disagree with such fine people," Elizabeth said with as much solemnity as she could, "but I think it could transform courtship as we know it for the better."

Miss Bingley scoffed. "It is a disreputable way to find a spouse, especially for women. I could not trust the morality of a woman who would initiate such indelicate contact."

"Why?" asked Mr Darcy in a low voice. When Miss Bingley only stared, he added, "I mean, why is it worse for women than men? Both sexes subscribe in search of a spouse, so why is only the morality of the ladies in question?"

Elizabeth thought this was a fair inquiry, and Miss Bingley had no answer. Mrs Hurst finally said, "Surely you agree that, for a lady, merely communicating with an unknown man is risky. She must be desperate to engage in such a scheme, and one must wonder why she is in a desperate state."

"It is reckless," Miss Bingley quickly agreed. "Why, it would be unseemly for me, as a respectable single lady, to write to you"—she looked to Mr Darcy—"a bachelor, even though we are friends. And the sole reason a man would write a single lady is to propose to her. For any other reason, he would be laughed at for being so forward."

"So a man would be mocked, but a woman pitied or reviled? Whatever our societal rules say about how a woman ought to act, women do try to engage men's notice, and



sometimes use cunning to do it. Is this subscription any different?"

Miss Bingley turned pink, clearly conflicted between what she felt was true and agreeing with Mr Darcy.

"The ladies who subscribe are doing what all ladies are told to do," Jane said, with a quick look to her that Elizabeth hoped no one noticed. "We are told to find an eligible man and marry, and preferably with little time wasted and little expense to those who maintain us."

Bingley spun his head to face Jane. "You are not considering the matchmaking business, are you?"

"I am not," she breathed. Elizabeth noticed how her sister kept her eyes on Bingley, and she hoped he could see how much Jane still cared for him.

The table fell silent as the two of them lingered in mutual gazes and smiles.

Mr Gardiner then said to Miss Bingley, "There is nothing clandestine in it, madam, from what I understand. This is for a mutually agreed upon purpose. Both parties are open to the possibility of marriage, and presumably the ladies have permission of their guardians."

"And it is a way for women to articulate what they want," said Elizabeth. "I could not directly say that I admire a man and would value a marriage of affection, but this subscription allows a lady to hint she wants a affectionate marriage. Or, whatever that lady seeks," she added when she noted the curious expressions she received.

"It is still an economic decision," Mr Darcy said, "even if one is not allying families and incomes. A man must have an income to support a wife and family, and a home to bring her to."

“True, but giving young people more control is a good thing, especially for a woman who needs to marry for her maintenance. They are more likely to find a partner who suits them as well as be able to afford to marry if they know all the particulars before they become too attached.” Was Mr Darcy a subscriber, or just a progressive thinker? “And a man who subscribes ought to know the lady will expect settlement papers and her family to ensure he can provide that home and income.”

“Miss Eliza, I am shocked that you see anything blameless in a scheme that allows women to promote themselves,” cried Miss Bingley. “Mr Darcy, you would not approve of your sister subscribing.”

“My sister is only fifteen,” he said. Elizabeth’s heart rate picked up. F said his sister was much younger than him, too. “However, women market themselves as potential wives in how they dress, how they act, how they display their accomplishments.”

“But that conduct,” said Mrs Hurst, “is done within the bounds of acceptable behaviour.”

“I disagree that there is any difference,” said Elizabeth. “One is dancing a dozen times a week, and the other is writing a dozen letters. Both are with the goal of learning if two people could suit.”

“Ladies sometimes employ arts for captivation,” Mr Darcy said, keeping his gaze on his wineglass. “Who wants to be schemed against or bargained for like a commodity on an exchange? A correspondence where both parties know the income, interests, and intentions of the other would cast aside all need for such arts.”

Miss Bingley did not look satisfied enough to continue the subject.

For the rest of the meal, Elizabeth hoped Mr Darcy approved of matchmaking by subscription because the debate was a means to end Miss Bingley’s attempts to

captivate him. She took a long drink and let the dinner conversation hum around her. She was no closer to confirming that F was not Mr Darcy. All she had were coincidences that proved nothing.

In the drawing room, the conversation between the ladies was polite and strained, and, thankfully, the gentlemen did not linger at the table. Bingley entered and sat by Jane, Mr Hurst ambled to the sofa and sprawled across it, and Mr Darcy entered amid a conversation with her uncle. Mr Gardiner was a good-natured man and only a few years older than Mr Darcy, but it surprised her to see them together, especially since Mr Darcy's expression showed none of the hauteur she expected to see from him while talking to someone lower than him in consequence.

When Mr Gardiner left him to go to the tea table, Elizabeth followed her uncle.

"What do you think of Mr Darcy?" she whispered.

"He seems a little stately for a young man, but he has an amiable temper."

Elizabeth blinked. "He was civil?"

Her uncle gave her a look as though she had said something peculiar. "More than civil; I would say attentive. We talked of your aunt's wish to visit Derbyshire, he asked after my sisters in Meryton, and then we talked of the panorama."

"But was Mr Darcy not very disagreeable? Or make you feel as though speaking to him was a great imposition?"

"He was perfectly well-behaved, polite, and unassuming." Her uncle took his cup and left her alone at the table, her mind a whirl.

She looked across the room and saw that Mr Darcy had joined Jane and Bingley. But

rather than monopolise his friend, he talked to Jane, listened to her responses, and, heaven forbid, he smiled once. While Elizabeth pretended to listen to Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst play a duet, she watched Mr Darcy move on to talk to Mrs Gardiner, who actually was attending to the performance.

Elizabeth was near enough to hear some of their conversation over the music. It centred on Derbyshire, what she knew of the character of his late parents, and then, to her surprise, Mr Darcy asked about her children. He then listened as her aunt answered with all the pride a good mother should have.

Who would have thought that the people whose connexions were not good enough for his friend were now people worth Mr Darcy's notice? Was he acting better because she had called him selfish? It was an admirable quality to recognise a fault and want to change it. F had done that, and rather than criticise him for his mistake or wonder at his honesty in admitting it, she admired his frankness and his willingness to change.

Liking her correspondent meant liking Mr Darcy for the same traits, and she dearly did not want to like Mr Darcy. He was a man who had treated Wickham horridly.

Elizabeth huffed and crossed the room to sit apart from everyone else. Why was he even soliciting the good opinion of her friends, of people he would hardly deign to touch his hat to in the street? He was insufferably rude and had hurt his friend, her sister, and Wickham. She wanted to like F, not Mr Darcy, and she still had no confirmation that they were not the same man.

“Do you regret there are not enough numbers for dancing?”

She looked up to see that Mr Darcy had followed her to this side of the room. While the sisters played, the others had formed for themselves a whist table. There must have been no other option but for him to pass a half an hour with her until the game

finished.

“I know your opinion on dancing,” she said as lightly as she could, “especially with ladies who are only tolerably pretty, so perhaps it is best that we are too small a number tonight.”

“What an odd thing to say,” he said, sitting down. “You could not mean yourself, I am sure, because you are a handsome woman—and I have asked you three times to dance with me.”

He clearly had no memory of his comment at the Meryton assembly. He had no right to be gallant to her, either. It made her senselessly angry to remember how dismissive he had been of her then, and she was just as angry that he was courteous to her now.

“I think it best we listen to the performance in silence,” she said. “Or, even better, you can attend the whist game.” She was resolved against any sort of conversation with him, and turned away with a degree of ill humour.

Let him waste his newfound politeness on the Gardiners and Jane. His current kind behaviour to her friends fuelled her anger about Jane’s lost time with Bingley, about Mr Darcy’s previous rudeness, and about how he ruined Wickham’s future.

“Have I offended you, Miss Elizabeth?” Mr Darcy asked in a tone of confusion.

The expected answer for a lady to give would be to say “Of course not,” smile, and apologise for causing his misunderstanding. But the desire to vent her feelings rose in her heart. Besides, any attention or tolerance with Mr Darcy was an injury to Wickham.

“Since you asked,” she said quietly while looking at the pianoforte, “no, you have not offended me .”

“If you mean your sister,” he said just as faintly, “I am aware of how my interference injured her, but I think my friend’s renewed attentions show the hope of Miss Bennet being in the fairest way for happiness.”

They glanced across the room to the whist table. Jane had a joyful expression that not even Mr Darcy could deny, and Bingley looked equally entranced. But what about Wickham? Even if Mr Darcy regretted what he did to Jane and Bingley, he showed no regrets about what he had done to that kind and charming man who now had nothing to his name.

“I meant another friend,” she said heatedly, “one who wished to enter the church but found that the living promised to him was given to another and that all pledged support was denied. What prejudice one must have to harm someone who grew up expecting that friend’s patronage.”

Mr Darcy slowly turned from the whist party to look at her, astonishment diffusing across his face. “I recommend, madam,” he said gravely, “that you refrain from speaking about things of which you know nothing.”

“I know all about the misfortune you caused him with your deplorable behaviour,” she whispered angrily. “From the first moment of my acquaintance with you when you said I was not handsome enough to be seen dancing with you, your manners showed me your arrogance, your conceit, and your selfish disdain of the feelings of others. No politeness to Jane and no notice of people from Cheapside can mend your selfish heart. You reduced Mr Wickham to his present state of poverty. You withheld the advantages designed for him. You are no gentleman.”

Mr Darcy’s face was red in anger, and the disturbance of his mind was visible in every feature. Elizabeth realised she was breathing quickly and instantly regretted every word she said. Not that she regretted feeling them, but speaking them aloud was unjustifiable.

Women could not advertise for a husband, and they could not confront an ill-mannered man. She was supposed to be pleasant and attentive, and instead she had lashed out in the most horrid way possible. She felt the heat of shame warming her cheeks. No matter his manner, Mr Darcy was still a man of consequence, and she had no right to provoke him in Mrs Hurst's drawing room.

He was struggling for the appearance of composure and seemed unwilling to open his lips until he attained it. She did not want to be seated next to him whenever that happened.

Elizabeth tugged off a glove and crumpled it as small as she could, hiding it in her hand and behind her skirt. "I seem to have dropped a glove between here and the dining room," she announced to the room. "I will just run downstairs to find it," she said with a nod to Mrs Hurst before fleeing as calmly as she could.

Darcy's heart raced away. As the whist game continued and the ladies played, he sat in bewilderment. He was absolutely astonished that Elizabeth had such a low opinion of him and that she had voiced it so publicly, so unfeelingly. The ill-natured attack of a woman who apparently held his judgment and talents in the greatest contempt tormented him.

He tried to appear calm as he pretended to listen to the music, but his mind turned over everything Elizabeth had said.

She had neither fortune, nor rank, nor connexion to recommend her, but Elizabeth was his equal in all ways that mattered—and she found him wanting. He knew he had acted meanly in the past, and he could not suppose that a few moments of conversation with her family would be enough to atone for his previous rudeness.

Darcy could not remember what he had said at the Meryton assembly when Bingley pressed him to dance. He never wanted to dance with anyone, and he recalled not

being impressed by Elizabeth until about a week or so later, so he could imagine saying something to the effect of him not wanting to give notice to a woman sitting down.

What sort of gentleman acted like that?

I admire her, and she absolutely hates me.

This was a blow. He had not expected her to be as bewitched by him as he was by her, but he had no notion that she held him in such contempt.

He had known at the Netherfield ball that Wickham had spread falsehoods about him, but he had thought it beneath him to lay his private actions open to her. His behaviour had been grounded in selfishness and mistaken pride, and now Elizabeth believed him capable of truly deplorable conduct.

Darcy rose and pretended to listen to Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley, glad that no one could hear how his heart still pounded away in anger and confusion. Elizabeth would return home at the end of the season and continue her friendship with Wickham. She might even admire Wickham more , believing him to be a victim of great misfortune at the hands of a villain.

When the ladies finished, he bowed to Mrs Hurst and, after complimenting a performance he had not been attending to, said, “By your leave, I will fetch a book from the library while the others finish their game.”

It was not an odd request from him, but it was nevertheless contrived. Still, he had to speak with Elizabeth while she hid in anger in the dining room. He had to tell her what Wickham was capable of, so she, or her sisters, could not be hurt. He would be a better friend than he had been before; a friend more like L.



Darcy looked into the dining room but found it empty. He walked into the adjoining library at the front of the house. “Bookshelf room” would be a more accurate description, for there were few books at all. Elizabeth was sitting by the unlit fireplace, but she leapt to her feet when she saw him.

“I am sorry for losing my temper,” she said, walking toward the other door into the hall. “It was badly done. I acknowledge you regret your error with Jane and Mr Bingley, but I think it is best if we do not speak.”

“For a moment, I entreat you to stay.”

Something in his tone or his look stopped her progress. She pressed her lips together, nodding, and avoided his eye. He supposed this was better than her storming past him, and he hurried to speak in case she changed her mind.

“You have called me selfish, not a gentleman,” he added, his voice shaking a little. “My parents gave me good principles, but left me to follow them in pride and conceit, encouraged to care for none beyond my circle. Your criticism was humbling, as much as was being caught in this deception with Bingley and your sister.”

“They will probably be engaged before the season is out,” she said in confrontation.

“And if that happens, I will wish them every happiness,” he said. Elizabeth looked as though she could not believe that he knew he acted wrongly. “Whenever that joyful event occurs, our paths will cross often. I must let my future behaviour be the proof you need to see of the changes I am making. There is nothing more I can say, but I will let my actions going forward speak for themselves.”

To her credit, the challenge fell from her eyes. She no longer looked like she was about to dispute every word he said. “I look forward to your future civility, and I can assure you of my own. There will be no further outbursts from me,” she added with a

faint smile of apology.

She curtsied to leave, but Darcy held out a hand and she stopped, although she looked longingly at the door.

“But regarding that other, more weighty accusation, of having injured Mr Wickham,” he said heavily, “I have much more to say that you need to hear. When you return home, I beg you not to give implicit acceptance to a word that man utters.”

“Why would I do that?” The furore returned to her voice. “And why are you so hateful toward a man who has suffered so much, and at your infliction?”

“Well, as to the former, I would not be surprised if Mr Wickham had an intrigue with every tradesman’s daughter and owes debts to their shopkeeper fathers.”

Her jaw dropped open, and Darcy regretted his impulsive retort.

“That is a baseless accusation,” she cried.

“In Meryton, perhaps, but I have dealt with similar repercussions in Derbyshire. And while I hope that acknowledging a defect can lead to its correction in my case, Mr Wickham is not principled enough to be capable of reformation.”

“You denied him a living. You simply hate?—”

“Mr Wickham himself resigned all claim to assistance in the church,” he interrupted, trying to keep his temper in check. “My father desired that a family living might be Mr Wickham’s as soon as it became vacant. But for years I saw his vicious propensities and his want of principle, which he was careful to guard from the knowledge of my father. When the time came, Mr Wickham wrote that he was resolved against taking orders, and expected some pecuniary advantage in lieu of the

preferment.”

Elizabeth’s face went white as she stared at him.

“He accepted in return three thousand pounds and wrote that he would enter the law, and I heard little of him, other than that he lived in idleness and dissipation. Three years later, he applied again for the presentation after he had learnt the living was then available. His circumstances were dreadful. He had spent the money I gave him, as well as the thousand pounds my father had left him, and was no closer to taking the bar than you are.”

“It cannot be true,” she whispered, falling into a chair.

“Do you think I would say all of this to you if I could not summon more than one witness of undoubted veracity?” he said, following to stand near her. “Or show you the letters we exchanged on the subject?”

“But why? Why would he claim you had refused to grant it to him?”

Darcy could give her no explanation she could understand, for how could an unsuspecting person comprehend the motives of a wicked man? “All I can say for certain is that his resentment of me was in proportion to the distress of his circumstances. He was as violent in his abuse of me to others,” he said pointedly, looking at her, “as in his reproaches to myself.”

Elizabeth covered her face with her hands, and he thought he heard her mutter, “I have been blind.”

Darcy swallowed thickly as he took the seat across from her. He wished he could leave matters as they were, but Elizabeth had to know the true depths of what Wickham was capable of.

He carefully laid plain his sister's history with Wickham, how she was removed from school and put under the care of a woman who had actually been in collusion with Wickham, how Wickham had followed his sister to the seaside, and he and her companion convinced her to consent to an elopement.

"I joined them unexpectedly just before, and Georgiana, unable to support the idea of grieving and offending me, acknowledged the whole of it. You may imagine what I felt and how I acted. Regard for my sister's credit and feelings prevented any public exposure; but I wrote to Mr Wickham, who left the place immediately. His chief object was my sister's fortune."

He sat back in his chair, feeling weary after telling the tale of one of the worst experiences of his life.

Elizabeth was sniffing into her handkerchief when she said, "I suppose he had also the hope of revenging himself on you."

Darcy exhaled a long breath. She believed him. "Yes, his revenge would have been complete indeed." She wiped her eyes and tried to compose herself. "Are you well?" he asked.

"You are asking about me?" she said through a strained laugh. "My feelings are acutely painful and rather difficult of definition. Your relation of events must overthrow my every cherished opinion of Wickham's worth." She looked thoughtful. "And I now see that his behaviour toward me had no acceptable motive."

"What do you mean?"

"He wants to marry for money and he knew I had no fortune, and so he must have been gratifying his vanity by encouraging my preference for him, one I see now that I incautiously showed."

“That is why I told you about Georgiana,” he murmured. “The rest of our history might have been enough to dissuade you of wrongdoing on my part, but you must be cautious around him while the militia remains in Meryton.”

She finished drying her eyes and wiping her nose, nodding to herself as she put away her handkerchief and tugged on her glove. It was time for them to return before anyone grew suspicious. He rose, adding, “I feel no doubt of your secrecy. Only myself and my sister’s other guardian, my mother’s nephew Colonel Fitzwilliam, know how close my sister came to losing everything.”

“Of course, although I will make it clear amongst my acquaintance that Mr Wickham is not to be trusted.”

He bowed; there was nothing more to say. Darcy picked up the first book he saw and left to return to the others.

To think he had considered encouraging Elizabeth when all of this time she had hated him, had not even thought of him as a gentleman. He had written to L as a means of distraction from yearning for Elizabeth, and all along she never admired him. And now that he had overcome his ridiculous scruples in considering a woman beneath him in connexions and consequence, she hated him. She believed his narrative of events, but knowing the truth would not make Elizabeth love him.

He would write to L as soon as he returned home.

## Page 8

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### Chapter Eight

Elizabeth had sat stunned for a long time last night after Darcy left the library. She had eventually grabbed the nearest book and pretended to read in the drawing room for the rest of the evening while astonishment, apprehension, and even horror oppressed her.

However, the recitation of events had not appeared to distress Darcy. He was reading when she returned to the drawing room, but when the whist game had done, he joined the others and continued to be pleasant to everyone. She could not attend to a single conversation, but she heard him talk of the panorama to her uncle, of Derbyshire to her aunt, of how was she enjoying town to Jane. He tried to press Bingley into attending a lecture with him. He even showed patience to Miss Bingley, who continued to court his attention despite his lack of encouragement.

She had thought all of Darcy's actions grossly violated everything right and moral, and it turned out Darcy was a decent man all along.

"Lizzy, are you still not dressed?" Jane asked as she entered her room the next morning. "Are you ill?"

Elizabeth sighed and fell back onto her bed. "No, I am not ill. Ashamed, disappointed, but not ill. I must stay here until I can at least affect being cheerful before my aunt and uncle."

