



No Less Resentment

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Category: Historical

Description: All of his efforts to forget her had failed, and he had accepted that some part of her would always be with him.

In the winter of 1812, a fatal accident on a stormy night plunges the Bennet family into mourning and scandal. Shunned and isolated from nearly everyone they have ever known and loved each of the Bennet sisters hurries to marry, to provide themselves the respectability of married women. Miss Elizabeth Bennet settles into marriage of prudence with a man she respects but could never completely love.

Fitzwilliam Darcy left Hertfordshire determined to put Elizabeth Bennet and her fine eyes behind him. Disgusted by society and plagued by memories he would just as soon forget, he tries to seclude himself at Pemberley. Alas, the treachery and extortion of someone he once trusted leads him to settle into a marriage both he and his bride despise.

Shortly after he becomes a widower, a chance discovery on a beach in Devon brings Elizabeth Bennet back to Darcy's mind. Not knowing anything of what has befallen her in the years since that fateful autumn in Hertfordshire he sets out to find her and, if possible, court her.

Will the tumult both have endured in the years since last they met be put aside? Will their long-awaited second chance at love finally lead to happily ever after?

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PROLOGUE

May 1817, off the coast of Devon

The sea rose and fell, rose and fell, the waves towering and crashing as the wind shrieked and roared in the dark night. Several miles out from land, on the shallow submerged plains below the raging surface, sand and gravel stirred as sea creatures scattered and took shelter. The sand shifted and moved, spinning in underwater cyclones, uncovering rocks and driftwood but also broken glass and other artefacts of a human presence.

A sail, its ragged remains gradually revealed by the shifting sands, was barely tethered to the cannon ball that had weighted it to the bottom some years before. The unforgiving power of the storm tugged violently at the canvas, unearthing it and pulling it to shreds. The wrapped sail was almost empty, its contents devoured by fish and other forms of marine life. Brass buttons, scraps of blue wool, bits of the larger bones survived; the mortal remains of a very good man. Another wave surged violently over. A small misshapen object was wrenched from a disintegrating coat pocket and rose to the surface, where it proceeded to its destination.

By the following day, the storm had blown itself out. The sun was shining in Devonshire, but the sea was still restless. The tide had withdrawn to its farthest ebb, and villagers picked their way across the shingle, looking for treasures left behind when the water retreated.

Fitzwilliam Darcy, breathing in the brisk, salty air appreciatively, strolled beside his sister and her husband, viewing the villagers with interest. "Does a storm always

wash so much ashore?" he asked his brother-in-law.

The man chuckled. "Not so much as in Cornwall, where ships may be dashed to pieces against the rocks. There are no reefs or rock outcroppings near the little cove here. There are caves in the cliffs though, and it was very busy with smugglers over the last few years. They would occasionally drop things or lose a cargo. Now that the war is over, not so many interesting items wash in. Mere flotsam and jetsam, not expensive French brandy. Most of the villagers are here to gather driftwood for fires."

As the water slowly crept forwards, Darcy noticed a small, warped piece of driftwood about the size of a man's fist bobbing near him. A gnarl from a storm-tossed tree, perhaps. It dipped and tumbled to and fro in the water until the waves made a small retreat and it disappeared. Mere minutes later, there it was again. It seemed to follow Darcy along the shore, playing a game of tag, repeatedly darting away from him then popping up almost under his feet.

"Fitzwilliam, it seems to be following you," teased his sister.

Darcy bent over and picked it up. The small piece of wood was badly warped and twisted from the water, but strangely, there was a tiny bit of blue paint clinging to it. It had been something once, deliberately crafted by someone. Darcy stopped to examine it more closely, while his companions kept walking. He spotted a seam along the side and, with his finger, followed it unevenly around the object. It had been a box or receptacle of some kind.

Darcy reached for his pocket-knife and ever so gently prised it open, moving the knife slowly and carefully around the circumference of the box. The wood, swollen tight with sea water, did not give up its secrets easily. At last, the two pieces separated.

The box had once been well-made and tightly constructed; there was very little water

inside. It contained a small object wrapped tightly in layer after layer of oilcloth, which was barely damp. More curious than ever, Darcy slipped the box into his capacious coat pocket and turned his knife to the oilcloth. He cut the pieces away, each one following the box to the depths of his pocket.

The back of the object was revealed first. It was a pendant of some kind, plain metal with no inscription, with a small loop at the top. He turned it over to further examine it and gasped, his long-dormant heart stuttering painfully to life. It was a miniature painting, of the type called a lover's eye; in this case a particularly fine one.