Jane sat next to her on the bed. "Your happy spirits have seldom been depressed before. What has you so affected as to make it impossible for you to appear tolerably

cheerful?”

Elizabeth related to her the chief of the scene between Darcy and herself and what she had learnt about Wickham’s character.

“What a dissolute man. And poor Miss Darcy,” Jane cried. “It is too much to be believed.”

“It was all too much to be believed, but it is true, and I do believe it. Darcy is blameless, and all Wickham has is charm of air and address.” Something had to be done to ensure Wickham injured no one else. “Will you write to my mother and tell her about Wickham? She can then make our acquaintance in general understand Wickham’s character.”

“Are you certain? He might be sorry for what he has done and wish to reform himself.”

“How can you say that, Jane?” she asked, incredulous. “He lied to me three months ago about the living, and now he is pursuing Miss King for her ten thousand pounds. He is a villain, and they all ought to know it, save for, of course, his involvement with Miss Darcy. A few hints about his lies and wasteful life will be enough.”

Jane agreed to write to their mother. “It is a blow, to be sure. We were all so fond of Wickham. But why are you hiding in your room?”

“Because I behaved wretchedly!” Elizabeth sat up. “Pleased with the preference of one, and offended by the neglect of the other, on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I courted prepossession and ignorance, and drove reason away—where either man was concerned. Until last night I never knew myself, Jane.”

Jane squeezed her hand. “You are too hard on yourself.”

“I was weak and vain and nonsensical.”

“It is unfortunate that you should have used such strong expressions in speaking of Wickham to Mr Darcy,” Jane conceded, “for now they do appear wholly undeserved.”

She felt shame wash over her again. “Wickham’s countenance, voice, and manner had established him in my mind in the possession of every virtue. And Darcy’s reserve and pride, his dismissal of me at the assembly, made me think him the worst sort of villain.”

“I thought Mr Darcy rather amiable last evening,” Jane mused. “Even Bingley remarked to his friend that he was noticeably friendlier. You must not have observed because you were reading.”

“Hiding, you mean.”

She had watched Darcy while pretending to be absorbed by her book. Darcy appeared desirous to please, and free from the self-consequence and unbending reserve she had previously seen from him. He had heard her reproofs and was attending to them, just as he said his future behaviour would prove how he had taken her words to heart.

She remembered how Darcy had said he was resolved to behave better, and she rose from the bed to read F’s last letter again. Darcy had said to her last night something about losing the good principles he had grown up with. And there, in the paragraph about wanting to be a better person, F had written: I was given good principles, but left to follow them in pride and conceit.

“What is the matter now?” Jane asked when Elizabeth groaned and tossed the letter aside.



As she was deciding what, if anything, to confess about her fears of F being Darcy, a maid entered with a letter from the office in Bishopsgate. She also gave one to Jane, and they both read their prospective letters.

Monday, February 10

My dear friend,

You must wonder at my writing again when you are a letter in my debt. Perhaps you are even surprised at hearing from me so often since I began my first letter expressing a desire to not raise your expectations. However, as I consider the matter of where this might lead, I cannot help but wonder if meeting in person might be a quicker and more meaningful way to decide if we would suit, either as friends or as something more.

While not timid, I think I am ill qualified to recommend myself to strangers, and this is another reason my cousin suggested this matchmaking scheme. However, to improve this, I ought to practise, just as I ought to practise showing more grace and patience to those outside my circle. Do not fear that you are a scheme by which for me to practise, however. I genuinely feel now, unlike how I felt before, that there is no harm in knowing one another in person.

If you are not opposed to a meeting, I invite you to tell the managers of the subscription office that you are willing to meet, and then we can exchange names and directions. Once that formality is done, please tell me when, and where, and under what conditions you would meet. By all means, bring someone you trust, your guardian or your sister. I will meet whomever you wish to bring with you and in any place in London of your choosing. I leave it up to you to determine if you want this meeting to be in public or private.

You might think this an abrupt change, and I suppose it is. I have come to realise how

hard it is to truly know someone, and for others to know my genuine character. I wonder now if a proper acquaintance in person and sanctioned by your family might be a better course of action. Are you smiling in anticipation, or is your breath stolen in horror? If the latter, please do not fear an offer on first sight, my friend. I ask only for a quarter of an hour of your time.

Regardless of your answer, I remain yours sincerely,

F

A cold sweat broke out across her, and her hands shook the paper. What a startling change from how F began their correspondence. She should be grinning so widely it hurt. Until last night, she would have been delighted to meet F in person. Since they had begun writing, her thoughts were often with him. Her dear new friend, who read novels and cared for his shy sister, who was forthright and did not demand a woman's deference, who was clever and introspective, who wanted to trade his solitary hours for the company of a woman who loved him, might be the man best suited to make her happy.

But what if F was Darcy?

The mortification of arranging a meeting and then seeing the name Fitzwilliam Darcy on a letter from the matchmaking office would be wretched. And then, what would Darcy feel when he saw the name Elizabeth Bennet? It would devastate him, certainly. He had wanted to meet a friendly woman who would talk with him about books, not a woman who misjudged him for months. Darcy would never tolerate meeting once he saw her name, and then every future encounter would be a thousand times worse than it was already destined to be.

But if she refused to meet, her friendship with F would sink, because how else would he interpret her reluctance but as her disinterest in their possible relationship? But

there was still the chance that she was wrong and he was not Darcy. Her judgment had not been sound as of late, after all.

Could she convince F to meet without involving her uncle or the matchmaking office, at least not at first? She could meet him in a public place, assure herself that F was not Fitzwilliam Darcy, briefly greet him, tell him she would like to continue their acquaintance and then go through all the formalities with the office and continue with a proper call in Cheapside.

But how could she arrange a meeting when she could go nowhere alone? Elizabeth set aside the letter and saw Jane using her writing table.

“What are you writing?”

“I received a note from Caroline. She wishes for my company on a walk in The Green Park tomorrow.” Elizabeth’s face must have expressed her opinion because Jane rushed to add, “She also says that her brother will be there and particularly hopes that I can come. He desires my presence so much that he will send a carriage to bring me to that part of town.”

Elizabeth put aside her fears about Darcy being her correspondent. “That is lovely news, Jane! Bingley wants to spend time with you and is insisting his sister arrange it.”

Jane blushed a little, and Elizabeth smiled at her sister’s renewed hope. “I think that since Caroline is the one inviting me, my aunt will not be concerned about letting me go, even if she insists on sending a man with me in the carriage.”

“Would you like me to join you?” Elizabeth cried, a little louder than she should have. “It might make it easier for my aunt to allow you to go, and I can distract Miss Bingley in case you need to lean on Bingley’s arm.”

“You would do that for me? Thank you.”

Elizabeth felt guilt wash over her. She would have gone with Jane in any event, anything to help Jane find happiness with Bingley. But now she could beg F to meet her tomorrow in The Green Park. The park was enclosed with an iron railing and was not very large. Surely they could find a place to run into one another a little apart from her friends.

“Jane, what time is Bingley’s carriage coming tomorrow? And you said The Green Park?”

While Jane answered and then finished at the table, Elizabeth composed a letter to F in her mind. She could tell him what she would wear, and when she would be there, and come up with some excuse for the clandestine nature of this first meeting. She could explain it away later with nerves or girlish fears or some other foolishness. Perhaps she could even tell F that she was afraid he might have been a man who had every reason to hate her and then they could laugh about it together.

The similarities she noted between F and Darcy were still there, and a meeting would put all of her fears to rest—or be the single most disastrous meeting ever to take place in London.

Monday, February 10, 11 o’clock

My dear friend,

When I received your last, my feelings were closer to excessive surprise than gleeful smiles or cries of horror. I am astonished that you wish to meet, but very gratified. I agree it is best to meet in person to learn if the amity I think we have both felt through the pen will translate to when we must speak to one another in a drawing room.

We neither of us have met anyone in this manner, and I wonder if I might alter your plans for an initial meeting? First impressions can have a powerful impact, for better or for worse, and I think we ought to look on one another in a brief and, dare I say, cursory manner before we go through the formalities of names and addresses through the subscription office.

Would you be amenable to a meeting tomorrow afternoon in The Green Park? I will walk with my sister and another lady and gentleman at 3 o'clock, and I will do my best to lead our group to the northwest corner by half-past. My hair and eyes are dark. I will wear a blue bonnet, and a posy of pansies pinned to my pelisse. I thought pansies fitting to identify me, as they are symbols for thinking of someone, and for hoping that they think of you in return. You, my dear friend, have often been in my thoughts. You are welcome to approach me when you see me. Perhaps you could also find a flower seller with pansies and attach them to your coat? Otherwise, I will be forced to approach every tall and slender man asking if he is F, and I hope you would spare me that mortification.

I tease, but I realise how peculiar this seems. I do not doubt your honour, and I hope my request does not place me under suspicion. If our encounter in the park is to our mutual satisfaction, I look forward to communicating our intentions to both the matchmaking office and our families and continuing our friendship in person.

Despite my curious request, I rejoice in the hope of meeting you and remain,

Your friend,

L

Darcy's mind passed over the letter as he hurried to Colonel Fitzwilliam's rooms in the bachelor quarters near St James's. It was five o'clock, and if he did not hurry, he would miss his cousin before he went out for the evening. Darcy rarely sought

counsel for anything related to society or his friends, but he was not a man who refused to admit when he needed help. He was astonished at L wishing to meet him unknown to her guardians. It felt horribly inappropriate, and he could not understand it. It was not an indiscretion that he dared to attribute to an excess of love.

Fitzwilliam's set in the Albany would likely be beyond his ability to afford were it not for his father supplementing his income. Darcy entered an entrance hall, and there were two sitting rooms in the front, a bedroom at the back, with kitchen, cellars, and a room for a servant below. A single man could entertain in style here without having to take an entire townhouse for the season.

His cousin gestured for him to come into his smaller and cosier sitting room. "You came all this way just to see me? I am flattered."

Darcy looked at him askance as he sat. "It is half a mile from my house."

"You left your elegant house in Charles Street to come all the way to my humble bachelor quarters. To what do I owe the honour?"

"I come here all the time. The porter knows me by sight." This teasing had to end; Darcy needed help. "No younger son of an earl need be ashamed to put the Albany direction on his card."

Fitzwilliam threw himself into his chair with a smile. "But truly, why are you here?"

"Do I need a reason?"

"Well, we were to see each other at Lady Courtney's ball on Thursday, so unless you need help to select a waistcoat, I am not sure why you came in person at this hour. I was about to dress to go to a concert with a friend."

“I received a letter from L,” he said in a rush. “I asked her to meet.” His cousin’s face lit up, but Darcy threw out a hand. “But she has an odd request for me.” He handed over L’s letter and sat back in his chair to watch his cousin read. “What does this mean? Why does she want to arrange this stolen meeting?”

Fitzwilliam read, nodding to himself, and returned the sheet to him. “She does not want to involve her parents right away. Perhaps they are too eager to make her another man’s responsibility, and she does not want to rush things. And she might be worried that you will take one look at her and announce she is ugly, and she would rather not be humiliated in front of her relations.”

Darcy gasped. “I would never be so cruel!”

“Not cruel, but you might be severe, and I doubt you could hide your disappointment if you expected pretty, and she was not even tolerable.”

“You cannot think I am so petty. Besides, I am fond of her. I am already predisposed to approve of her.”

“Or maybe she’s afraid ‘tall and slender’ means unkempt and gangling. She wants a proper look at you before she gives away her name in case you are hideous.”

Darcy gave a faint smile at his cousin’s attempt at humour. “I doubt that. I came here for real advice. I admire her; I want to meet her, and I think she feels the same. She says she is writing with her friends’ permission, so why this strange meeting in The Green Park before someone can properly introduce us?”

Fitzwilliam shrugged. “It is not so strange, you know. She might not want to raise expectations with her guardians if you can both tell within five minutes that you cannot stand one another. It is not the first time a man or a lady has put themselves in the way of their object.”

“This is not the same as noticing a man in the lane and deciding to go for a walk or walking a path a lady habits hoping to encounter her. In those instances, one has already been introduced to the person they admire and are only hoping to talk with them more. She wants to meet me for the first time with no one knowing about it.”

“If you are so against it, will you refuse?” his cousin asked, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “You have two options: agree to her curious terms, or tell her it is inappropriate and refuse.”

He wanted to meet L. He would never forget Elizabeth if he did not get to know another woman. L’s fortune was nothing, but he could afford to marry wherever he liked. L had a pleasant nature, a stock of vivacity and good humour. Aside from this request, she was sensible. She could be just the sort of woman to attract him.

“She is bringing her sister,” he said slowly, “and it is in a public place. If this is what the lady wants, and since we will not be solus cum sola , I can do as she asks.”

It was still an odd request, as far as he was concerned. He was perfectly willing to give his name and shift their acquaintance into public view. She was not; or at least not until they had seen each other in The Green Park tomorrow at half three. But he wanted L to feel at ease, and this manner of initial meeting was what she wanted.

He was uncertain what worried him more: the curious nature of their meeting or the fact that he was finally meeting L.

“I will join you tomorrow,” his cousin said. Fitzwilliam rose to gather his coat and gloves.

“What?” he cried, standing as well. “Why?”

“To keep that worrisome look off your face so this mysterious L does not flee into the



trees thinking you hate her as soon as you look at her,” he said.

Darcy felt embarrassed at having come here for counsel. He deliberated, rationalised, reasoned, weighed every possibility, and came to quick decisions on his own. He then acted on that decision without looking back. It was unlike him to feel troubled about making a choice.

“If she is this concerned, why meet me at all?” he asked quietly. “She might have said she wanted to write for longer before deciding.”

“Women are curious and delicate creatures,” Fitzwilliam said, looking round the room. His gaze settled upon his hat thrown on a chair, and he put it on. “Best not to question it and just do as the lady asks.”

“You are probably right. You need not come with me tomorrow, you know,” Darcy added as they made their way to the door.

“No, you will need me with you while you wait so you do not become cross or change your mind. And Miss L will be with her party, and you will want me to distract them so you only have to be charming to one person. Pleasantness to four strangers is a bit much to expect from you.”

Darcy ignored the slight on his civility. “I do not want to put you to an inconvenience.”

“I was meeting a friend to ride anyway, so it is no trouble to change our plans to walk in The Green Park instead.” He paused. “Well, they would always prefer to ride—fond of horses, like me—but they will want to meet you more than they want to ride.”

“Who are you meeting?” he asked hurriedly. The last thing he wanted was for

Fitzwilliam's entire regiment to know his business.

"No one you know, yet. I will introduce you tomorrow. And they do not know you are a subscriber. Here we must part ways," his cousin said when they reached a hackney stand at Piccadilly and Bond. "Go home, stop worrying, find some pretty pansies, and I will see you tomorrow at the park entrance behind St James's at quarter past three."

Fitzwilliam hailed a hackney, and Darcy returned on foot to Charles Street. He dearly hoped that L's guardians were in favour of the scheme and not likely to be a hindrance to their friendship. He was afraid they might punish her if they learnt she had arranged a clandestine meeting, or blame his influence for her scandalous behaviour. It would lead to problems if their relationship progressed beyond tomorrow's encounter.

He had a positive sense of his own self-worth, but he could not help but fear L was hiding something, and wonder why she was reluctant to make him known to her relations. However, he wanted to be more gentlemanly, and a true gentleman avoided whatever may cause a concern in the minds of those he was with.

If L wanted him to wear a sprig of pansies and meet in the park, if he was to be a better friend and gentleman, this is what he would have to do.

### Chapter Nine

In the northeast corner of the park, there was a fine body of water, and near to it was the gravel path along the eastern boundary called the Queen's Walk. Elizabeth had hoped to steer her group in that direction to encounter F, but Miss Bingley was making that difficult.

Although the potential couple tried to talk with one another, Miss Bingley insisted on inserting herself into her brother's conversation with Jane. She was holding onto his arm while Bingley tried in vain to speak with Jane, who was on his other arm. Elizabeth walked alone next to them.

"Caroline, it looks to be getting narrower; would you like to walk with Miss Elizabeth?" he said as they turned down another path.

"Miss Eliza is content where she is, I am sure. She is a great walker, you know, and I would only slow her down. Besides, I would rather get to know my dear Jane better."

Elizabeth wished Bingley would have said "So would I" and dropped his sister's arm, but that would not happen, and now it was three thirty and she was nowhere near to the northeast section of the park.

"Actually, Miss Bingley, I am rather tired and would benefit from my sister's arm if Mr Bingley can spare her."

She would rather have dropped farther behind on purpose and gone on alone, but even as enchanted by Jane as Bingley was, he was not about to lose her sister in the

park.

Jane agreed, and Elizabeth went in front of Miss Bingley and her brother to walk with Jane. Now she could lead them away from the centre of the park to where she would meet F. Elizabeth brought a hand to the pansies pinned to her bodice, patting it to be certain they were in place. She was all anxiety to have the meeting over and done with, to have her fears about F being Darcy refuted once and for all.

Her stomach was fluttering with nerves at meeting F. Would they feel an instant attraction to one another, or would it come on gradually like it had through their letters?

“You are going a little fast for me,” Jane said. “I thought you were tired.”

Since the moment was at hand, she had to confess. She had wanted to slip away so only some cows would see her walking to that side of the park, but her company was not as inattentive to her as she had hoped.

“Do not react. I arranged to meet F privately rather than through the matchmaking office,” she whispered to Jane. “He is on the other side of the park waiting for me.”

To her credit, only a small “Oh” of surprise escaped Jane’s lips, although her face showed complete shock.

“It will be well, I promise,” Elizabeth murmured. “I told him what I was wearing, and we both wear a posy of pansies. We will smile, say how pleasant it is to meet, exchange names, be embarrassed and awkward for a moment or two, and then I will tell him we should exchange information through all the formal channels, and he will call in Cheapside.”

“What about us?” Jane asked, tilting her head at the pair behind them.

“We won’t talk long, certainly not long enough to introduce you. I won’t even be able to because I do not know his name,” Elizabeth added, laughing a little too loudly. She was nervous, excited, and felt an eagerness to meet F and a sliver of terror that F was Darcy.

This meeting would put to bed her fear, and she would have a good laugh about it.

When they were nearer to the Queen’s Walk, she saw a tall man pacing along some trees while another man leant against the first tree, arms crossed over his chest, talking to the man pacing. A woman in grey stood next to him. Occasionally, the man pacing would stop, crane his neck to look one way, pace again, and then look the other direction. There were trees between them that often hid the man from her view, but his walking would bring him out of and into her sight.

Even from this many yards away, Elizabeth could tell that it was Darcy.

Her stomach sank, and briefly her vision spun. And then she felt crushing disappointment. Her friendship with F was now over, and she admired him so much. How startling that she had been writing to Darcy all along and had somehow grown fond of him. The realisation that followed was equally alarming: if she liked F, then she liked Darcy. If she wanted to flirt with F, then she wanted to flirt with Darcy.

And Darcy hated her.

It would be a humiliating moment when Darcy saw who L was, and he would be horribly disappointed. She would see it in his face the moment he realised what he had done. She was poor, unconnected, and had embarrassing relations. And even if those concerns could be overlooked, she had mistaken his character and accused him of being a terrible person.

“Change bonnets with me!” she cried.

“What? Why?” Jane asked, even as she untied her own hat’s ribbon.

Elizabeth pulled her off the gravel path and gave a false smile to Bingley and Miss Bingley, keeping her back to the northeast corner. “I am afraid I do not like my hat.” She ripped off her blue bonnet. “Jane is good enough to exchange with me.”

“I do not think the way you have styled your hair will fit inside my hat.”

“It does not matter,” she muttered, shoving her hat into Jane’s hands and trying to hide behind her.

“You can go ahead; Lizzy and I will catch up,” Jane said to Bingley. When they left, Jane turned back to her and her face expressed all the confusion her lips had yet to utter.

“F is looking for a woman with dark hair and eyes, and a blue hat.” Elizabeth tore off the pansies and ground them under her foot.

“But he will be disheartened if you never appear.”

“I cannot meet after all. Let me stay with you and your friends.” She looked around Jane toward where she had seen Darcy and his friend. At any moment, Bingley and Miss Bingley would be upon them. “Should we turn back? We could turn back, yes?”

“Why?” Jane asked firmly, tying Elizabeth’s ribbon for her. “Why are you doing this to a man whom you forced to meet in this strange way?”

Elizabeth heaved a sigh. It was so awful. She admired a man she previously thought she hated, who now had every reason to dislike her. “My dear friend F is Mr Darcy.”

Jane’s expression went entirely blank. After a long moment she said, “F for

Fitzwilliam? Oh, my goodness.” She then grinned. “But how lovely!”

“Lovely?” Elizabeth shrieked. “It is in every way horrible!”

“But I thought you liked F? And you cannot hate Mr Darcy now that you know the truth about his character. And he was civil the other night. Why not go over and admit you are his correspondent?”

“Because I was a fool! Wickham’s social powers gained him my regard, whereas Darcy was proud and silent. I acted despicably, Jane! Who was the one who had real, substantial good? The one I treated horribly.”

“He is also the man you have been writing to with enough fondness to want to meet you properly, and a man you have been acquainted with for months.”

“And what do you think will happen when Mr Darcy realises L stands for Lizzy, as in Elizabeth?”

Jane grew thoughtful. “You know, he always looks at you a great deal, and he even asked you to dance at Netherfield.”

Elizabeth felt incredulous. “Darcy must hate me. I unjustly condemned and upbraided him at Mrs Hurst’s!”

Jane looked to the trees where the Bingleys had now met with Darcy and his friend. “I think you should give him a chance. Mr Darcy liked you well enough to meet in this strange way.”

“He likes L, not me . He loathes Elizabeth Bennet.”

“His opinion of you cannot be as poor as you fear it is.”

“No, no, absolutely not. I called him selfish and said he was not a gentleman.” She covered her face with her hands. “I favoured the man who tried to seduce his sister.”

Jane tugged down her hands and pulled her back to the path. “Well, you can avoid telling him you are L, but our friends have met, and now there is no avoiding greeting him.”

Elizabeth felt on the verge of tears as they approached. Darcy stood talking with Bingley and his sister, but his eyes moved above their heads to look at the approaching paths. The other man with him had come forward to greet them and was now joined by the woman in grey she also did not know. Elizabeth watched them exchange greetings, and then Darcy looked back to the path and saw her.

He absolutely started when their eyes met, and for a moment seemed immovable from surprise.

“Ah, there they are,” Bingley said as Jane dragged her to join the group. “Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, may I present Darcy’s cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

The colonel turned from the other woman to give them all a pleasant smile. He was about thirty, not handsome, but entered into conversation directly with the readiness and ease of a well-bred man. Darcy paid his compliments to them and met Elizabeth with every appearance of composure. Elizabeth merely curtsied without saying a word.

What did he feel on seeing her? He likely thought very little of her, especially since he was still looking at the women on the other paths, hoping to see a brunette in a blue hat wearing pansies.

It was all too humiliating.



She felt wan and sick and hoped she did not appear it. She said everything agreeable, and was torn between watching Darcy and not looking at him at all from the shame she felt about what happened at the Hursts'. He greeted her kindly, but after the initial surprise upon seeing her faded, he returned to scanning the park.

Her eyes, however, stayed on the small collection of pansies pinned to his coat.

The other woman who stood by his side had yet to ask to be introduced. She appeared about the colonel's age, with a full figure but by no means handsome, although her countenance was agreeable. While Colonel Fitzwilliam talked about this and that with the Bingleys and Jane, the lady resumed talking to Darcy.

"As I was saying, I am soon going to Beaumont Street to purchase one of Mr Marshall's portraits. He painted one of my horses, although he cannot know it was for me. He thinks my father commissioned it."

"Fitzwilliam said you were a proficient rider," Darcy answered in an admiring tone with another glance down the path.

"Yes, and I am interested in racehorses too, if you will keep the secret," she said with a laugh. "Your cousin said you bought a pair of chestnuts last year at Tattersalls."

"Yes, but they are at Pemberley," he said, his gaze searching the distance for a woman who would never appear.

"Ah, for your curricule? Colonel Fitzwilliam says you drive rather fast." The lady's voice lifted hopefully.

Darcy turned from the path and gave her a smile. "From what I hear, not fast enough for your liking, madam."

She laughed, and their conversation shifted to thoroughbred bloodlines and The General Stud Book.

They seemed to not know one another well, but were having a friendly conversation. Elizabeth felt a pang of regret at seeing Darcy be civil and amiable with another woman. When L did not meet him, perhaps Darcy would take an interest in this lady. She was acquainted with his cousin, was well-dressed, affable, and they seemed to have some things in common.

The lady noticed her staring, and Elizabeth dropped her gaze. There was no reason to be jealous of Darcy talking to another woman. Besides, this lady was not the one he was looking for. He wanted L, but when L did not show, he would naturally look elsewhere for a wife. Her emotions were in total confusion.

“Would you introduce me to your friends?” the woman said to Darcy. He nodded, but when he hesitated and only stared at Elizabeth, Colonel Fitzwilliam introduced the lady to the group.

“May I present my friend Mrs Sullivan? Her father has recently passed, and she has taken a house in Harley Street.”

At the mention of this location, Miss Bingley narrowed her eyes. “Charles, we ought to take another turn with Jane before we return her home.”

Miss Bingley’s slight against Mrs Sullivan made Elizabeth insist on staying, despite the awkwardness with Darcy. “I am still tired,” she said sharply. “I would like another moment or two.”

Now the group had to remain, and Miss Bingley was determined to monopolise Darcy’s attention and ignore Mrs Sullivan. Bingley and Jane hardly knew what to say after her rudeness, but thankfully Colonel Fitzwilliam recovered with another

pleasant conversation.

“Are you a friend of Mr Darcy’s as well?” Mrs Sullivan asked her. When Elizabeth struggled for an answer, she added, “Only I noticed your attention to our conversation. Unless you are a horsewoman?” she asked, her eyes bright with interest.

“Oh no. I never learnt, I am sorry to say. Do you ride often now that you are fixed in town?”

“I had hoped to ride to Highgate today, but my friend wanted to walk in the park instead.”

Was her friend Darcy or Colonel Fitzwilliam? Perhaps both, since it seemed the cousins were good friends. “I am sorry you had to forgo something you enjoy. I miss taking a solitary walk in the country, but I will take what I can get whilst in town.”

“I do not mind a walk with good company.” She turned to look at the men, but Elizabeth could not see if her gaze lingered on either man in particular. “But I prefer riding. I drive a phaeton as well, so if you ever want to drive to Hampstead or Highgate or anywhere, you must let me know. I would be pleased to take you and your sister. If she is not always occupied with—” She tilted her head toward Bingley and smiled.

Mrs Sullivan was forward, but it was done with such sincerity and friendliness that Elizabeth could not help but like her. “I will only be in town for another three weeks, but I would enjoy talking with you again before I leave.”

“Would you? Colonel Fitzwilliam, Mr Darcy,” she called. “It would be lovely to continue my acquaintance with Miss Elizabeth. I wonder if we might all meet again with the Bingleys and Bennets on Thursday evening?”

She said this in a pointed manner. Colonel Fitzwilliam grinned and said to Mrs Sullivan, “Yes, I can get them an invitation to Lady Courtney’s ball. My mother is her dear friend.” He turned to the rest of the group and added, “But only if Miss Bingley, Miss Bennet, and Miss Elizabeth promise me a dance. I am not encouraging more ladies to come if they are just going to sit and gossip all evening.”

This was, of course, refuted, and they all thanked the colonel and Mrs Sullivan for their consideration. Darcy’s expression was pleasant, but Elizabeth watched how every so often he looked around this section of the park. She hated causing his disappointment, but he would be more saddened if he knew she was L.

She was just as disappointed. Her friendship was now over, and the prospect of a future romantic relationship with F was gone. And the embarrassment she was already going to feel around Darcy because of her misjudgment would now be multiplied a tenfold.

“Miss Elizabeth, I look forward to speaking with you on Thursday,” Mrs Sullivan said, intruding into her unhappy thoughts. “I have been in mourning, you see”—she gestured to her grey sleeves—“and am ready to mix more with the world.”

Elizabeth smiled and agreed, keeping her attention on Darcy. He must have felt her gaze because he stopped staring into the park and said, “Mrs Sullivan is newly arrived in town and eager to make friends. You could not find a more amiable lady than Miss Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm to hear his praise. He said it absently, she was sure, but she admired him for it. He was forcing himself to be amiable when he was undoubtedly feeling frustrated and confused as to why L had forsaken him. And he was being polite to a woman who had abused him dreadfully.

“I hear from your cousin that you are not much of a dancer,” Mrs Sullivan said to

Darcy. “Will you find Thursday evening tiresome?”

“Hopefully, I will find some conversation through the course of the evening.”

“Do you not dance because too many ladies equate a dance to a marriage proposal?”

He looked a little surprised at her insight, but he bowed. “That is one reason, but if you are hinting that I ought to do better”—he glanced at Elizabeth—“then I promise to ask you to dance if you are sitting down.”

Mrs Sullivan curtsied, and Elizabeth dropped her head. He did not ask her to reserve a dance, but he knew he had wronged her at the Meryton assembly. He was being more gentlemanly, but he could not forgive her for her acrimonious accusations.

“Darcy,” his cousin said, “it will be dark soon. Do you want to join me in escorting Mrs Sullivan home?”

“No, I am going to walk the park again,” he said quietly. “I will see you both at Lady Courtney’s.”

His cousin gave him a sad look, and Elizabeth saw that Colonel Fitzwilliam knew exactly who Darcy was waiting for. Her heart broke for him all over again, and she wanted to help him recover his spirits.

“Mr Darcy,” she said, laying just two fingers on his sleeve to keep him from leaving. He flinched, and Elizabeth dropped her hand in shame. “I wanted to say, well, that I am?—”

“Miss Eliza,” called Miss Bingley. “Please let us not keep Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth curtsied and ran to join her friends, but not without a few backwards

glances at how Darcy paced the northeast corner of the park, looking for a woman who would never appear.

She would have to write one last time as L, to apologise for hurting him and come up with some explanation why she had not appeared, one that would put no blame on him.

All the way back to Cheapside, Elizabeth regretted what she had lost. She had shown such foolish solicitude for Wickham—and such resentment toward Darcy—when it was Darcy who was the good man. Wickham was a scheming liar, and Darcy's only crime was his reserve and selfish pride. And the latter he seemed willing to mend. Perhaps a woman like Mrs Sullivan would be the one to benefit from that improved manner and make him happy.

Elizabeth might have been happy with Darcy, but there was no hope for that now.

### Chapter Ten

Darcy sat in his dressing room the next morning, a breakfast tray ignored on the table and the coffee in his cup grown cold. His mind could not stop passing over the mortification he had endured yesterday. He was also thunderstruck by how saddened he felt by L's abandonment. He was certainly not unaccustomed to life's disappointments, but this hurt more than he ever expected such a rejection could hurt.

He had been enthusiastic to meet L, both for her own sake and for the expectation of forgetting Elizabeth. It was an insult to be forsaken this way, but this heartache was harder to bear.

His door opened, and Fitzwilliam entered unannounced. They had free rein over one another's homes, but it still surprised him to see his cousin at so early an hour.

"I thought you had a late night at that rout with Mrs Sullivan," he said, gesturing to the other chair at the table.

"I did," Fitzwilliam said, looking at the coffee pot but changing his mind when he realised it was cold, "but you probably had a late night pacing and thinking and distressing, so here I am to ensure you do not make yourself miserable."

Darcy smiled faintly. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"You came to check on me, but you came with an opinion as well." Darcy sighed and

held open his hands. "I am ready to hear it."

Fitzwilliam pointed at him. "Since she played you false, I say revenge is in your power."

"That is not amusing."

He muttered an apology. "I was only trying to cheer you. But perhaps this is a better way." Fitzwilliam handed him a sheet. "This is the updated subscription list. There are more names than there were a fortnight ago. For all the town talk against it, privately there seems to be more approval."

Darcy idly looked down the list. "I do not want to recover by impulsively throwing myself at another woman."

After a thoughtful pause, his cousin said, "Perhaps L's guardians learnt about the scheme and prevented her from coming?"

Darcy reached into his pocket and pulled out the letter that had come in the first morning post and handed it to Fitzwilliam. "No, she chose not to come."

Tuesday, February 11, 5 o'clock

My dear friend,

You must question my salutation and wonder if you are indeed dear to me after what happened yesterday. I have inflicted pain on you, and you must resent me for it. It would be natural after I insisted on the strange meeting and then failed to appear.

I would be all anxiety to learn that you hate me for it, although, to be honest, I fear that you do. I hardly know what explanation I can give that you would accept. Please



know that my reluctance had everything to do with me and nothing to do with you. Fear and anxiety overcame me, and all I can say is that I no longer think a meeting is wise. I can admit to this paper, that might be burned before your eyes even read it, that while writing I felt an attraction to you and an interest in your happiness, and when it came time to meet, I was afraid to follow through.

I suspect you cannot forget my offence against you. If I have lost your good opinion, be sure to know that I recognise the value of what I have lost. And if you do not reply and wish to end our correspondence forever, know that I will always consider myself,

Your affectionate friend,

L

His cousin was silent for a long while after he finished reading. "Some fear or doubt reversed her intention."

Darcy nodded. The question was, what had caused that fear or doubt? L admitted to an attraction that rivalled his own, but something changed her mind. He could not think of anything he had done to worry L, but perhaps he had simply been too hasty in asking her to meet.

"Reassure her that you won't reject her on sight," Fitzwilliam said, handing the page back. "Write again and encourage another meeting under more appropriate terms."

Darcy shook his head and refolded the letter. "No. I will not make her uncomfortable by pursuing her. It would only pain her. She made it clear she does not want to meet, and it would be an insult to her to hound her with vain wishes."

"But will you continue to write to her, in case she changes her mind?"

He shrugged. "I must at least acknowledge her last." After that, he was unsure if writing was wise.

"You have every right to resent her, you know," his cousin said, pouring himself a cup of cold coffee after all. "You wanted to meet honourably. She arranged a curious scheme instead, and then she abandoned you for no reason she will admit to. I say, burn the letter, wish her to the devil, and find a new lady. And then send L your wedding notice after you find a new love."

His cousin was trying to rally him. It was unlike him to be unkind. "No, I do not wish her ill for changing her mind."

"Your temper surprises me," Fitzwilliam said. "You would not be harsh to her, but I would have expected at least some bitterness of spirit."

"I am trying to be more gentlemanly, more patient with others," he said.

"And you liked L a great deal, I suppose?"

Darcy nodded. Perhaps bitterness would come later, but he was more disappointed than angry. He hoped he would not be unkind toward L in his own heart. He was capable of the inward reflection necessary to comprehend Elizabeth's criticism of how gentlemanly he truly was, and then wish to improve himself. A few months ago, he would have been ruled by a resentful temper.

But now he only wished L to be happy.

"Clara was pleased to have met you yesterday," his cousin said, likely to change the subject. "I must have talked about you too much. I hope she was not disappointed in you, even though you did talk to her about horses."

Darcy gave his cousin a pointed look. “‘Clara’, is it?”

Fitzwilliam blushed, and Darcy grinned for the first time since yesterday. It was rare he could embarrass his cousin, and after what happened at The Green Park, Darcy was going to enjoy this small moment of cheerfulness.

“Yes, Mrs Sullivan, I mean. She is rather affable for the fashionable world, but your taciturn self is drawn to sociable people.”

Fitzwilliam had not said where he met her, and Darcy wondered if it was through the subscription business. He was always making new friends, though, and he kept most of them. “Was Mrs Sullivan one of the dozens of ladies you wrote to through the matchmaking office?”

“Hmm, yes. Hard to keep track of them all, but easier now that I have faces to go along with all the names. I am an earl’s son, you know. Highly desirable.”

Darcy nodded disbelievingly. If Fitzwilliam had met other ladies, he only introduced him to the widowed Mrs Sullivan. He wondered if Fitzwilliam would get attached. Clara Sullivan was not the sort of woman his cousin typically admired. She was older, rather plain, and although wealthy, she had no rank to boast of.

“Was Mrs Sullivan offended by Miss Bingley’s snub?” As soon as she heard Harley Street, Miss Bingley looked ready to decamp as fast as possible. Darcy hoped he would never have been that sort of person, but he could at least guarantee he would not be in the future.

“She is accustomed to it, I think. She has wealth and taste, but her father was a banker and her first husband had no rank either. Mrs Sullivan mentioned wanting to speak again to the sister of the woman you tried to keep from Bingley, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. You do not think she was feigning politeness with Mrs Sullivan?”

Darcy felt taken aback at the hint that Elizabeth could act that way. "Not at all." It had been jarring to see the woman he admired in vain when he had been eager to meet the woman he expected to help him forget her. While he feared L would not show, he also spent that brief meeting in dread that L would appear while Elizabeth was present. His feelings for both women were too complicated for him to see them both at the same time. "She is not superior or false. She has a warm heart and excellent understanding. I think any woman should be proud to call Elizabeth Bennet her friend."

After a pause his cousin added, "Rather pretty too."

He remembered how she had looked at The Green Park. Her cheeks were pink, her eyes bright, and her hair falling out from under a bonnet that sat askew on her head. "Yes, possibly the handsomest woman I have ever known."

Darcy was lost in the remembrance for a moment before he noticed Fitzwilliam's emphatic look.

"Do not look at me like that. I have no hope in that quarter."

"Friendly, pretty, lively..." Fitzwilliam counted on his fingers as he listed her qualities.

He had to end this now. "She is the reason I agreed to your matchmaking scheme. I have admired her since the autumn, but I wanted to forget her and your plan seemed at the least to be a pleasant distraction."

Fitzwilliam threw up his hands. "So what if she has neither fortune nor consequence? You have enough for the both of you. That would be nothing if you really loved her."

"I have already overcome those concerns, I assure you, but it does not matter because

she does not like me. The first time I met her, I insulted her. I called her not handsome enough for me to dance with, and my manners after that did not impress her either.”

Fitzwilliam’s face fell, and he shook his head, saying, “You do tend to behave poorly amongst strangers.”

“So I have learnt,” he said drily. “Miss Elizabeth thought me selfish and ungentlemanly, and that was before I tried to keep her sister from Bingley.”

“But all of that is behind you now, and from the way you describe her, she does not seem of the temper to hold a grudge.”

It might be behind them, as was her misplaced trust in Wickham, but she did not admire him. She made her opinion quite plain. How much longer would this heartache linger? “Leave it,” he pleaded. “The woman who has entirely bewitched me does not even respect me, and the woman I felt an attraction to has forsaken me.”

Fitzwilliam nodded, although his sympathetic look lingered, and Darcy sought to distract him and shift the attention away from his own heartache. “Does your father still want you for Lord Stewart’s daughter?” he teased.