He knew that eye. It and its twin had haunted his dreams for years; in truth they still did. There could be no others like them. What he held was a faithfully rendered copy of an eye of Elizabeth Bennet, with whom he had fallen in love years before. He had left the area, never to return, but the beauty and warmth of her eyes had taken up permanent residence in his memory. He had thought of her often in the ensuing years. All his efforts to forget her had failed, and at length he had accepted that some part of her would always be with him.

The seawater slowly moved up the shingle, the gulls cried and wheeled overhead, the sun shone, and villagers began to leave with their arms full of wood. Darcy did not notice, his eyes riveted on the tiny painting nestling in the palm of his hand. He was no longer in Devonshire, standing by the sea on a summer's day; he was transported almost six years backwards in time, to a bare autumn garden in Hertfordshire, walking in pale November sunlight. He could hear again the gravel walk crunching under his boots, feel again Miss Caroline Bingley hanging heavily on his arm, pressing herself too closely against him, suffer again her insinuating voice—her snide attempt at drollery.

“Oh yes! Do let the portraits of your aunt and uncle Philips be placed in the gallery at Pemberley. Put them next to your great-uncle, the judge. They are in the same profession, you know, only in different lines. As for your Elizabeth's picture, you

must not attempt to have it taken, for what painter could do justice to those beautiful eyes?"

"It would not be easy, indeed, to catch their expression," he had answered, controlling his annoyance. "But their colour and shape, and the eyelashes, so remarkably fine, might be copied."

It had been awkward when, mere seconds later, they had encountered Elizabeth and Mrs Hurst, who quickly dropped Elizabeth's arm and took his with alacrity. The rudeness of Bingley's sisters had embarrassed him, and he had attempted to smooth it over, but Elizabeth had laughed and gaily excused herself, running off in the opposite direction, leaving him speechless as she so often did. And now here it was, her eye, captured completely, right down to the shimmering mix of colours, the expression, the warmth and sparkle.

He raised his head to gaze out at the sea. This miniature had been out there, clearly under water for some time. Had she perished under the waves? No . No, that could not be. If she had died, surely he would have known it, would have felt something . His brain knew better, but his heart insisted upon it. Darcy remembered the day he had learnt she was married, how it had broken something inside him, even though he had been anticipating his own wedding at the time.

He looked down at the miniature in his hand. No, she would have given this to someone, not kept it herself. She must be alive. He closed his hand tightly around the miniature and stared back out at the sea. But where is she?

"Fitzwilliam! Your boots!"

He startled and looked up to see Georgiana hurrying towards him. The incoming tide was already rushing over his ankles.

His sister beckoned, and after one last look at the sea, he followed her back up the shingle towards their carriage.

CHAPTER ONE

Late January 1812, Hertfordshire

As freezing rain was wind-driven inside the cart, and the wheels bumped and slid across icy ruts, George Wickham's thoughts were swirling in his head. Lord, I am glad no one can see me! Driving a ramshackle old dogcart! At least it has a roof. Once I get to London, I'll sell it. The livery fool will never see it again. Glad I kept those letters—they fetched a goodly sum. Not the ten thousand pounds I wanted, nor the thirty thousand I should have had, but enough to set me up for a time. What to do with this stupid chit now? Will she ever stop wrenching my arm and babbling about wedding clothes? I can barely hang on to the ribbons! How did she know that I was leaving? Lord, will she not leave me alone! She has a fulsome body that should fetch a fine price in Covent Garden, I shall grant her that. After I use her for my own pleasure, that is. Good god! What is that noise? What is happening?

Later, when Elizabeth remembered that night, the worst night of her life, it was with the sense of events wheeling and spiralling out of control, their lives crashing and splintering, throwing their entire family into an unknown void. The sleet and freezing rain drumming noisily on Longbourn's slate roof. The shouting and pounding on their front door in the dark. Sir William's deeply lined face starkly shadowed by lantern light. Colonel Forster's wild eyes. Mr Jones's profound gravity. The men's brief conference in low tones; the colour draining from her father's face, ageing him decades within seconds. The shock and confusion; the noise abruptly turned to silence.

Mr Bennet had hurriedly dressed and left with the men, and, one by one, the family

and servants returned to their beds. Elizabeth turned to go back up the stairs when a cold foreboding stopped her so quickly that Mary bumped into her. She moved her eyes about the room, above her on the stairs and below her in the hall. Jane was in London, but another person was unaccounted for.

A sickening thought chilled her to the bone. She opened her mouth to speak but bit her tongue. There was no use upsetting Mama before they knew what was going on. She quickly slipped to Lydia's room and opened the door, hoping against hope; but the bed was empty, still made up from the day before.