“I will marry that woman the day you meet Anne de Bourgh at the altar.”

Darcy shuddered, and his cousin laughed. “I would rather be a bachelor for the rest of my days if Anne is my only option.”

Fitzwilliam waved the subscription list. “She is far from the only option!”

He smiled but shook his head. “I am still in love with Elizabeth Bennet, although she dislikes me immensely, so I ought not to pursue anyone at present. I put too heavy a

burden on L, and perhaps she felt distressed by my eagerness. Until my feelings for Miss Elizabeth are driven away, I ought to leave the matchmaking to you.”

“In that case, I hope you forget her soon. But if Mrs Sullivan befriends her and your friend marries her sister, you will have a difficult winter ahead of you.”

“Now that I know she has no good opinion of me, it shan’t be as hard as I previously thought.” At least, he hoped that would be true.

Fitzwilliam rose and clapped him on the shoulder, saying he would see him at the ball, and left. Darcy went to his writing box and organised his supplies. He would be gracious in his short reply to L. If L wanted to continue to write in friendship, he could occasionally do that to make her happy, but he would be more reserved and less timely in his replies than he had been.

He would have to be equally reserved with Elizabeth, but that would be difficult, as their paths would now cross often. Elizabeth regretted her mistaken judgment. He saw it in her face at the park, but just as there was no future with L, there was no future happiness to be had with Elizabeth Bennet either.

Wednesday, February 12, 11 o’clock in the morning

My dear friend,

Your letter yesterday made me happy, it will surprise you to know. I feared you had met with some misfortune, although I will admit that it was a selfish fear. It was less painful to imagine something had prevented your meeting me rather than acknowledge you chose not to meet me after all.

You wrote you thought my good opinion was lost forever, and I think that if I had not been recently reminded of what it means to act in a gentlemanlike manner, I would

have read your letter but never replied, and forgotten you. But I am aware of how little yielding my temper is and am taking pains to improve it. I feel I can be honest in these pages and say that I was disappointed you did not appear in The Green Park. However, I do not fault you for it. Nor do I resent you or wish you ill.

I was too hasty in asking for a meeting, and perhaps it is good that you did not appear. You cannot believe that I would have rejected you on sight, but I will not blame you for regretting to agree to my impulsive request. The frequency and intimacy of our correspondence must wane, but I leave what happens next entirely in your hands.

Should you reply, do not fear my addressing you in the language of love. I will merely be your friend, and I swear never to address you but in the language of friendship.

Since we are both writing for the sake of others, to either appease them or show them another option for matrimony, if you wish to continue writing in friendship, although less frequently than we once did, I will remain,

Your sincere friend,

F

It was a more gracious letter than Elizabeth expected to receive, and it was further proof that Darcy was no longer the selfish man she assumed he was. Bingley was downstairs now visiting with Jane, and Elizabeth was certain a proposal would ensue in the coming days. She would therefore meet often with Darcy for the rest of her life, and it would always remind her that she had allowed a first impression to blind her to the good qualities of a man who must now hate her.

A man who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her.

The door opened, and Jane entered. "You did not join us in the drawing room."

"That was to save you the trouble of sending me away so Bingley could talk with you alone."

Jane shook her head. "My aunt was with us."

"And did she stay the entire time?"

Her sister's cheeks pinked. "No, she went away on some errand with her children, but she was back within a few minutes, and before you tease me, your schemes for this day were ineffectual."

Elizabeth smiled. "It is only a matter of time."

Jane sat and took her hand. "Are you quite recovered from yesterday?"

"Oh yes. It hardly takes a moment to recover from learning the man you imagined yourself falling in love with is the same man you hated for months."

"But you do not hate Mr Darcy now, surely?"

"Of course not," she cried, "although he might loathe the sight of me after I berated him so unjustly."

"If he did, he did not show it at the park," Jane said. "Now, are you truly recovered? Even my uncle remarked you seemed out of spirits."

Elizabeth slipped her hand from her sister's and stood. "I will do better to show a happier affect."



“Lizzy, you can be honest with me.”

She sighed. “It is a shame because F seemed to have such a liberal heart, and every word he wrote announced the intelligence of his mind. I got the impression he was loyal to his friends and his family. I think in his own way he was eager to be loved. He was a young man deserving of my regard, and I entertained some private hopes that our writing might lead to our future happiness.”

“I am sorry you lost that opportunity with Mr Darcy. I think he is a good sort of man.”

Elizabeth was struck how much she admired Darcy after all. Jane was right—he was a good man, a far better one than she had previously given him credit for. Hope that his opinion about her might change entered her heart. Was it impossible that he could forgive her misjudgment and come to admire her? He forgave L for abandoning him, so maybe Darcy could pardon her, too.

“Have I truly lost that opportunity with him? L has lost her chance, but what about me ?” L and F could only ever be friends, and their correspondence must sink. But F and Darcy were the same man, with the same values, same talents, same character—and the same qualities they were looking for in a spouse. “Jane, they are the same man,” Elizabeth cried, smiling. “If F was attracted to a lively, amiable correspondent without fortune but with some quickness, why could not Mr Darcy become attached to me?”

“I believe I said yesterday he looks at you a great deal and asked you to dance?—”

“He announced I was only tolerable,” she said quickly, holding up a hand. “And if he was at best indifferent before, he must dislike me now after what I accused him of. But perhaps he could grow to like me in that way. He is trying to be more patient and kinder to those outside his circle. He just has to consider me as a marriage partner

when he has never thought of me romantically at all before.” All this time, while writing to an anonymous man, she was falling in love with Darcy. She laughed to herself, grinning at the hope of changing his opinion of her.

“Well, from what you have said of your letters and what little I have observed of him, you have literary tastes in common, and your cheerfulness will counteract his gravity. He is devoted to those he loves, just as you are.”

Elizabeth laughed again at the prospect of procuring Darcy’s regard. “Oh, Jane, my head is all bewildered with what I have to accept: I am attracted to Mr Darcy.”

“It is not so strange,” Jane insisted. “You never appreciated it before, but he is wealthy, handsome, and intelligent.”

Perhaps it was not strange, but she had wasted months hating the man and not bothering to know him at all. “I shall have to encourage him, show him more than I feel, as I suggested you do. He talked with me often before, you know, but I was always trying to provoke him with saucy speeches. He might take a stronger interest in me if I was pleasant to him.”

“I do not think Mr Darcy enjoys it when women flatter him.”

Elizabeth smiled wryly. “You are thinking of your future sister-in-law.”

“Lizzy,” Jane cried. “Bingley has said nothing of his feelings for me.”

“He might not have said he loves you, but his actions are finally expressing what he ought to have expressed in Hertfordshire. He is sending his carriage for us for tomorrow’s ball. I know my aunt does not enjoy a crush where she knows not a soul, so you had better get an engagement out of it.”

“What about you?” Jane asked softly. “Mr Darcy will be at the ball.”

She would have to pursue Darcy, but with no flattery or undue deference. He never considered marrying Elizabeth Bennet in all his life, and now she was determined to make him like her. She had never had to try to secure the interest of a man before, and she certainly never had to overcome a man’s dislike.

Elizabeth grew embarrassed by how much she had talked of herself. “I suppose I must try to be more than tolerably pretty so he will dance with me.” It was one thing to encourage Jane to talk about her feelings for Bingley. The possibility of loving Darcy—of him loving her in return—was too new to be spoken of. “Where were you before Bingley called? I did not see you after breakfast.”

If Jane suspected she was changing the subject, she was too gracious to comment on it. “I wrote to my mother. I had a great deal to inform her about, and I had waited until I was surer of my feelings before I mentioned seeing Bingley.”

“I am glad not to hear her cries of joy myself. When you write about your engagement—yes, it will happen—my ears and I are pleased to be twenty-five miles from Longbourn.”

“I also explained some part of what we learnt about Wickham. Nothing about Miss Darcy, of course,” Jane added quickly, “but of his character. Perhaps Miss King can be removed from his influence. Now that my mother can spread the news of his prior bad behaviour, hopefully no other ladies in the neighbourhood will be imposed upon. And no one can press us for more details because we are not there.”

Elizabeth agreed, and then their aunt called them to give their opinions on what she ought to wear tomorrow evening. While they talked about dress and hair and shoes, Elizabeth’s mind passed over if she truly had any hope in persuading Darcy that there was room in his heart for her.

She knew she had no power over Darcy, not after the way she acted toward him. And he was perhaps still enchanted by L despite his promises in his letter. He might even be bewitched by the friendly and artless Mrs Sullivan. The widow might appear more worldly and wise compared to the young lady who misjudged him.

She had never had to put herself forward before to encourage a man's notice, and of course it was looked down upon for a woman to show a strong interest in a man. But now women could subscribe to a matchmaking business and announce what they were looking for in a husband in a private letter. Women could write to a stranger who appealed to them from a list of men. For a man of character and merit like Darcy, she could put her heart forward for the taking.

She could encourage lively banter with him rather than try to provoke his anger. She could listen when Darcy spoke and not assume the worst of him. But would that be enough to convince Darcy that he wanted her to love him?

### Chapter Eleven

Lady Courtney had a fine house filled with company that Darcy knew, but he was not in the mood to make small talk. He never excelled at it in the first place, and with his thoughts still distracted by L's sudden rejection and Elizabeth's abhorrence of him, he was not willing to put forth a strong effort.

His cousin was dancing with Mrs Sullivan, and Darcy knew Fitzwilliam wanted him to dance with his friend this evening. The last time he had danced at a ball was with Elizabeth, and he could still recall the curious stares of her neighbours upon seeing them. If he danced among this company, it would not be as remarkable, but it would still bring attention to Mrs Sullivan. As much as he disliked dancing, if he wanted to be more gentlemanly, he would also ask any lady he knew who was sitting down to dance.

"Darcy," a voice called through the din. He turned to see Bingley waving at him from the other side of the room near to the door. He had dressed before him and left to accompany his sisters. They were with him, along with Mr Hurst, and Darcy resigned himself to having to dance with both ladies. After he greeted them, he added, "Why are you standing all the way over here?"

"He wants a view of the entrance hall," Mrs Hurst said. She shared a look with her sister, and they both lifted their eyes. "He sent his chaise to bring his friends from Cheapside."

"They are your friends as well," Bingley said. "At least Miss Bennet is your particular friend."

Darcy knew his sisters certainly were not, but there was no point in saying that aloud. It was better to never see an affront if one could help it. He would do better to show Miss Bennet all the politeness and respect she deserved as the chosen bride of one of his closest friends.

He made fashionable talk with Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst while Bingley waited for the woman he would soon ask to marry him. The chit-chat kept off serious subjects, but he could expect little better at a ball.

“There they are,” cried Bingley soon after.

Darcy turned to see the Gardiners and their nieces approach. Miss Bennet was a beautiful woman and would be considered beautiful regardless of her character. Elizabeth was pretty, but it was her liveliness, the intelligence in her eyes, her playful manner that enhanced her beauty.

He kept his eyes fixed on Elizabeth too much because Miss Bingley whispered to him, “I wonder if they have ever been amongst such exalted company in all their lives?”

He typically resisted women who forced themselves into his friendship. If admitted, they were a snare or an incumbrance, but there was no avoiding his friend’s sister. Before the other party reached them, he said to her under his breath, “The Bennets and Gardiners could soon become your family, and it is unbecoming to speak against them.”

Miss Bingley stiffened beside him, but turned it into a quick curtsy as the others arrived.

“How do you do, Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth added after she had greeted everyone in a general way.

It surprised him to be addressed, and he only bowed, trying to keep a pleasant affect while not showing her any notice. She could not want it, and Miss Bingley would tease him later and repeat something or other about his admiration of her fine eyes.

“Have you read anything of interest lately?” Elizabeth continued. When he hesitated she added, “I misspoke when I told you I could hardly talk of books in a ballroom, so I hope you will humour me tonight.”

Talking with Elizabeth was a painful reminder of how little she liked him. It would take longer for his heart to move on with her sister likely to marry his friend. But not engaging her in conversation would be rude. He could not avoid Miss Bingley, however little he liked her, and he could not avoid Elizabeth, however much he admired her in vain.

“Why do you not tell me what you are reading?” Hopefully she would name a book, he could say he had not read it, and be done with the conversation.

“Something by one of the Porter sisters. I know you enjoy their works.” She paled and said, in a much higher pitch, “I mean, I assume you do, since I hear you are always buying books. I ought not to presume, of course. I enjoyed Thaddeus of Warsaw .” She gave a nervous laugh. “Do you even read novels?”

“I do.” Why was Elizabeth awkward? It was unlike her. “And I have read Thaddeus of Warsaw , although The Hungarian Brothers written by her sister is my favourite.”

“I like Thaddeus of Warsaw very much, but I will read the other on your recommendation. I will be cross with you if I learn you led me astray,” she said, meeting his eye and smiling. “I am prepared to argue my point that Thaddeus is better, so you must not hold back in debate even though I am a lady.”

He bowed again, wondering why she was being pleasant and sporting to him.

“I always thought silence became a lady best,” Miss Bingley said, moving near to stand by him and face Elizabeth.

“But one must guard oneself against a proud and insulting silence,” she said archly before turning to give him a small smile. “Silence should result from one’s prudence and not the consequence of their pride.”

Darcy could not help but smile back. She effortlessly charmed him, and she did not know the power she held over his heart. She must have forgiven him for his selfishness and pride if she could tease him about it so mildly. But did she truly believe that he wanted to be a better friend and a more generous man?

“A model woman would not want to debate with a man, that is all I meant,” Miss Bingley pressed. “A model woman is rather silent in company. Like Miss Darcy,” she said, looking at him. “It is her countenance that shows her interest, as only an observing eye could discern.”

“My sister is shy,” Darcy said. With a quick look at Elizabeth, he added, “She could do with a little more polite conversation.”

“And how are your skills? Are you a suitable model for her?” Elizabeth asked.

She looked earnest rather than ready to mock him. “No,” he said honestly. “I do not have the talent of conversing easily with strangers.”

“But you are not shy,” she said, “like you say Miss Darcy is. I never thought your conversation was lacking or unpleasant,” she said with a winning smile. “But you could take the trouble to practise talking to strangers.”

“So could my sister, but I think a lively young lady would be a far better model than me.”



Elizabeth blushed and turned her head, and Darcy cringed. What was he doing? He had at this moment hinted that Elizabeth would be a good friend to his sister. It was true, but he had just made her uncomfortable with his insinuation. She was only speaking to him because she was polite and their circles now overlapped.

“Yes, dear Miss Darcy is a lovely girl. Look, there is your cousin,” Miss Bingley said, pulling on his arm. “Let us greet him.”

Fitzwilliam had just left the dance with Mrs Sullivan, and Miss Bingley overcame her dislike of Mrs Sullivan purely to avoid Elizabeth. Miss Bingley could make no headway in his talk with Mrs Sullivan, either. His cousin’s new friend was determined to talk to him, and Fitzwilliam encouraged their conversation—and Darcy suspected why. When the music began again, he asked Mrs Sullivan to dance, and Miss Bingley reluctantly dropped his arm.

“I was not even sitting down,” Mrs Sullivan said to him after they began. “I am honoured.”

“I noticed you were eager to talk with me, and I thought that was best done away from my cousin’s hearing.”

When the dance brought them together again, she asked him what he could mean.

“You either want to talk to me about Fitzwilliam because you have some concern I could assuage, or you want to talk with me because you know I am one of his closest friends and he values my opinion.”

He had made the hint, and Mrs Sullivan was astute enough to take it. “I wanted you to form your own decision about me, and I hoped to talk with you enough to give you the chance. I suspect his lordship and the rest of Fitzwilliam’s family will only note that I am past the years of danger and my money comes from banking, and that I was

briefly married a long time ago. They will not care how fond I have grown of your cousin or how bright I see our future together.”

“And if I liked you for your own merits, then perhaps I could take Fitzwilliam’s side when he tells his father he wants to marry a stranger he met through a subscription office, who is over thirty, and whose father was in some line of business?”

She agreed as the dance separated them. Fitzwilliam had attached himself to a woman through the subscription, and even more quickly than L had attracted him. Fitzwilliam’s hints about having a dozen correspondents and a notebook to keep them straight were all bluster. And now he had fixed on Mrs Sullivan, who was intelligent enough to know that his friends would struggle to accept their union.

“Well?” she asked when they stood at the bottom together. “What can I do to bring you to my side?” She said it with a smile, but her tone and manner showed her anxiety over his answer.

He thought it rather soon to commit themselves, for they had known one another a fortnight. Mrs Sullivan was older and not as well-connected or conventionally beautiful as the women Fitzwilliam typically flirted with. But her countenance was pleasing, and made more so when she smiled, which was pretty much all the time. If Clara Sullivan was what Fitzwilliam wanted, so be it. He would not make the same mistake he had made with Bingley.

“There is nothing you need to do to convince me, madam. If my cousin wants to marry you, and you show him all the loyalty and devotion a wife ought, you will have no better friend than me.”

She grinned. “Then I do not have to spend the rest of this dance convincing you of my merits and my faithfulness. We can resume talking about thoroughbred bloodlines like we did at The Green Park, which, I assure you, is a more interesting topic than

my good qualities.”

He laughed. “You will find a better conversant on horses in your chosen partner, but I can indulge you.”

The rest of the dance passed pleasantly, and Darcy hoped his cousin would be happy with his choice. The resentment of his family or the indignation of the world would not be enough to stop Mrs Sullivan, and not his cousin either. He brought Mrs Sullivan back to Fitzwilliam and their friends, and, sadly, Miss Bingley was still with them. He would have to ask her to dance.

Fitzwilliam gave him a steady look as he approached, and Darcy thought he seemed nervous. He realised how important his approval was to his cousin, and how much his approval would help when he announced whom he was marrying. He felt anew all the shame in interfering in Bingley’s happiness. Darcy gave his cousin a quick nod, trying to express his acceptance and approval in the crowded room.

Fitzwilliam understood him. He smiled to himself and laid a hand on Mrs Sullivan’s arm, but her attention was caught elsewhere.

“If you will excuse me, I see a young lady by herself.”

Darcy turned and saw that Mrs Sullivan noticed Elizabeth sitting alone. Where had Mrs Hurst or the Gardiners gone? Bingley and Miss Bennet were dancing, and so were the Gardiners. Mr Hurst had likely gone to the card room, and he saw Mrs Hurst gossiping with another group farther away. He shook his head. Mrs Hurst had left Elizabeth there, in a room where she knew not a soul, and had not even bothered to introduce her to anyone.

He thought how disappointed Elizabeth had been by his rejection at the assembly, and how it had clouded her perception of him as a gentleman. He would ask her to dance,

but he was now obliged to dance with Miss Bingley. It would be another half an hour before he could talk to Elizabeth. Even though she disliked him, he hoped his company would be preferable to being alone.

At the last ball she went to, Elizabeth wanted to dance all night with Wickham even though it would have come to nothing. And now she hoped for Darcy to see her as an eligible young lady who could make him happy. She wanted to dance with him, and deep down she wanted to conquer what remained unsubdued of his heart, which was arguably all of it.

And considering he might detest me for accusing him of being a horrible person, it could be a very long night.

Mrs Hurst could not abandon her fast enough once the others had joined the dance, and she had found a seat nearby to wait. Elizabeth then saw Darcy ask Mrs Sullivan to dance, and although he looked serious at the beginning, then he laughed and smiled at her through all the rest.

Elizabeth felt a twisting sickness in her stomach, watching him hold hands with Mrs Sullivan and look into her eyes.

Knowing how eager he had been to meet L, she knew she had a pre-engaged heart to attack, but seeing Darcy with another woman felt different. He might still mourn L's loss, but Elizabeth was L, so how hard could it be to convince Fitzwilliam Darcy that Elizabeth Bennet could answer for his lasting happiness? Remarkably harder than she expected if he was dancing and laughing with another lady.

When the dance finished, she watched them return to their friends, but immediately after, Mrs Sullivan broke away and approached her. After asking if Miss Elizabeth remembered her from The Green Park, she asked if she could sit by her side.

“I thought you could keep me company until my friends return,” she added.

Mrs Sullivan was plainly choosing to keep her company, but was too polite to say so. It made it difficult to dislike her for dancing with Darcy when she was so considerate. It was a kind gesture, especially for someone she had just met. Elizabeth watched Darcy ask Miss Bingley to dance. That was done out of politeness, but had he asked Mrs Sullivan out of affection?

“You are welcome to join me,” Elizabeth said, removing her eyes from Darcy, “but please do not let me keep you from your friends.”

“I should be honest. They are Colonel Fitzwilliam’s friends. I am relatively new in town, you know, and eager to make friends now that I am on my own.”

“I am sorry for your loss. Has your mourning kept you at home and away from London?”

“Thank you. I nursed my father for years, you know, at the seaside. He had been in banking, quite successful. I was his only child, and he left me fifteen thousand pounds, and the house in Harley Street. But between my first husband’s death and my father’s long illness, I have been away from society since I was twenty-four.”

Elizabeth could tell her new acquaintance did not want her pity, and so she tried not to show it. “How fortunate you are well-provided for. Have you become reacquainted with your former connexions?”

Mrs Sullivan made a face and shook her head. “I think too much time has passed for most of them. Now that my father is dead—and I miss him, certainly—but now that he has passed, I can make my own friends without his interference and opinion. I hope I can count you among them, Miss Bennet?” Her voice lifted hopefully.

“If you are able to visit Cheapside, you would be very welcome to call,” she said. If Mrs Sullivan wanted to be her friend, she ought to know her connexions. “I am staying with my aunt and uncle in Gracechurch Street.”

She waved a hand. “Oh, you cannot think a Harley Street direction has gone to my head. We started as a country bank, you know, before moving to town when I was a child, and our first bank was in Lombard Street. You have a friendly face and a dislike of some of the superior ladies—I can tell—so I hope you will not think me forward in saying I would be glad to call.”

Elizabeth had assumed her to be a woman of fortune, and not less pleased with herself for having those fifteen thousand pounds and a wealth of life experience. In Mrs Sullivan’s person, there was nothing remarkable, aside from a charming smile. After seeing her interest in Darcy, Elizabeth wanted her to have an excess of undeserved vanity, and with only the empty appearance of knowledge, but Mrs Sullivan was delightful. Mrs Sullivan might be too bold for polite society, but she was friendly, sincere, and likeable.

It was no wonder Darcy laughed and smiled while they danced.

As jealous as she felt, she was not about to forsake the possibility of a new friend. “You are very welcome to call,” Elizabeth said. “I am in town until the first week of March when I leave to visit other friends, and then I return to my family in Hertfordshire in May. Have you any other family?”

“No near relation living. It is rather freeing, you know.”

She thought this was a curious thing to say. “I am afraid that I do not. My family has their faults, to be sure, but they are all dear to me.”

“Of course,” Mrs Sullivan cried. “What I meant is that my family is dead. I am of

age—by quite a lot, you know—and I can finally make choices for myself, without a father or another man to decide for me or influence my choice.”

Elizabeth sighed over the truth of it. It was so difficult to be a woman sometimes. “I understand wanting more agency than men typically allow us.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” she went on. “I know we just met, but I am simply bursting, and you have such a kind face. You are young, so you cannot know how I feel, but I am weary of the season already. Not being asked to dance anymore as I grow older made me realise?—”

“Mr Darcy asked you to dance,” Elizabeth said quickly, hoping she did not sound jealous.

“He is a new friend, or rather, I hope he will become one. I like him already. But I am not asked to dance any longer. I am allowed to be out on my own on account of my age and my previous marriage, which is both liberating and lonely. I would like to marry again, but I know I am not beautiful, and it would be dreadful to marry a man who thinks my fortune is my sole recommendation.”

“Yes, it would,” she managed to say, still caught on hearing Mrs Sullivan say how much she liked Darcy. “I am surprised you did not remarry before your father became ill, when you were nearer to my age. You are very good-natured and had that fortune when you were young.”

Mrs Sullivan blushed and shook her head sadly. “My first marriage was a foolish one, and one made too young, you know. I mourned him, but never truly missed him. My father insisted I was worthy of someone of greater consequence, given how he had raised himself and the circles we moved amongst, and after my first poor choice, I conceded to his wishes. He never approved of any gentleman. And then he became ill, and I had to care for him. And here I am, you know, at thirty-one with no family

of my own. You want to marry, do you not? Although I would hate to assume.”

Elizabeth smiled to herself. Mrs Sullivan did a great deal of assuming, but she still answered, “I do, someday, and I want to make my own choice.”

“I as well, and have children, and be liked for myself and not my fortune, so do you know what I did?”

Elizabeth leant forward, intrigued. She could not help but like Mrs Sullivan and was curious to know what she had done.

“Miss Bennet?”

They both looked up to see Darcy standing in front of them. She had stopped watching the dance and had lost track of where he was.

“Will you do me the honour of dancing with me?”

Her heart beat an unsteady rhythm and her mouth gaped, but she recovered in what she hoped was enough time for Darcy to not believe she was reluctant. She was only excessively surprised that he asked her. “Yes, certainly.” She rose and then looked back at Mrs Sullivan. “But I hate to leave Mrs Sullivan alone.”

“Oh, do not mind me,” she said. “I am old enough to be left all alone, single or not.”

Darcy said something or other to Mrs Sullivan about where Colonel Fitzwilliam was, but Elizabeth could hardly listen. Her heart was pounding. She might not have another moment all night to have Darcy’s undivided attention.

Darcy’s heart might not be easily won, and not if his thoughts were with L or Mrs Sullivan, but she could encourage him. She thought of what to say, smiling at him



while they took their place in the set. He looked at her curiously, and she stopped grinning and staring. He probably wondered why she was smiling at him so much when she had never even bothered to pay him any attention before.

“I thought you were not fond of dancing,” she blurted. He looked at her askance, and she regretted that was what she thought to say. “I mean, thank you for asking me.”

“I would not want to be selfish or ungentlemanly and ignore a lady sitting down at a ball.” For a moment, she feared he was angry, but he smiled and gave her a knowing look. “I have learnt a valuable lesson.”

After dancing a while in silence, she wondered if Darcy had ever had a true hope of marrying through the service or if it was done purely to appease his cousin. Maybe she could learn a little about what he was looking for in a wife.

“So, the matchmaking subscription is still in business, it seems.” He nodded. “If, if you met someone through such a means”—she took a large breath—“what quality would you want to be certain your correspondent had?” He would describe some quality L had, and then she could make him see that Elizabeth Bennet shared the same characteristic.

“Honesty,” he answered when the dance brought them back together.

“Honesty?” She could not hide her surprise. “Not humour or intelligence? What woman would even countenance lying to you while writing with the intention of marrying? It would all come out when you met in person.”

“I do not purely mean honest in the sense of not lying, but in the sense that we could say anything to one another.”

“You want an honest attachment, a true affection?” she asked, holding out hope that

he might find that with her.

“Yes, but more than that. The truth is often painful, and nothing but strict truth can carry you through life with honour and credit. I would entrust my fortune and my happiness to another person if I marry, and I would only do that if we could be entirely honest with one another.”

He looked a little embarrassed by what he admitted. Elizabeth’s heart began pounding wildly. She had not been honest. Darcy was such a direct person, and his seriousness only amplified it. What would he think of her integrity if he learnt she was L all along and never admitted the truth?

When she could think of nothing to say that would prove her own honest character, he asked, “May I ask your opinion of my cousin’s friend, Mrs Sullivan?”

Elizabeth’s heart sank further to hear him ask about her. “She is a sprightly, chatty woman. I am inclined to like her.”

He smiled and looked over the dancers to look at Mrs Sullivan, who had found Colonel Fitzwilliam. Was that fondness in his eyes as he looked at Mrs Sullivan? “She is eager to make friends. I am not sure if her manner and her connexions will win her many in London, however.”

“There is a great sincerity behind her forwardness, I believe.”

He agreed. “I do not mind it, although, as Miss Bingley hinted, most would say that a woman had better say too little in company than too much.”

“True,” she said. “My mother always told us that a forwardness to join in conversation with men when the topic rolled on politics, learning, or science would cause us to be thought pert.”

“You never shy from sharing your opinions with me,” he said, when the dance brought them together again.

“Maybe I ought to conceal the little learning I have, and some of my opinions too, but I think you are a man of genuine sense.” She gave Darcy a warm smile and looked directly into his eyes. “So I know you won’t look at me with a jealous or malignant eye if I share an informed opinion, even if it is contrary to yours.”

She did not aim to flatter him, but Darcy was a sensible man, and sensible men seldom fell her way. She dearly hoped that she could show this one what he meant to her. She ignored the fact that she had not been honest enough for a man of Darcy’s character. Surely, there was no real need for him to know that she was L?

“You are welcome to argue with me as you please,” he said, but his attention seemed elsewhere.

“Mr Darcy, I might disagree with you, but you should know it is not out of spite, at least not any longer.”

He nodded, but Elizabeth felt as though he did not truly hear her. Perhaps her defence of Wickham hurt him more than she realised. How could she have any chance of earning his respect if she never apologised? If she was afraid to be honest about being L, she could at least be honest in expressing her regret.

As they waited at the bottom, she said, “While I have this moment with you, please allow me to apologise.”

His eyes narrowed in confusion. “For what?”

It felt like she had a thousand things to apologise for. That she was sorry for being L, sorry for not showing up in the park and for the disappointment he felt, sorry for

believing Wickham, and for all the unkindness she had shown Darcy.

Sorry for not having the courage to tell him she was L.

“For everything I said to you at Mrs Hurst’s,” she murmured. “I was wrong, and I am sorry that my foolish defence of that man hurt you. And I should never have said you were not a gentleman. I do not know you as well as I thought, and certainly not as well as I want to.”

Darcy’s gaze sharpened, as though seeing her for the first time. He looked her up and down, and she wondered if he approved or if he thought her a strange creature. She tried to show all the regret she felt as she met his eye, and all the hope that he might see her as a woman he would want to marry.

“Your accusation was ill-founded,” he said slowly, “formed on mistaken premises, but I need to act in a more gentlemanly manner. There is nothing to forgive.”

“I hope,” she stammered, “I hope that, that we can move forward in friendship.”

He bowed and held out an arm to escort her back to her friends. When they were nearly there he said quietly, “I am sorry I did not dance with you in Meryton, and am exceedingly sorry that I called you tolerable when you are in truth a handsome woman.”

Darcy left her with the Gardiners and went to join another party before Elizabeth could reply to such a statement. She watched him talk to other friends before finding Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mrs Sullivan. Her heart sank as she saw Darcy ask Mrs Sullivan to dance the supper set. It was more notice than she had ever seen him give any woman, and even more gazes followed them as they took their place in the set.

Elizabeth felt wretched for the rest of the evening. He had said he found her

handsome so honestly, but there was no warmth in his eyes when he looked at her, bowed, and left. When would Darcy look at her with the same yearning she felt for him?

### Chapter Twelve

Darcy shoved aside his writing box. He wanted to write to L, but that would not be wise. Besides, today was February 14. She could misconstrue his intentions on a day when the post was filled with romantic epistles from would-be lovers. He had to let that connexion fade, and a little distance from both L and Elizabeth felt necessary, especially after the ball yesterday.

Elizabeth had talked with him more than was typical for her at the beginning of the evening. She smiled at him often, even challenging him to argue with her. She was unfailingly polite, and not provoking. Then, after he had danced the supper set with Mrs Sullivan, Elizabeth had not spoken with him for the rest of the night. It was as though she had done her duty to apologise and be civil, and then suddenly her friendliness shuttered and she scarcely looked at him. Not even Mrs Sullivan's candidness could get much more than a smile from her.

Darcy sighed and changed into his riding clothes to meet his friends. L had liked him, but not enough to pursue a relationship that might lead to marriage. Maybe Elizabeth respected him, but not enough to match the feelings he held for her. He had never had any entanglements and his cousin Fitzwilliam flirted with every woman he saw; and now, while Darcy nursed two disappointments, Fitzwilliam was engaged.

It was quiet in the house since Bingley had left early for Cheapside. He had not said he was going to ask Jane Bennet to marry him today, but Bingley's grin and anxious pacing while he awaited his carriage told Darcy his intentions. Similar good fortune would come to Fitzwilliam, aside from his family's lack of support in the beginning.

Bingley would marry, and Fitzwilliam would marry. Darcy tugged off his cravat in frustration and tried to tie it again. Dwelling on his feelings of solitude and his longing for companionship would solve nothing. He had to get over his feelings for Elizabeth and L. Neither one liked him enough, so there was no reason to be melancholy over it.

His dressing room door burst open, and his cousin came in. “Do you need help with that? Should I call your man?”

Darcy was tempted to crumple the linen into a ball and throw it at him. “Of course not.” He turned back to the mirror and forced himself to breathe calmly. “Did you talk with your father?”

Fitzwilliam threw himself into a chair. “Hours,” he said, running a hand over his face. “He talked at me for two hours, and I expect a letter with his displeasure to follow.”

Darcy heard the distress in his voice. He finished tying his cravat and sat across from his cousin. “Did he refuse to give his blessing?”

“He refused to supplement my income if I marry so far beneath me—his words,” he added. Darcy felt the sting of shame for once thinking that way about Elizabeth. “He called her ambitious. How dare the daughter of a banker think she could marry a son of an earl? He said I have to marry money, but I might have got someone younger, never married, and of a higher rank for the price. That I am settling for a mere fifteen thousand pounds when I could have someone with twice that. At the end of our conference, he consented—since he cannot stop me—but he wants me to wait until the end of the season to announce it.”

Darcy looked at him for a long moment. Who would have thought that this matchmaking scheme would have led to his cousin finding a life partner? “Congratulations.”

Fitzwilliam actually blushed before murmuring, "Thank you." He shifted in his seat and seemed to push all sentiment from his face. "Despite the promise of your support, his lordship hopes I will change my mind, and he exacted my promise not to elope in the meantime. Will you come with me this week to talk with him, to tell him I am not throwing myself away and that I am marrying a respectable woman?"

"Of course, if you think it will help. Will Mrs Sullivan mind waiting, or mind the secrecy?"

"She is more distressed at my family's disapproval, but Clara won't mind, not when she has my word."

"She is a sensible woman, and she knows how fortunate she is. I think I could even like her for her own sake rather than just for yours," Darcy said with a teasing smile.

"Don't put yourself out by throwing around all those compliments about my intended," he said drily.

"She has pleasing manners. And, for some reason, she likes you a great deal, but I won't assume her taste is entirely questionable. How is that?"

His cousin crossed his arms over his chest and gave him a mock glare. "You could do better. If that is the best you can do to compliment a woman, it is no wonder you are not engaged."

Darcy looked away, feeling the unintended blow more than he wanted to admit. Fitzwilliam swiftly apologised and said, "Miss Elizabeth did not seem to hate you as much as you feared."

He stood and busied himself with choosing a riding coat. "She was polite. No one could fault her civility, but after I danced with her, she wanted nothing to do with



me.”

Fitzwilliam pursed his lips in thought. “Do you suppose she could be jealous of Clara?”

Darcy spun round, his heart pounding with a wild jealousy. “You think she admires you? She only met you on Tuesday.”

“What?” he asked, his face crinkled in confusion. “No, jealous of Clara. You danced with Clara twice and talked with her all night.”

“For your sake, to demonstrate to everyone that she is respectable and that your family approves.”

“I know that,” Fitzwilliam said quickly. “But Miss Elizabeth would not.”

Darcy hid his smile as he buttoned his coat. He allowed himself a moment to indulge in the prospect that Elizabeth liked him so much she would be jealous of him dancing with another woman. It was a lovely thought that he would be a complete fool to humour. And only one sunk in selfish pride would consider it, and he was determined not to be such a man.

“No,” he said, turning around and readying to leave. “Please do not say such things.”

“Why? You said Miss Elizabeth does not like you, but?—”

“She has reason not to. I separated her sister and my friend, and I was selfish and proud.”

“That is the past, and I still say she was impatient to talk with you last night. It could have saddened her that you danced the supper set with Clara because she wanted to

spend that time with you.”

“Fitzwilliam, do not raise my hopes,” Darcy said, cringing a little at his own pleading tone. “I am already disappointed enough that writing to L came to nothing. I cannot tolerate more disappointed hopes about a woman I actually met and loved.”

His cousin lowered his head and nodded, muttering a promise to say nothing more. To change the subject, he asked, “Are you going to the theatre tomorrow?”

Darcy shook his head, eager to talk of anything else. “I am going to the Surrey Institution lecture.”

“Do you want company?” Fitzwilliam asked as they went down the stairs. “I am a subscriber because you made me, although I never go. Clara can be my guest.”

“I am perfectly capable of attending an evening on my own. Besides, there will be plenty of people I know in attendance, regardless of the lecture topic.”

“Of course you can go anywhere alone,” Fitzwilliam said with an exaggerated lift of his eyes. “When have you not gone somewhere because you did not have a companion? Your favourite cousin is offering to go to your dull lecture on chemistry or philosophy or literature or whatever to sit in a room next to Clara—and to keep you company so you do not look as though you have no friends.”

Darcy laughed and agreed, and parted ways as his cousin went to call on his future bride and Darcy mounted his horse. As he rode toward Hyde Park, he was torn between wanting to hope there was a kernel of truth in Elizabeth having some interest in him, and knowing rationally that she had no attachment to him whatsoever.

“Do you suppose we have given them enough time to themselves?” Mrs Gardiner asked Elizabeth as they stood on the landing outside the drawing room.

“You were generous enough to leave them alone in the first half an hour Bingley was here,” Elizabeth said. “He already proposed to her, and we have all congratulated and hugged and shaken hands, yet he remains with us all these hours later.”

Mrs Gardiner gave a knowing smile. “Well, I thought they might like a quarter of an hour to themselves now that everything is settled.”

Bingley had proposed to Jane this morning by handing her a valentine and, although she could not read his writing in its entirety, the pertinent question was legible enough, and they settled all between them before Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner had returned. Elizabeth suspected that kissing and cuddling on the sofa would be how they spent this brief interlude alone.

“Do you think once he has had a few kisses, Bingley will return home?” Elizabeth asked. Bingley was an amiable man, but he had been with them since eleven this morning.

Her aunt shook her head. “At this late hour, I will have to invite him to dinner.”

Mrs Gardiner was about to enter the drawing room when there was a knock at the front door and Mrs Sullivan was shown in. Elizabeth felt startled to see her and was grateful that she was on a floor above her and had a moment to compose her features before Mrs Sullivan looked up.

She truly liked Mrs Sullivan, but after watching her dance and talk with Darcy, it would be difficult to speak as amiably as she had spoken with her at the ball. Darcy had seemed interested in everything Mrs Sullivan had to say, and her disappointment still felt raw.