Reeling, she sank to her knees, feeling like a heavy weight pressed against her chest, forcing the breath from her body. Images flashed through her mind in rapid succession. Lydia at an assembly, tipsy with punch, flirting with the officers. Lydia unabashedly running towards the men in the middle of the high street, her bosom thrust forwards, skirts held above her ankles. Lydia at the ball, shrieking and falling all over herself. Mr Darcy, glowering not at Lydia but at her, which made no sense at all.

Elizabeth knew then that they were lost. All, all was lost.

The next morning, Longbourn House was silent; the kind of silence that comes after a thunderbolt—the silence of shock and stupefaction. An express had been sent to town during the night.

The heavy clouds had parted, and the morning sun was bright as Mrs Hill opened the wide wooden door to the laundry room at the rear of the house, where a makeshift table had been constructed of planks and sawhorses. Some of the ladies' gowns, already dyed black, were hanging to dry before the wide old hearth.

Her mistress had insisted on seeing the body over the master's violent objections but had then dropped to the floor, insensible, when she caught sight of her damaged

child. She had been given laudanum not to quiet her but to help her sleep, for Mrs Bennet had been quite unable to speak.

Mrs Hill would prepare the body for burial, with Ruthie, the kitchen maid, and Martha, the maid who attended all the Miss Bennets. Mrs Jenks, the cook, stood ready as well. Mr Osbeck, the butler, personally hung the hatchment and black bunting over the front entrance with the help of Davy, the young footman. The senior servants of Longbourn had been with the Bennet family many years, Osbeck preceding even Mrs Bennet. They were all deeply attached to the family. Hill, in particular, loved the girls as if they were her own. Indeed, she loved all the family with a clear-eyed acceptance of their foibles and limitations. She had learnt very early in her childhood that one could love others in spite of their faults.

Even if Miss Lydia had disgraced them all, Hill, Ruthie, and Martha, along with Mrs Jenks, would send her to rest in love and peace. They worked in silence except for the occasional whispered remembrance: ‘let us use the lilac soap. That was her favourite’ or ‘such pretty hands she had’. Hill was preparing a grey woollen shroud, and Martha was arranging Lydia’s golden curls over the mortal wounds on her head when there was a knock on the door. The servants exchanged startled glances, and Jenks went to answer, barely cracking open the door.

It was Elizabeth, forlornly standing with a length of rose silk draped over her arm. “You must not look, Miss Lizzy,” Jenks said gently, positioning her stout form so that Elizabeth could not see into the room.

“I know,” the girl said quietly. “I wondered whether Lydia might wear her best gown instead of a shroud. She was so very proud of how she looked in it.”

Jenks reached out and stroked the fabric tentatively with one finger. Behind her, Martha laughed sadly. “She would have hated the shroud.”

Mrs Hill sighed deeply and looked down at the form lying on the table. Taking Lydia's hand in hers, she stroked her hair with the other while she considered. At last, she spoke. "By law, we must use a woollen shroud and nothing else, though I have heard it is often flouted." She moved to the door to stand by Jenks and looked at the gown. "She wore that to Mr Bingley's ball."

Hill regarded Elizabeth. The girl seemed so dazed, so detached, so unlike herself. Her large eyes were full of turmoil and despondency.

"Why do you wish to do this, Miss Lizzy?"

Elizabeth met her eye. "I...I do not truly understand it myself. I cannot think. My mind is numb and sluggish. My heart feels like a stone. But I know that once the shock has passed, I shall be furious with her for her foolish actions that have ruined us all. I also love her and shall miss her. Lydia will be buried soon, so there is no time for me to sort out my feelings. I think I shall regret it if I do not do something loving for her while I have the chance. I wish to say goodbye and tell her that I shall forgive her when I can."

"You do not wish to save the fabric and make it over?"

A voice came from behind Elizabeth. "Mrs Hill, I do not think any of us would wish to use it, even Mama. It will remind us too much of Lydia."

Elizabeth turned with a gasp. "Jane! Oh, Jane! You are here, you are here!" The sisters fell into each other's arms.

"Aunt and Uncle and I just arrived. We left London before dawn." Jane turned to the housekeeper. "We cannot see Lydia?"

"It would make a very bad memory for you, Miss Bennet. She was injured most

grievously. Your mother insisted on seeing your sister's body, and it has made her sorrow that much worse."

Jane's chin quivered slightly, but she nodded. "Then I shall go to Lydia's room and find another pretty thing for her."

Within minutes, Jane was back, followed by Mary and Kitty. Jane held a silk flowered hairpiece, and Mary offered a pair of beaded dancing slippers. Kitty held a pair of embroidered evening gloves.

"They are mine, but I found them in her room," she said in a trembling voice. "Lydia always took my things without asking, but I think she should have them now." Her half-hearted laugh turned into a sob.

No one spoke the words; they all knew. It was unlikely that any of the Bennets would ever attend a ball again.

Hill stepped out of the laundry room and spread her arms wide, enveloping the sisters in a loose embrace. "Let us then show Miss Lydia how much we love her and send her along in style. We shall cover her finery with the shroud, but for heaven's sake, keep this to yourselves!"

CHAPTER TWO

Early February 1812, London

At yet another ball, Miss Rose Grantley made her way through the crush. There were too many people to enjoy oneself. It was hot, there was not room enough to dance, and she had grown weary of it before the musicians even began to play. She sighed, wishing to be home in Lincolnshire, but Parliament was in session, and the family was spending the winter in town.

Miss Grantley had been out in society for four years. She enjoyed London and had many friends, but most of them were now married. She was two-and-twenty, pretty but not beautiful, monied but not rich, intelligent but not sparkling, of a venerable family but not haut ton. The main thing that people remembered about her was that she was good-natured, sensible, and kind. If she had come out back home, she would have been exceptional, but in London, she was lost in a veritable sea of hopeful young ladies, all getting younger every Season.

As she edged, sidled, and squeezed her way around the ballroom, she noticed Mr Bingley standing alone, almost hidden by a large potted palm. That alone was most unusual, but he also was without his ever-present shadow, Mr Darcy. Miss Grantley scanned the crowd and spotted her erstwhile friend Miss Caroline Bingley—not her person but the very tall feathers on her headdress—moving through a quadrille.

Miss Grantley's instincts won out over her ill-humour; Mr Bingley had always been amiable to her, even when Caroline had not. She stepped over to greet him.

“Mr Bingley?” she said. He was evidently fascinated by the palm tree, and it was not until she repeated his name that he startled into awareness.

Miss Grantley had known the man almost as long as she had known his sisters, and she had never once seen him look unhappy, but now he seemed to be dreadfully so. His attempt at a smile was painful to watch.

“Miss Grantley, it is a pleasure to see you again. Is your family well?” he said, straightening his shoulders.

“We are all well, sir,” she answered. He looked so sad it was disturbing. “Mr Bingley, are you well? You look a little peaked. Might we sit down?” She gestured towards some chairs pushed against the wall.

Mr Bingley complied. They sat, and Miss Grantley gently asked him again whether he was well. Appearing relieved at her concern, he confessed he had been trying for weeks to sternly talk himself out of his low spirits and had no one who wished to listen. Out it all came: his feelings for Jane Bennet, his sisters’ opinions, Mr Darcy’s opinions, his disappointment.

Miss Grantley listened carefully, interjecting a few questions and keeping her opinions to herself. She wondered whether it had ever occurred to Mr Bingley to speak directly to this Miss Bennet. The poor girl might be broken-hearted. And Mr Darcy was so full of his own consequence that he did not seem to approve of any young ladies. Why would Mr Bingley take his advice on personal matters? Certainly, listening to Caroline’s opinion on anything was a terrible mistake!

Miss Grantley knew Caroline Bingley well. When the Bingleys and their new industrial money had arrived in town, the sisters had been enrolled in the same exclusive seminary as she. Most of the other girls had cut Caroline and Louisa, but Rose had been kind and generous with her time and introductions, up until the time

Mr Darcy had befriended their brother. That was when she had felt the betrayal of her status-seeking friends. Suddenly the Bingley sisters sought better company than a girl who was only the second cousin of a viscount and whose dowry was a mere seven thousand pounds.

But it was Caroline's cutting criticisms behind her back that raised Miss Grantley's ire. Her former friend belittled her to others every chance she got, disparaging her needlework, her gowns, her singing, her conversation—anything to raise her own consequence with high-born ladies.

Still, Rose was glad she had taken the time to hear out Mr Bingley; he seemed to be perking up slightly. As the quadrille drew to a close, he asked her for the next dance, which was the supper dance, so they would go into supper together and continue their friendly conversation.

Days passed, and the carriage accident remained the main topic of conversation in the streets, shops, and homes of Meryton. The more forgiving members of the community felt that while it was indeed a tragic scandal, the young people had certainly planned to marry, and if the roads had not been rutted and coated with ice, they would have lived to be wed, and the whole affair would have been no more than a nine-day wonder. They had known the Bennets all their lives, and while they had many faults, they had never done anyone any harm. Others felt that a disgrace was a disgrace, and the Bennets should be avoided for a time, though perhaps not permanently. They were a leading family in what was a small, closely connected community, and they could not be ostracised forever.