“I hope you will forgive me for being abominably rude and calling so late in the afternoon,” she called up the stairs without waiting for the footman to even close the

door behind her. Mrs Sullivan gave her a smile that reached her eyes. "I can leave my card and pretend I do not see you if it is not a convenient time, Miss Bennet."

Elizabeth saw Mrs Sullivan's smiling expression and remembered her eagerness to make friends in this new stage of her life. She could not allow jealousy to prevent her from befriending a respectable woman, especially one who was eager to know her.

Sending her away would transgress the duty of woman to woman. Did not the sisterhood of women come before any affectionate feelings for a man? Female friendships must always come first and be valued above a man, even a man who might be as perfect for her as Darcy.

But that did not make it easier.

Elizabeth put on a bright smile and told her it was no trouble. She gestured for her to come up the stairs and introduced her to her aunt. "We are about to interrupt my sister, who is recently engaged, so I think it best if you follow behind us," she added with a wink.

"How lovely! I do not know Mr Bingley well, but he is acquainted with people I know intimately."

Elizabeth turned to hide a sigh as everyone was greeted and Mrs Sullivan offered her congratulations to the couple.

"I am very happy for you both," she added before sitting by Elizabeth. "I will stay just a quarter of an hour; you must not think I am about to trouble your aunt for an invitation to dinner. It is only that I was occupied all morning and did not want to put off a call for another day."

"I am glad that you came," Elizabeth said honestly, knowing it would hurt dreadfully

if Mrs Sullivan became attached to Darcy. “I am not as much at liberty as you, so you must forgive me if I cannot call in your side of town as soon as I would like.”

Mrs Sullivan waved a hand. “Send me a note, and I will drive my phaeton here myself. Friends cannot stand on ceremony, and I would like to pass some time together before you leave town next month.”

Her aunt and Bingley and Jane were in the room, so the conversation stayed on general topics and included everyone. While they talked about public places and amusements in town, Elizabeth wondered what Mrs Sullivan had wanted to tell her at the ball before Darcy asked her to dance. She seemed enthusiastic about something, but in case she did not want it to be publicly known, Elizabeth held her tongue on the subject and asked her instead about her phaeton.

“Perhaps when you return to town in May and the weather is fair, we could drive to Hampstead,” Mrs Sullivan added after she had described it. “You do not ride, correct?” Elizabeth shook her head, and Mrs Sullivan looked disappointed. Her being an avid horsewoman was something Mrs Sullivan would have in common with Darcy. “That is all very well, because I can drive us or we can hire a coach. It is only four miles, and a pleasant retreat in the summer months.”

“I would have no trouble walking the distance.”

Mrs Sullivan laughed. “Well, you are younger and fitter than I am. I might make it to Hampstead, but you would have to carry me back!”

Elizabeth smiled, and in the pause Bingley asked her what her plans were for the evening. Mrs Sullivan said, “Nothing of note tonight, dinner with friends, but tomorrow I am attending the Surrey Institution lecture with Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr Darcy.”

Bingley laughed. "Darcy must have convinced you both to go. He is always asking me since he is a subscriber and can bring a guest, but I have no interest."

Elizabeth felt the disappointment hit her heart that Mrs Sullivan was seeing Darcy so soon.

"I have no interest either." Mrs Sullivan laughed. "I could not even tell you who the lecturer is or what is his topic. But Colonel Fitzwilliam invited me, and I had no reason to decline."

Darcy had not invited Mrs Sullivan as his guest. Perhaps he had not definitely decided that Mrs Sullivan could supplant L in his heart. Elizabeth wondered if there was any chance that she could still earn Darcy's affections. With no understanding between Mrs Sullivan and Darcy, she could befriend one while she tried to show the other all the affection she was capable of without betraying her conscience.

"I would like to attend one of the Surrey Institution lectures," she announced.

As she hoped, Mrs Sullivan smiled. "We could bring you tomorrow if you like. Each subscriber can bring a guest, and I cannot imagine Mr Darcy would mind bringing you if he knew you wanted to attend."

"He would enjoy having someone there who actually cares," Bingley added with a laugh.

"I would not want to impose," Elizabeth said, although she very much did.

"I will see Colonel Fitzwilliam at dinner this evening and will tell him to ask his cousin." Elizabeth thought she was rather confident in Colonel Fitzwilliam's ability to be persuaded, but it would be to her benefit if it meant she could see Darcy tomorrow.

“Thank you very much,” she said. “You are generous to include me.”

“Would you entrust Miss Elizabeth to the three of us, ma’am?” Mrs Sullivan asked Mrs Gardiner. “It is off Blackfriars Road on the other side of the Thames, you know, and we will collect her and return her to you in good time.”

“Are there many ladies in attendance? I would not want Lizzy to feel out of place in an audience full of gentlemen.”

“I have only been once, but I would say half the audience was ladies. I do not scruple to add, however, that I am always glad to have a female friend with me.”

Elizabeth lowered her head as her aunt agreed she could go. Regardless of what happened with Darcy, if he became attached to Mrs Sullivan or not, she must safeguard her growing friendship with Mrs Sullivan.

Mrs Sullivan rose and said to Mrs Gardiner, “Thank you for receiving me so late. I wanted to show Miss Elizabeth my determination to befriend her, and the day got away from me.” She then turned to Elizabeth as she put on her gloves and said in a quieter tone with a smile, “I will tell you all about my day another time when we are alone.”

She wondered what this meant, and her stomach sank to think that it had anything to do with an attachment to Darcy. “I look forward to seeing you tomorrow evening,” she said. As Mrs Sullivan turned to leave, Elizabeth felt guilty for arranging a meeting through Mrs Sullivan’s kindness and eagerness for friendship. She followed her to the door and added, “I am pleased that you came today, and I promise we will be good friends.”

Mrs Sullivan looked a little surprised, but she grinned and held out her hand, and Elizabeth grasped it. “As am I,” she said warmly. “I shall see you tomorrow evening

at seven.”

When she was gone, Mrs Gardiner asked Bingley to stay to dinner, and Jane and Elizabeth went to dress. Jane followed her to her room and sat on her bed. Elizabeth felt her attention as she selected a gown. After a few moments of silence while she put it on, she asked, “What is it?”

“Why were you eager to attend the lecture? I have never once heard you mention it.”

“Because it is not absolutely certain that Darcy and Mrs Sullivan love one another. What if I can still show Darcy how much I like him? I have to try.”

“But why force yourself onto his notice tomorrow?” Jane asked, throwing up her hands in confusion. “Your paths will cross often now that Bingley and I are to marry.”

“I retreated too early last evening, Jane. Mrs Sullivan might not have fixed upon Darcy as her object, and he might not have decided on her. I have a chance to earn his affections after all. I need to try a little harder.”

“Most respectable men would find a woman’s interest unseemly.”

“Darcy subscribed to the matchmaking service and had no ill will toward L for putting herself forward.”

“All I am saying is that it might be unbecoming in person,” Jane said gently.

Although there was no reason for a young woman to be ashamed of an honest attachment to a deserving man, a woman’s delicate nature was allegedly supposed to make her ashamed of it. A woman of true delicacy should not even acknowledge to herself that she loved a man until he confessed his feelings first. It was all so foolish



to pretend that women had no feelings, no passions at all.

That was what made the matchmaking subscription thrilling. She could show her interest, state that she wanted to marry and announce what sort of partner she was looking for.

Why could she not apply a little of that agency in person?

“I am pursuing what I want,” she said firmly. “And I would not go tomorrow if I did not think that I have a chance with him.”

Jane nodded and left, wishing her luck in a tone that said she did not agree with her decision.

How would Darcy feel to be coerced into spending an evening in her company? Would he ever consider her as his wife, as a woman he could love and spend his life with? He did look at her a great deal, and she could now remember a certain smile that he often wore when he did. He considered L knowing how little her fortune was, so that should be no hindrance.

She had to pursue Darcy, and she had to make him forget L and Mrs Sullivan. And she had to do it without being like all the other women who flattered and deferred to him.

### Chapter Thirteen

Darcy was silent the entire ride to the Gardiners' home on their way to the Surrey Institution lecture. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mrs Sullivan talked amongst themselves, but it still took Darcy aback that his cousin had said as they got into the carriage, "Clara wants her new friend Miss Elizabeth Bennet to join us."

And of course Fitzwilliam had agreed with the hopes of him making a match with Elizabeth after all.

He had thought that it would be the newly engaged Bingley who would force him to see Elizabeth, not his cousin and his secret betrothal. He was uncertain why Elizabeth wanted to come, especially since she had known that he would escort her as his guest. Mrs Sullivan might have pressed her, and despite the newness of their acquaintance, Elizabeth might have felt compelled to agree.

It was natural that Mrs Sullivan wanted to befriend Elizabeth. Elizabeth was possessed of every requisite likely to ensure her the love, the esteem, and the admiration of all her acquaintances with any sense to speak of. She also had every requisite to render a man happy, and Darcy had no reason to believe that she would turn her admiring gazes onto him.

In Cheapside, his footman went to the door, and in a moment Elizabeth was sitting across from him. He would have to look into her pretty eyes the rest of the way and know how he had lost her respect with his selfish behaviour and ungentlemanly manner.

She and Fitzwilliam engaged in the usual trivial chat that identified one's place in the world, and their common acquaintances and experiences. It was so easy for both of them, and even Mrs Sullivan's forwardness aided her in this sort of exchange.

Elizabeth's ease and liveliness would answer for all of his wishes. Darcy dropped his gaze from watching her talk with his cousin and friend. Would she ever think that they were perfect for one another the same way that he did?

"Where exactly are we going?" Elizabeth asked, peering out the side glass.

When Fitzwilliam nudged him with his elbow, Darcy answered, "The Institution meets in the Blackfriars Rotunda building in Southwark, on the south bank of the Thames."

"I think I was there as a child with my aunt and uncle, but it was a museum," she said. "I remember a lot of birds."

"It was once the Leverian Museum," he agreed. "It was filled with oddities from around the world. It closed a few years ago and was remodelled for the Institution."

"You know a great deal about London's attractions," she said brightly. "The panorama, museums, the features at St Paul's. If I want to visit a public place, I know who to ask for a recommendation."

"I spend at least one quarter of the year here," he said with a shrug, not remembering when he had spoken to Elizabeth about St Paul's.

"And he would rather go look at a curiosity or attend a viewing of some invention than attend a vigorous rout like any other young single man," Fitzwilliam said with a laugh. "A lecture is a good outing for a reserved man."

Darcy felt offended. “And yet here you are at a lecture.”

“I am here to escort a lady with better taste than I have,” he said with a wink.

The conversation ended as they arrived and entered the impressive auditorium. Within moments, a crowd of friends surrounded Fitzwilliam and Mrs Sullivan. Darcy found himself not in the mood for empty small talk after being accused of being taciturn. He would have stayed with their group for the sake of appearances, but Elizabeth asked where they were to sit.

“There are many ladies here,” Elizabeth said, sounding a little relieved when he found their seats in the rotunda. “I was afraid Mrs Sullivan and I would be nearly alone, but there must be a few hundred women.”

Darcy looked around the room and agreed she was about right. “The room holds five hundred, and they all seem to know my cousin,” he added with a smile.

“Your cousin is popular.”

“People are drawn to him,” Darcy murmured as he watched his cousin and Mrs Sullivan stand in a group of a few men and several ladies. He realised Elizabeth might find him tiresome, or perhaps not want to be forced to talk with him alone. “Would you like to join them? I can introduce you to anyone you wish to be known to.”

“I am happy to sit here with you and await the lecture,” Elizabeth said emphatically. “Is Colonel Fitzwilliam particularly interested in any of those ladies?” she asked in a teasing voice. “He seems remarkably friendly, but he might provoke their jealousy.”

He could not admit that his cousin was betrothed, and Mrs Sullivan must not have admitted it either. “My cousin is actually a subscriber to the matchmaking

subscription, so he is only talking to those ladies out of politeness.”

He expected her to look surprised at his admission, but she showed no reaction to this news at all. “Has he found anyone?”

“I could not say,” he said firmly. Realising she might misconstrue his abruptness as rudeness, he added, “He joked about having dozens of correspondents, but I do not believe him.”

Elizabeth laughed, and then her expression sobered. “From what I recall you saying at dinner last week, you approve of the enterprise? Would you...” She looked away and blew out a breath. “Would you ever hope to find a wife through such a means, granted she was honest enough?” she added awkwardly.

He looked at her a moment before answering. She sounded remorseful for some reason, but perhaps she was just embarrassed by the topic of the matchmaking subscription. “I see the appeal of writing letters to get to know a person without the expectations of one’s friends getting in the way.” He was not near to ready to admit that he had subscribed but been spurned. “They can decide on their own if they suit and could have, as you said at dinner, a affectionate marriage.”

“I am not in society as much as you are,” she said, “but I have heard little talk about it lately. Do you think the talk has died down because it has become accepted or because the venture is unsuccessful?”

This pressed uncomfortably close to his own experience, and he did not want to think about his failure with L. “Why are you curious about it?” The alarming thought that Elizabeth might use the matchmaking subscription to find a husband turned his stomach.

“I have been thinking about this subscription service and the agency it gives women,”

she said slowly. "It allows women an active role in courtship."

Darcy turned to look at where Mrs Sullivan, a long-widowed banker's daughter with fortune but no connexions, stood cheerfully next to the younger son of an earl. He wished them both happy and knew they would not have had the opportunity if not for the subscription. "I know some are calling it a new aggressiveness, but women corresponding with would-be beaux is hardly as insulting as how some women use cunning to court a man in a drawing room. I suppose they are the same goal, so if one method is acceptable, why not the other?"

He turned back to look at Elizabeth and was surprised to see that she looked embarrassed. When had she ever used arts to captivate a man? He could not believe her to be cunning; she was so sincere.

"I think women use their gifts, influence, and charms to captivate men, if they can," she said carefully. "You might say their time is better spent on serious reading or domestic or charitable pursuits. But there is more at stake for women than men when it comes to matrimony."

"I think both men's and women's happiness are at stake. You cannot value the happiness of one gender above the other."

Elizabeth gave him a long, sad look. "How could you know what it is like?" she asked. "To be a woman on a small income, how expenses like buying clothes and tea are carefully counted, that even receiving a letter can be a financial burden? If you did, you would be more patient with the women who court you."

He narrowed his eyes in confusion, curious about what she meant. "Why is that? When I have given them no encouragement to court me in the first place?"

"Mr Darcy, if you lost everything, if all the Pemberley estates and your investments

were lost to you, I am confident you could begin again. You are a man, and a clever, well-connected one with a fine education. I am certain there is nothing you could not do.” His heart beat fast to hear any praise from her lips. “But I lose everything when my father dies, and I am a woman with no resources. There is far more at stake for women, so while I cannot approve of a woman throwing away her pride for a man, I understand it. Think about what women have to sacrifice to have room and board.”

The idea of a woman trading autonomy, their bodies, for the security provided by a man struck him to his core. He would never put his sister or his daughters in that position, but men often left their female relatives in dire circumstances. The world left women with few options for their own maintenance.

“I do not mean to be unkind toward women in such a precarious position.” If Elizabeth disliked him before, she must have lost all respect for him now. “You must think me a complete fool.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “Never,” she said firmly as she removed her hand. Darcy wanted to grasp it and hold it tight. “I only wanted you to consider it from my point of view, all poor ladies’ point of view, really. I will have little to live on, and no accomplishments to be a governess, and no connexions to become a companion. But I still won’t marry without affection and respect. However, I have sisters and an uncle I could rely on if I never marry. Not every woman has that support.”

“I hope you are not confined in such trying circumstances to risk an unhappy marriage,” he said with his voice catching. “You deserve someone who admires how vivacious and caring and witty you are.”

She looked into his eyes. “I am hopeful.”

When their eyes met, he felt the connexion deep into his bones.

Was the gulf between them still impassable? He had misunderstood her archness and playful spirits before. But he had not heard one mocking aside or sardonic speech from her all evening nor at the ball earlier. And there was no mistaking the affectionate look in her eyes, the smile playing at the corner of her lips, her complete attention.

“Who are we hearing tonight?” Mrs Sullivan asked as she sat next to Elizabeth. Fitzwilliam followed down the row to join her. Whatever had passed between him and Elizabeth in that moment was gone as their friends took their seats.

Darcy tore his eyes from Elizabeth and pulled a pamphlet from his pocket and thrust it across her to Mrs Sullivan. “Mr Accum is speaking. He is a chemist and believes they can use the gas produced during the heating of coal as an illuminate.”

Mrs Sullivan exclaimed her disbelief and entreated Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam to agree with her. His cousin indulged her, but Elizabeth smiled and said she could be convinced before she turned back to him.

“So, do you now approve of women who pursue a partner for their own happiness and security, regardless of the medium, if they at least admire the man for his good character and merits?” Elizabeth said to him quietly as everyone took their seats.

When their eyes met again, he could believe that she felt something for him. Was Elizabeth Bennet flirting with him? Had she come tonight for him? For the first time, he could perfectly imagine a life of domestic tranquillity with a loving wife by his side. He had never felt that certainty while writing to L.

I love Elizabeth better than any woman in the world.

“You have stated your case on women’s situations beautifully, so I must,” he said in a low voice, leaning a little closer. Darcy’s heart pounded wildly when he asked, “If



you were pursuing a partner, a man you admired for his merits rather than what he could offer you, what qualities would you look for?”

This had to be the most pointed conversation he had ever had with any woman. Did she like him? Could she come to love him? He needed to be certain before he acted or spoke. Any sure sign from her would unleash every feeling in his heart.

Elizabeth’s lips parted, and she turned pink. Her gaze slipped from his eyes down to his mouth. “Darcy...” she whispered.

The librarian came to the table at the front to introduce the lecturer, and the conversation in the room stopped. Elizabeth gave a little disappointed sigh and looked away. Darcy reluctantly shifted away to face the front of the room, but he fought a smile as the lecture began.

Somehow, during their short reacquaintance in town, he had gone from being a person Elizabeth disliked to being a person she cared about.

The lecture might have been brilliant. Elizabeth could suppose the Institution fostered and disseminated scientific, technical, and literary knowledge and understanding. But what she was most aware of was Darcy. While Mr Accum made demonstrations with an elaborate display and talked of gaslight and the future of illumination to a rapt audience, Elizabeth felt Darcy’s heat next to her. His arm as he held his hat in his lap was scarcely an inch from hers. The audience on all levels of the elegant rotunda leant forward in interest, and Elizabeth wished she had reason to lean into Darcy to pretend to see better.

I put myself forward—how alarming and wonderful—and he seemed interested.

Elizabeth felt she was the sort of woman that could attach a man of sense, a man who had lived in the world, but would Darcy consider marrying a little beneath him? He

wanted a marriage of attachment, just as she did, but it might be uphill work to show herself in an amiable enough light to make him propose. She had neither beauty, connexions, nor fortune to tempt him, so her personality and character would be the way to gain her his notice.

But she knew Darcy to have all the worth that could justify the warmest hopes of lifelong happiness with him—if she continued to put forth the effort.

After the lecturer finished and the crowd lingered to talk to him and amongst themselves, some men came to talk to Darcy. He introduced her to his acquaintances, but she preferred to watch him rather than speak herself. She had the impression the audience was more middle class than aristocratic, but Darcy was entirely at ease. He was either putting forth the effort to be more agreeable, or he was more in his element here talking to these people interested in science and manufacturing than in Meryton amongst strangers.

He still should have been introduced and danced, but she had judged him harshly.

While the conversation went on about chemistry and the charter for a Gas Light and Coke Company, Elizabeth noticed that Mrs Sullivan and Colonel Fitzwilliam had drifted apart to talk to themselves. She watched them and wondered why Mrs Sullivan did not linger at Darcy's side.

“Do you find us tiresome?” Darcy asked.

She started and snapped her eyes back to his. “Not at all. I was only wondering why Mrs Sullivan was not with us, but I am content here with your friends.”

Darcy smiled, but he parted from the group and pointed toward the door. “We are tedious; you are just too polite to admit it. Would you like a tour of the Institution while Fitzwilliam chatters with one group and another?”

She agreed, and Darcy led her out of the crowded rotunda. Adjoining the theatre and near the enclosed space appropriated to the lecturer was a chemical laboratory. Contiguous to that was the committee-room. There were also conversation rooms and a reading room.

“On the other side of the theatre is the research library,” Darcy said, leading her down a corridor, “with a gallery on three sides, and easy access to it by a flight of steps, if you would like to see it?”

“I am not a subscriber; am I allowed?”

“Unless you plan on walking out with a book, it won’t be a problem.”

He led them through the throng to an impressive library that Darcy said held five thousand volumes. When the door closed behind them, the silence was a welcome relief from the noise and conversation of five hundred people. Elizabeth noticed Darcy exhale and settle his shoulders, and she wondered how little he liked a crowded room.

“Could we stay for a moment before we find our friends?” she asked. If he suspected that her asking to stay was for his benefit, he did not show it. He smiled and gestured that she look around. She pretended to look at the bookcases nearest to her, her eye wandering up to the gallery, but she preferred to stay near to Darcy as he asked her what she thought of the lecture.

“Does he really mean to tell us it will be possible to have light without a wick?” she said sceptically.

“Mr Accum thinks that through gas, it will be possible to have light in all rooms the way many private homes in England are provided with pipes in the walls that deliver water.”

“Are you a chemist, as well as a landowner?” she teased.

Darcy laughed. “No, I have no talent at all for scientific study.”

“Then why do you attend the lectures?”

He thought for a while, looking around the room as he came up with an answer. “I am always learning. I am curious, I suppose, and I want to support curiosity.”

“I understood little about Mr Accum’s process,” she admitted, hoping he would not disapprove of her or think her stupid. “I would have to attend several more lectures to be able to explain it to anyone.”

Rather than grow haughty or condescend to her, he smiled and stepped nearer. “I do not always understand every topic presented, but I enjoy feeling on the verge of progress.”

She could not help smiling at learning more about Darcy. “How did you come to be involved in the Institution?”

Darcy looked out into the room. “It is not interesting.”

Elizabeth’s hopes fell. “I want to know.” When he still said nothing, she said quickly, “I did not give you the credit you deserved when we first met, but please believe me when I say I am interested in knowing all about you now.”

She was being forward again, and her heart raced in anticipation. Darcy looked at her before answering. He seemed a little surprised, but he gave her a soft smile.

“Helping to fund the Institution was the first endeavour I supported on my own after I inherited Pemberley. My father died about five years ago, and for a year I did nothing

for my sake.” He paused and struggled with what to say. “My father’s death was difficult for me.”

Elizabeth held back the urge to put her arms around him. “I am so sorry.”

He bowed his thanks and paced in front of her as he spoke. “His death was not a surprise, but still a deeply felt loss. Then, in early 1808, I heard there was a need for private subscribers to open an organisation devoted to scientific, literary, and musical education and research. The amount was thirty guineas, and for the first time I spent money—what was now my money—for something other than Pemberley or my necessities or the charities already supported.”

“Tell me what drew you to it.”

Still pacing, Darcy said, “Because I was curious about the application of science to the common purposes in life, and all the other topics as well, even though it is often more performance lectures than serious research,” he added, looking a little embarrassed.

“It is more accessible that way,” she exclaimed. “I could not retain any knowledge if it were not.”

He stopped walking and stood in front of her. “It is not as fashionable here in Surrey, not like the Royal Institution farther west. Although perhaps it has a little more intellectual freedom.”

“It seemed a wide and appreciative audience,” she said, gesturing her head toward the door and the rotunda. “And I think your father would approve.”

Darcy shrugged, coming nearer. “I am uncertain he would approve of how liberal and middle class this is compared to the Royal Institution.”

“Oh, he would approve of you doing something for yourself because it made you happy.” Darcy fixed his attention on her, but still looked doubtful. “I am glad you found your way again.”

“Your eyes are remarkably expressive.” His voice was warm, and he smiled gently before realising he had given her a forward compliment. The way he turned pink and apologised was charming.

“Don’t apologise,” she said, feeling embarrassed and grateful at the same time. “I am quite flattered, to be honest. What a long way you have come from ‘tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.’”

It was easier to tease and be arch than say how much she wanted him to admire her. How could she make him know how wonderful she thought he was? Could she let him know how well she thought they could complement one another, if he would only give her the chance?

“Miss Bennet?” he asked quietly. “Would you—would you tell me why you wanted to come this evening when you did not even know who was speaking?”

There was a pointed look in his eyes, like he knew the answer and wanted her to confirm it.

She suddenly felt nervous and lost her previous courage. “Are you implying I do not have a curious mind, am not interested in the nature of things, like you are?” she said breathlessly. “I like a little rational amusement.”

He set down his hat on a table near to her and came closer. “You expressed an interest in coming when Mrs Sullivan mentioned it, because you want to be her friend, yes?”

She had forgotten all about Mrs Sullivan and Darcy's cousin and a lecture hall full of people. She nodded.

Darcy was directly in front of her. She was now effectively trapped between him and the bookcase. "Is that the only reason you wanted to come tonight?"

If she wanted any chance with Darcy, wanted him to forget Mrs Sullivan, she would have to be more direct than she had ever been, either in person or in L's letters. She could hear her own pulse pounding in her ears, and her nerves felt frayed.

"Well, before I answer that, you know that if a woman wishes to fix the affections of a man, it is generally agreed that she should conceal from his view the hold that he has on her heart. How does that suit anyone's interests?"

"It does not," he breathed. He reached out his hands and gently took hold of hers. She felt a shock of awareness when their hands touched.

It took her a few tries to find her voice, with Darcy tracing his thumb across her hands. "If she shows what she feels, she will be thought forward and, therefore, an unsuitable wife. But the man, or his friends, might assume she does not care for him." Thoughts of Jane flitted across her mind. "That matchmaking subscription lets participants know they are open to matrimony, and in the privacy of a letter they can reveal what might be in their heart without opening themselves to criticism. But heaven forbid a woman just tell a man that he has become very dear to her."

Darcy squeezed her hand a little tighter. "Why did you ask to come tonight, Elizabeth?"

"Because I knew you would be here, and I like you very much."

His nearness made her heart stagger. With his gaze locked upon hers, he moved

closer, his hands brushing along her arms before he pulled her into his embrace. She saw his intention a moment before feeling the touch of his lips. He leant down and pressed his warm lips firmly against hers.

Elizabeth was entirely unprepared for the onslaught of emotions unleashed from a single kiss. His arms tightened around her waist, holding her flush against him as his lips hungrily tasted hers again and again. His lips touched hers in long, lingering kisses, and she could have laughed with happiness.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and opened her mouth to him. His lips swept over hers, kissing her hard. It felt exhilarating when Darcy's tongue entered her mouth, bringing the two of them even closer together. She stroked his jaw, his cheek, and he gave a soft moan against her lips.

He pulled back from kissing her and rested his forehead against hers, leaning into her and gently pressing her into the bookcase. For a moment, they both stood there, with her in his arms and both of them breathing heavily.

She felt joyful, enjoying his closeness and the knowledge that Darcy cared for her after all.

"I am sorry," he said, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I should have?—"

"What?" she cried, startling him so much he stepped back. "Why are you sorry?" A sickening fear that he still had feelings for L or admired Mrs Sullivan settled in her stomach. "Is there someone else?"

Darcy's mouth fell open, and before he could speak, the door opened and Mrs Sullivan and Colonel Fitzwilliam walked in.

"There you are," he cried cheerfully. "Of course, you would be in the library when



you ought to be social.”

Darcy’s cousin appeared not to notice anything amiss, but Elizabeth caught Mrs Sullivan’s eye. Her gaze darted from her to Darcy and seemed to take in the entire scene. Elizabeth felt herself blushing fiercely. Had the woman who wished to be in her place caught her in an embrace?

Mrs Sullivan gave a heavy look to Colonel Fitzwilliam, who did not understand, and then she glared at Darcy and gave him a disapproving shake of her head before striding toward her.

“Miss Bennet, I have been missing you all evening. You cannot leave me to talk with these people without a friend at my side.”

Mrs Sullivan linked an arm through hers and all but dragged her back into the corridor toward the rotunda.

“Good heavens,” she muttered. “Your aunt will never allow me into her home! She will never even let me speak to you again if she learns I left you alone to be taken advantage of. And to think Mr Darcy capable of such an outrage.”

Realisation dawned, and as wounded as she was that Darcy’s heart might not be free, she could not allow the woman he might choose to think him capable of that. “He did not importune me,” she said as she was tugged along. “I, I am so sorry, Mrs Sullivan. I was a willing participant, but I am sorry, and I want to be your friend.” She loved Darcy, but she hated the idea of Mrs Sullivan losing all respect for her. “Please forgive me.”

All of her thoughts were a muddle. Who did Darcy care for more: her or the woman hauling her back into public view?

Mrs Sullivan slowed their pace and patted her on the arm with her other hand. “Well, kissing behind a curtain is hardly a scandal, is it? It is nothing every young person has not done once or twice. And no one saw you together but me and Fitzwilliam. Besides, as you are my friend, I can forgive you anything, not that you were to blame.”

They were now back among the crowd, but Mrs Sullivan still kept their arms linked. In a softer voice, she added, “And all I saw were two people standing rather close together. Oh, my dear, you look stricken. I would never speak against another lady, you know. I would never hint that a few moments alone implied anything improper.”

Mrs Sullivan would stay silent, either because she loved Darcy and still wanted him for herself, or because she was a loyal friend and Elizabeth did not deserve her.

She kept an arm around hers while Colonel Fitzwilliam chatted with all the little groups. Darcy eventually re-joined them, but Mrs Sullivan kept them apart with her conversation and her physical presence. Mrs Sullivan would not let go of her until they were in the carriage half an hour later. Darcy sat across from Elizabeth, and although he caught her eye and gave her a small smile, there was no opportunity to talk.

He clearly had some affection for her, but was it enough to forsake L and Mrs Sullivan and marry her? It took all of Elizabeth’s self-control not to cry during the awkward and mostly silent carriage ride home.

### Chapter Fourteen

Darcy awoke early the morning after the lecture to his man telling him that Fitzwilliam was in his dressing room and impatient to see him. Rubbing his eyes and only bothering to get half dressed, Darcy made a vague drinking gesture in the hopes of getting coffee and joined his cousin.

“It is seven; why are you here at this awful hour?” Darcy asked when he finally had a cup of coffee. “We are not meeting your parents for hours.” He was to spend the afternoon with his aunt and uncle to sing the praises of Fitzwilliam’s chosen bride.

“What happened last night?” Fitzwilliam said, his arms crossed over his chest. “Clara is furious with you.”

“Did she say why?” He took another long drink, hoping his mind would clear. It was a late night at the Surrey Institution, and then he spent half the night tossing and turning, thinking about Elizabeth. He had impulsively kissed her and then had not the time to declare himself before they were interrupted.

“No. She seems to think it would lessen my opinion of my favourite cousin and my only family member who will champion her, but she won’t say why. So here I am to demand an answer before you and I have a very uncomfortable afternoon with my parents.”

Now that he had some coffee and a moment to think, Darcy knew why Mrs Sullivan thought ill of him. He must have looked like he was importuning Elizabeth last night, leaning her against a bookcase and forcing his attentions on her. Fitzwilliam had

noticed nothing amiss, but another woman had. Now he would have to admit to the whole of it and suffer his cousin's teasing.

"I kissed Elizabeth last night," he said in a low voice, staring into his coffee cup, "before you and Mrs Sullivan entered the library. She caught us, or caught us in each other's arms."

Fitzwilliam's face turned quizzical, and then he laughed. "Oh, she thinks you are a scoundrel!" He laughed again and sat at the table to pour himself a cup of coffee.

"Yes, how amusing," Darcy said drily. "Let us hope Elizabeth does not think I am one. She said nothing to me after we kissed." Mrs Sullivan had been with her the entire time, though. The widow must have been afraid to leave them alone again.

"And Miss Elizabeth may have felt humiliated in front of her new friend to be put in such a position." Darcy grew embarrassed at opening them both to criticism, and felt wretched for kissing her and leaving unsaid everything he felt for her.

"What is that downcast look for?" Fitzwilliam barked. "You should be thrilled the lady does not hate you after how you behaved early in your acquaintance. You don't regret kissing her, do you?"

"No," he cried. "Well, yes, and no. She made her feelings for me clear. She encouraged Mrs Sullivan in the invitation because she knew I would be there and Elizabeth told me she liked me, and I kissed her." It had felt like the most sensible, most necessary thing to do. "But I should have confessed my own feelings in return and asked her to marry me first."

"Then go see her this evening after we meet my parents and throw yourself at her feet before she changes her mind. I am not even sure why she likes you. You are not amiable, you have an unyielding temper, you hate dancing, and you would rather go

to a lecture than a party. You might not even be a good kisser.”

Fitzwilliam was teasing, but what if she regretted it? They had settled nothing between them, after all. The fear gripped him that she regretted it because their kiss meant everything to him.

“When I stopped kissing her, I apologised for taking such a liberty?—”

“If she kissed you back, I doubt she minded.”

“—and she asked me if there was someone else. Before I could answer, you and Mrs Sullivan came in.” His mind was a whirl with reasons Elizabeth might think less of him and refuse him.

“Is there someone else? Are you still hopeful about L?”

“No. In fact, I am going to write to L to formally end our communication.” He would wish her well, but tell her his affections were engaged elsewhere and that it would be inappropriate to continue writing. “And then tomorrow I am calling in Gracechurch Street.”

“You look rather miserable for a man expecting to be engaged.”

Any man who had so many reasons to be refused would look as distressed as Darcy felt. “She might suspect there is someone else and not trust me. I kissed her without making a declaration. I thought her sister was not good enough for my friend.” He rested his head in his hands. “I called her ‘tolerable’, Fitzwilliam.”

“This is why I thought you would find a woman to love you through letters. There was less of a chance of you saying something stupid. Break it off with L. Help me convince his lordship that the widowed daughter of a banker could make me a good

wife, and then tell Miss Elizabeth you want to marry her before you kiss her again.”

He felt mortified. “A gentleman would have settled everything rather than kiss her senseless.”

“And a proper lady would not have put words to her feelings before you did,” Fitzwilliam quipped. “I guess you are both reprehensible and deserve one another.”

Fitzwilliam laughed heartily, and Darcy gave a wan smile and hoped that Elizabeth loved him.

Sunday, February 16

My dear friend,

I open with this sincere salutation knowing full well this will be my last letter. I have met a woman with whom I hope to share the rest of my life, and it would be disrespectful to her to continue writing to a single woman. Although we did not meet in person, we exchanged enough letters in friendship that could distress another woman. I do not demand the letters’ return—there was nothing shameful in our correspondence—but out of respect for a woman who I hope will be my bride, I would appreciate it if you burned them.

I cannot write to you again, but I hope you know I will always think of you with fondness and friendship.

I wish you health and happiness and remain your humble servant,

F

Elizabeth read Darcy’s letter in the drawing room while Bingley and his sisters

visited with Jane. His letter arrived in Monday's first post just as they had called this morning to express their joy in their brother's engagement. Elizabeth suspected the connexion mortified them, but they would learn to be gracious for the sake of appearances.

Since she was in company, it forced Elizabeth to stay calm while her heart beat out of control. She wanted to believe that she was the woman Darcy had fixed on, but everything felt unsettled since the lecture. After her thoughts ran wild and she tried to keep a calm affect, she felt about to burst if she did not speak to Jane.

Begging to borrow her sister for a moment, she pulled Jane from her guests and made her join her in her room. After a few false starts, Elizabeth admitted what had been on her mind since Saturday night: that she had admitted to her fond feelings for Darcy, Darcy had ardently kissed her, but they were interrupted before he could make any promises.

"You let him kiss you?" Jane cried. "I am astonished, but I am happy for you. He must love you."

The memory of the kiss made her blush, and it made her yearn for a quick marriage that she had no assurances would happen.

"There is more," she said, holding out the letter. "This is from Darcy—to L," she added. "He wants his letters destroyed because his affections are with another."

Jane handed the letter back and gave her a curious look. "What has you so distressed to learn he cares for you and won't write to L again? And whenever Mr Darcy calls to request an audience with you, then you can tell him you were L all along."

The uncertainty she felt about Darcy's feelings was nothing compared to the guilt at keeping the truth about their correspondence from him. Her integrity would be called

into question, and Darcy would never love her. “Oh, Jane, how could I tell him? He is so principled. As soon as he knows I realised who he was and said nothing, he will be angry.”

“His affection for you will do away with any resentment about you keeping this from him for so long. You must tell him the truth,” Jane said firmly, but Elizabeth shook her head. “You mean to say that if you secure Mr Darcy, you will never tell him you were his correspondent? How else will you explain how you grew to like him so quickly?”

She remembered how desperately he looked for L in The Green Park. “He would be disappointed in me. He admires honesty in a partner above nearly all else. And Darcy might care in some small way for Mrs Sullivan. What if he despises me for lying, for not telling him I was L immediately, and turns to her instead?”

“That is your fear talking. It is not rational.” Jane smiled and led her by the hand to sit on the bed. “He kissed you in the library, not her.”

Elizabeth felt that fear now rise out of control. “Maybe he felt guilty for kissing me and actually prefers Mrs Sullivan? He never said there was no one else when he stopped kissing me.” She let go of Jane’s hand to cover her eyes and hold back tears. The only thing she could be absolutely certain of was her own feelings. “He did not speak to me for the rest of the night.”

“If he was going to propose, he would prefer to do it alone. You were in a crowded lecture hall, and if he is as principled as I believe he is—as you believe he is—then he is not as fond of Mrs Sullivan as you fear, not if he was so pleased by your admission that he kissed you.”

“I have made myself so unhappy with worry.” Elizabeth sighed and put her arms around Jane. “How wretched would I be with no one to speak to of what I felt, no



Jane to comfort me. I was supposed to come to town to be a comfort to you, and now here you are telling me how silly I am.” She could almost allow herself to believe that she had not ruined everything with Darcy.

“Lizzy, why are you so unsettled?” Jane asked, pulling back to look into her face. “Is it really out of fear that he admires Mrs Sullivan more than you?”

“No,” she whispered. She knew the truth behind their correspondence—and Darcy did not. He did not know how his letters improved her opinion of him. “Because there is a lie between us, and I love him.”

“And can you begin a marriage with Mr Darcy with this lie between you?”

Elizabeth shook her head. She had to be honest, and she tried not to give in to despair that it was too late and he would feel ill-used once she confessed. How much would his respect for her fall once he learnt what she kept from him? Whatever affection Darcy had found for her this past week might be too new for him to overcome her deceit.

But he valued honesty, and she could not live with this lie hanging between them.

“Would you tell Bingley and his sisters that you want to go somewhere this afternoon? I promise this shall be the last time,” she added, with a wan smile. “I will ask Darcy to meet me as L and tell him everything.”

Monday, February 17

My dear friend,

I beg to prevail on your kindness one final time and ask you to meet me in person today. I do not want to dissuade you from your chosen lady, but to deliver your letters

myself and offer an explanation why I did not meet you at The Green Park. It would ease my mind to be candid and apologise in person, and have us part in friendship and honesty.

For worlds I would not have a letter of mine seen by your future bride. I will bring your letters, but will burn them if you do not appear.

I will be in the Whispering Gallery at St Paul's this afternoon at half past two, in the place you described in your earlier letter, wearing the blue hat and posy of pansies as I ought to have worn last week. I hope you will be gracious enough to hear my explanations in person. Even if you do not, I remain,

Your dear friend,

L

It had been simple to get everyone to spend the afternoon looking at the curiosities at St Paul's. Jane had only to tell Bingley that she wanted to go, and Bingley immediately agreed and pressed Mrs Hurst to chaperone his intended and Elizabeth. Bingley's sisters exchanged long-suffering looks and complained the entire carriage ride, but they all descended from a tightly packed carriage by two o'clock.

After pretending to share everyone's interest in the clockwork and the Great Bell, Elizabeth said she had to rest while the others viewed the library. As soon as they were out of sight, she asked the person conducting visitors where the stairs were to the galleries in the dome.

She stopped counting steps at around two hundred, and it was soon after that when she reached the Whispering Gallery. Above her, it looked to be about a hundred more steps each to get to the Stone and the Golden galleries. She entered and went halfway round the circular walkway at the base of the dome above the nave to sit on the stone

bench. It was silent all around her, and there was no service until quarter after three. If someone stood opposite her on the other side of the gallery, she could hear the ticking of their watch or any word they whispered.

She had nothing to do but fret while she waited to see if Darcy would appear.

Would he be angry when he realised she was L and leave? Would he let her explain or be too distressed at being deceived for this long? Would she always be a woman with no integrity whom he could never respect?

Elizabeth fiddled with the pansies on her pelisse. It had not been necessary—Darcy would make sense of it all quickly enough—but she thought it a penance due because of the way she abandoned him in The Green Park.

Elizabeth heard footsteps climbing the stairs and then stop just outside the small door. After a long moment of hesitation where she felt overpowered by restlessness and tension, Darcy entered the gallery.

Even though they were separated by one hundred feet, his feelings were expressive enough that she could discern them from the other side of the gallery. Darcy's face went from impassive to surprise upon recognising her. He then looked pleased, and he took a step toward going round the gallery toward her before halting. She saw the realisation in his face, watched him reason, think, and his mind pass over every word exchanged on paper and in person.

He had a severe countenance that drove away most of her hope.

He bowed his head, tapping lightly on the brim of his hat that he held in his hand. The sound travelled round the gallery and the steady beat hit her ears. Was he lost in thought or furious? The seconds passed, and Elizabeth felt a wretched suspense.

Darcy turned his head to the wall, and she was afraid of what he would say.

“L is for Lizzy?”

He had spoken in a low whisper, but she heard it as clearly as though he had spoken directly into her ear.

Her throat was completely dry, and she nodded.

“When did you realise?”

His voice travelled around the gallery and sounded as though he was right next to her, rather than one hundred feet away. She could not tell if he was angry, or disappointed, or surprised.

She could not whisper the entire explanation, and gave Darcy a pleading look and gestured that he should come nearer. Her heart stopped beating while Darcy hesitated. He then came round the gallery slowly until he stood directly in front of her by the rail. He looked grave and stared at her.

“Did you realise at The Green Park and tear off your flowers?” he asked, pointing to the pansies.

“I suspected before,” she said hoarsely. “You wrote about disliking being assiduously courted. Certainly a man of sense and honour must dislike being pursued for his position and fortune and not for himself. But F’s complaint about a woman admiring his handwriting and offering to mend his pen was so precise to what happened at Netherfield with Miss Bingley that I began to wonder.”

“Fear, or wonder?”

She gave a nervous laugh and felt tears building behind her eyes. “Well, I did not know at that point that I had horribly misjudged you, so there was some distress at the possibility of F being Mr Darcy, the man I thought wronged Mr Wickham and was selfish and arrogant.”

“And so you arranged a private meeting in the park to assure yourself that your correspondent was not me?”

He looked so solemn. It must offend him to know she was disappointed to learn that her new friend was him .

“I did,” she admitted, “and I was still stunned to see you. Even though I thought better of you after what happened at the Hursts’ home, I knew our correspondence and all it meant to me was over. You wanted to meet L, not me. But after, I thought, why could we not like one another as ourselves?”

She searched his eyes to see if he was open to the idea, but he only stared. Deciding he deserved more of an explanation, she went on. “I realised I was entirely wrong about you. I have never been more wrong about anyone in all my life. I hoped you might forgive my awful assumptions and prejudices because I wanted to know you better.”

“But why?” he pressed. “You made it clear that night at the Hursts’ that you held me in very little regard, even if you were wrong about Wickham. Why did you care about my good opinion?”

“My correspondent F realised he had acted wrongly and wanted to be a better man. I find that commendable. He wanted to act less selfishly, and I realised so must you. You were the same man!” How could she make him understand her feelings for him were sincere? “Everything I admired about F’s intelligence and humour and character and honesty...it was you all along. The person I thought was my dear friend, my

anonymous friend, was already known to me. I thought of F—of you—so often this past month. I liked him, and...and so, naturally, I like you. So, so I thought, why not persuade you that you could like me in return?”

Darcy blinked. “Persuade me to like you?”

He repeated the words as though she had not spoken English. “Yes, I realised what a task was before me. You had admired L, and never looked at me but to find a blemish.” She could not bear to look at him and addressed his shoes instead. “All the things that you said to Bingley to keep him from Jane must also be true in your own case. You withstood my beauty from the moment of our acquaintance. But I thought if you had been attracted to L enough to meet her, you might be capable of preferring me.”

“Capable of preferring you?”

Was he going to repeat everything she said? If he was so stunned by the thought of preferring her, she had no chance with Darcy after all. His kiss must have been an impulsive mistake, brought on only by hearing of her preference for him. “Yes, forgive me, but I felt that if you admired L, then I could convince you to prefer me over L or any other woman.”

“I prefer you to every soul breathing.”

She tossed up her head to stare at him in shock. He had whispered it. Because he was in front of her, the effect of the gallery was lost, but she still heard him clearly, although she could not believe it.

“How is that possible? You never considered me in that way until the lecture when I threw all propriety aside and told you I care for you.”

Darcy set down his hat and joined her on the stone bench. He smiled for the first time since entering the gallery, but Elizabeth was too dumbstricken to smile back.

“Do you believe I did not admire you until this week?” he asked, taking her hand in his. “Until the night of the lecture? That is extraordinary,” he murmured.

She had to swallow twice to find her voice. Her heart beat fast and she was trembling. “You cared for me before this week?”

“I never thought that L might stand for Lizzy, but the reason I wanted to meet her was because L reminded me of you. L was someone I thought I could fall in love with, but I was already in love with you .”

She was struck with amazement. “In love with me?”

Darcy laughed. “Yes, in love with you.”

Those were words she would never tire of hearing, but how could he not be angry with her? “Even if that is true, what about now?” Her voice shook. “When I kept the truth from you for a week? When I just left you in The Green Park? I knew the truth and just left you there and never told you I was L.” She remembered how disappointed he had looked. “You want someone who will always tell you the truth; you deserve someone who will be honest with you.”

“Then I hope you do not make a habit of keeping things from me.”

He was still smiling. “Darcy, you are the most principled man I have ever met. How are you not furious with me?”

“Because I am too happy to learn that you think you could love me,” he said with another laugh. He looked absolutely delighted. “I do not even care that you first

admired me through our anonymous correspondence.”

She felt lost in amazement. Darcy was truly already in love with her? “But you have only noticed me this week. Until then, I was only tolerable.”

He shook his head and squeezed her hand. “I thought you were pretty, but your character gave charm to your beauty, and I was captivated before I left Hertfordshire. I was foolishly afraid of my feelings for you and tried to forget you, but I was entirely bewitched. Bewitched by your liveliness, your cleverness, your generosity.”

Darcy had trailed off and leant forward with an intent look in his eyes.

“But what about Mrs Sullivan?” she cried when he was nearly at her lips.

He drew back with a look of complete astonishment. “What about her?”

“You have hardly been apart. I have never seen you give so much notice to any woman, including me—and you claim to admire me.”

“Love you,” he corrected.

She felt her cheeks heat, and a smile threatened to burst her lips wide open. “I value my friendship with Mrs Sullivan, so if you have any feelings for her, you must tell me now, and then you must choose. I know I was not honest with you about the letters, and I should have been, but I deserve the truth now, just as you deserved the truth then.”

He was quiet for a moment as he studied her face. The suspense was intolerable.

“I must break a confidence to answer that, but I cannot have you believe I am attached to another woman. Mrs Sullivan and Colonel Fitzwilliam found one another



through the matchmaking subscription. His parents are against the union, and I have been trying to know her better and be seen as though I approve of her for my cousin's sake. I do approve of her," he insisted. "She is a worthy woman, and I ought to be a better friend than I have been in the past. Mrs Sullivan makes Fitzwilliam happy; they can talk about horses all day long, and she is conversant enough to keep up with him, and has enough money for them to live on."

A few tears of relief fell from her eyes. Mrs Sullivan was attached to Darcy's cousin, not him. He was trying to be a better friend to his cousin than he had been to Bingley.

"They are secretly engaged," he added, as though he thought her silence was from confusion and not at the realisation that nothing stood in the way of her being with Darcy.

She gave him a look she hoped he understood. She wanted to show him all the love and esteem she felt for him. "You cannot know how happy I am to hear that."

"I want to be the man you see when you look at me," he murmured, stroking her cheek. "I want to be worthy of having you look at me like that. I am exceedingly sorry for the selfish way I acted, for separating Bingley from your sister."

"It is all in the past," she whispered, now grinning. "And I am so sorry for abandoning you at The Green Park. I should have admitted sooner that you were writing to me all along." She gave a relieved sigh. "I never thought you cared for me at all before the lecture."

"There is only one woman I want, and it is not L or Mrs Sullivan. Will you comfort me and counsel me, lighten my cares, strengthen my principles?" He moved his hand to hold her cheek. "Love me always?"

"Yes." There was surely nothing that felt so gladdening as the certainty of reciprocal

affections. “Nothing would make me happier than to return your love.”

Darcy bent his head for a kiss, and her pulse quickened. His warm lips sent a shiver through her. She gave way beneath him, breathing him in while Darcy took his time, gently kissing her. One hand crept up his chest until it reached his shoulder, and her other hand tucked around his waist.

Darcy brought a hand to cup the base of her neck. His mouth moved over hers, delicately at first, and then she allowed his tongue to slip between her lips. Her breath hitched, and when he lifted his head, his eyes were closed. He must have been waiting for the unsteadiness of his own breathing to pass.

Opening his eyes, he gently cupped her face in both of his hands. “I should have told you at the lecture that I love you and want to marry you.” He gave another smile, an expression of heartfelt delight diffusing over his face. “I did not even realise you cared for me until the lecture.”

“That is because I stupidly did not tell you I was L and that I had begun to love you through our letters,” she said, smiling.

“I cannot believe you even liked me after the selfish way I acted.”

Elizabeth laughed and pressed a quick kiss against his lips. “And I cannot believe you liked me all along!”

Footsteps crossed the nave below them, and they reluctantly drew apart. By unspoken agreement, they made their way to the steps. About halfway down, Elizabeth felt Darcy’s silence.

“Are you pensive?” she asked. “Are you worried about how we will explain ourselves to the others? Jane knows all of my trials and heartache, which I fully admit are of my

own making.”

“No, that shall all be explained after I speak to your aunt and uncle,” Darcy said, grazing the side of his knuckle up and down her arm as he spoke, sending a thrill straight to her heart. “I am wondering what I shall tell Fitzwilliam.”

“Will he not approve of me?”

Darcy shook his head. “He knows I love you, but I believed I had no hope. Last month, I told him I would never find someone to love me through the matchmaking service. Although we met in person, you got to know me through the letters, and now I will never hear the end of his saying ‘I told you so.’”

One year later

Darcy ran up the steps to the Gardiners' home and rang the bell, asking if Elizabeth could meet him privately before he joined the others. His wife had been there visiting all afternoon along with Jane and Bingley, but he had had an important item to retrieve before joining her. The Gardiners were hosting them all to observe the anniversary of their marriage. Fitzwilliam and Clara had married the same day last spring as Bingley and Jane and he and Elizabeth. His uncle had approved of Fitzwilliam's match; or rather, Darcy suspected, his lordship relented because he could do nothing to stop it and decided it was best to put on a public show of approval.

There had been no Easter trip to Kent last year. Elizabeth had wisely decided it not the best time to visit her friend who lived next to Rosings. Lady Catherine had been furious to learn Darcy would not be marrying her daughter, although the only one surprised by this confession was her ladyship. She was still not yet willing to put on the same pleasant face for public view as was her brother.

Fortunately, the Gardiners had been overjoyed by their news. There had been no need to apply for an exchange of identities at the matchmaking office last season. After the excursion to St Paul's, he and Elizabeth explained the entire scenario to the Gardiners, who found it highly amusing. Ultimately, they decided to say the couple met in the autumn and reawakened their connexion in town rather than announce they met someone they already knew through the subscription.

"I was disappointed you did not come earlier," Elizabeth said when she greeted him in the Gardiners' parlour. "I was almost afraid you were avoiding an evening party

when you are one of the guests of honour.”

Elizabeth showed a glow of such happy expression whenever he entered the room. He would never tire of receiving her smiles.

“I had an errand to run, my dear,” he said, leaning forward to kiss her cheek since they were alone. “It took longer than anticipated, but I could not leave until it was finished.”

“I am surprised my aunt left us unaccompanied,” she said with an amused look at the closed door. “Before we married, she was always intent on watching over my conduct with enough scrutinising severity as to make it doubtful to anyone that I actually love you.”

He would also never tire of hearing Elizabeth say that she loved him. She seemed to know that, and she told him every chance she had.

“I do not blame Mrs Gardiner. She caught us kissing rather fervently in your uncle’s library before we married.” Darcy took her by the hand to sit on the sofa. “But I am glad for a quarter of an hour alone with you before we join the others. I intend to use it wisely.”

He shifted to take the box from his pocket, but Elizabeth clasped him around the shoulders and kissed him. He was startled, but then he closed his eyes and kissed her back. Her lips were so soft, and her response reflected his own longing.

“That is not what I meant,” he murmured when they were done.

“It seemed a wise use of time to me. If it was not to kiss me, then why did you want to see me alone?”

Now he pulled out the jeweller’s box and presented it to her. “I have an anniversary

gift for you, but hopefully you won't need it for any other clandestine meetings."

She pulled out the necklace with a pendant in the shape of a large pansy, with amethyst petals and a citrine in the centre. Elizabeth's playful and eager expression turned more tender. "You brought me a pansy. To help me think of you?"

"You said you would wear pansies to meet me in The Green Park because you thought of me often." He took the necklace from the box and put it around her neck. "I hope this way you will always *pense à moi*. Now you can more easily think of me when we have to be apart. Just don't use it to identify yourself when meeting strangers," he added in a teasing voice.

Elizabeth ran her fingers over the stones. "There won't be any more clandestine meetings, I promise you that. We both ended our subscriptions long ago." She pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "I will think of you always."

"Do you think your aunt and uncle were right to not tell people we met through the subscription? The business did not survive, but it was a fine thing for women, as you taught me."

She shrugged. "It was, but it might be better that no one knows we connected through the subscription. I was already an alarming choice according to your family. Besides, who would believe that you needed it?" She had a look in her eyes that said he would be teased. "Mr Darcy of Pemberley would never resort to such a scheme, not with his rank, connexions, and wealth."

"A scheme, was it?" he asked, smiling. "It served me well, all in all. We found our way to each other thanks to those letters." And also thanks to his cousin placing him in the second tier of subscribers, a confession Fitzwilliam laughingly made when Darcy explained how he had become engaged to his secret correspondent, Elizabeth Bennet.

“You joined because your cousin knew you were always so impatient with women who only wanted to be mistress of your house and purse. And this way, you could compose your thoughts, not say anything rude, and force a lady to actually love you.”

Darcy resigned himself to further teasing. “Did you feel forced into loving me?”

“In a way, I do,” she said, determined to sport with him. “A lady of sense would require some romantic poems, clever conversations, and at least two dances for a gentleman to be deemed worthy of her hand. I could not marry a man who was not a fine dancer, you know. But all I had were a few weeks’ worth of conversations through letters.”

“You forget that I am an excellent dancer, and I fulfilled your two requisite dances before I proposed. I make no guarantee about romantic poems, though.”

She smiled and leant into him as Darcy raised an arm around her shoulders. “Truly, a clever conversationalist is more necessary to me, so I suppose you can forgo writing me any pretty lines.”

“Long and devoted letters, however, I can promise,” he said, pressing a kiss into her hair. “I enjoyed writing to you, and I will do my best to spend a lifetime of writing you as romantic lines as I am able.”

She shifted to look up at him. “You enjoyed writing to L, not me .?”

“And you enjoyed writing to F, and that is how you first fell in love with me.”

“Does it bother you?” she asked softly. “That I first fell in love with you without even realising it was you?”

“No,” he answered honestly. “I was more bothered that you knew for a week that we were correspondents and did not tell me.” He felt her sigh and quickly added, “But I

was not about to sacrifice our future happiness by being resentful over it. And I understood why you were reluctant. You were surprised, and had a lot to reconcile.”

“Not as surprised as you must have been when you entered the Whispering Gallery and saw me with a blue hat and pansies pinned to my coat.”

Darcy ran a finger over Elizabeth’s pansy necklace. He had been stunned to enter the gallery and see Elizabeth that day. But the shock faded into gladness when he learnt Elizabeth had come to love him. The joy in knowing she did not despise him did away with the displeasure that she had not confessed earlier that they were correspondents. “I easily reconciled that you and L were the same, although I know I had an easier time than you did.”

Elizabeth agreed by kissing him again. “I never expected to fall in love through those letters, and certainly not with a man I already knew.”

“I entered that matchmaking subscription because I wanted to forget you, and I am delighted I was thwarted in that plan.”

“I only wanted to prove to Jane that a woman could find an amiable and steady man. There are few ways for a woman to speak first and be honest about who and what she wants.”

“I was the reason Bingley was not constant.”

“Plus his sisters, and his own diffidence, and Jane’s modesty, but that is neither here nor there. We have all happily married now, and Clara and Fitzwilliam as well. I am glad she was never an object for you. I would have regretted losing her friendship as much as it would have hurt to lose you at the moment I realised your worth.”

“Fitzwilliam is also glad that I was never enamoured by his wife,” he said drily, and Elizabeth laughed. “He was highly amused that I spent a month writing to the very



woman I was trying to forget. Our short courtship through letters was a complete surprise in many ways.”

Elizabeth brought her hands to his cheeks. “As much as I look forward to whatever romantic lines you will write to me when we must be apart, our relationship in person is far more elucidating than letters.”

There was a look and a manner that gave her words meaning, and he decided there was a better way to spend their remaining time alone than talking.

The End