Still others, particularly one other, felt that that sort of behaviour should never be tolerated, and that the Bennets should be made an example to all: banished, shamed, and repudiated for life.

Mrs Etheline Crombe, the former Miss Etheline Goulding of Haye-Park, did not feel

a bit of sympathy for the Bennet family, especially the grieving mother. She had been waiting for something like this for years. Fanny Bennet, née Gardiner, had long ago stolen something that had rightfully belonged to her; that item being Mr Thomas Bennet.

From the time she was a child, the elder Mrs Goulding had filled her daughter's head with the certainty that the heir to Longbourn was hers to marry, even though the unfortunate young lady was not attractive in either appearance or personality, having little conversation that was not a complaint, criticism, or insinuation. Moreover, there were no other families of rank in the area with a daughter of the right age. Etheline was destined to be, according to her mother, the mistress of Longbourn and the pre-eminent lady of the neighbourhood.

Unfortunately, young Mr Bennet had been indifferent to Miss Goulding, seeming in fact to never quite remember who she was. One evening, as the Gouldings hosted a dinner for pillars of the Meryton community—gentry, the militia, and the most prosperous merchants—the beautiful Fanny had snatched up the most eligible bachelor in the neighbourhood in an entrapment scheme. Mrs Crombe had been forced to content herself with a rector, a friend of her cousins in Bedfordshire. They had produced one daughter before he died, and she had been obliged to come home to Haye-Park to keep house for her brother William. Now she had an axe to grind, and she went at it with a will.

Although there would be no entertaining for the foreseeable future, Mrs Hill drove the little cart into Meryton for supplies. She was just leaving the haberdasher, where she had met with a baffling lack of civility, the proprietor barely speaking to her as he wrapped her order of thread, fabric, and pins. Her next stop was the butcher, who stood ready to assist her but would not meet her eye. The man was wrapping her order of venison when a strident voice came from behind her.

“You are serving this woman, Mr Johnson?”

Mrs Hill turned to see Mrs Crombe standing in the door of the shop, pointing at her. “You would serve this...person...from a house of immorality and disgrace? Is that not tantamount to condoning depravity?”

Momentarily stunned, Mrs Hill pulled herself together quickly enough to hear Mr Johnson’s muttered instructions. “Just come to the back door from now on. Come early and through the back alley and there won’t be no trouble.”

Mrs Hill gathered her courage and straightened her spine. Ignoring Mrs Crombe, she nodded to the butcher, thanked him, took the venison, and, head held high, walked to the cart in as unruffled a manner as she could manage. She did not show fear or embarrassment, but before driving off, she met the older woman’s eyes evenly. She turned towards Longbourn, hearing Mrs Crombe spouting her opinions to all and sundry and feeling the weight of dozens of eyes staring after her.

When she reported the events to Mr Bennet, he and Osbeck heard her out sombrely.

“Thank you, Hill.” Longbourn’s master sat at his desk, steeping his hands. “Well, well. I knew we would be outcast in society, but I neglected to consider that merchants might refuse our custom.” He wearily ran a black-bordered handkerchief over his face. “Osbeck, Hill, I do not expect any of my servants to frequent the back alleys of Meryton begging shopkeepers to take our money. That said, do you have any suggestions as to how we should proceed? Shall we take our custom to Ware? Hertford, perhaps?”

The housekeeper and butler exchanged glances. Hill spoke first. “Is not the very nature of mourning to retreat from the world for a while? Perhaps, sir, we can use the time to change our ways, to plan carefully so that Mr Osbeck, or I, or other servants, can make the trip to a more distant market town once every week or two. The travel there and back may take an entire day, but with careful planning, it need not amount to excessive inconvenience.

“Mr Osbeck,” she continued, “let us take a detailed inventory of what we purchase, what quantities, and how often. Let us also request Mr Emmons, Caleb Whitson from the home farm, and Mr Bennet’s tenants make similar inventories. Longbourn estate is quite independent in terms of supplying the necessities of life. The items we purchase need not be a long list.”

Mr Bennet thought for a long moment. “Do you concur, Osbeck?” The butler gave his assent, and the project was begun. It would be a long, long time before the merchants of Meryton would see any Bennets visiting their establishments.

CHAPTER THREE

Although the lady of the house did not understand, there were no callers. A daughter's death was one thing; a wanton, unmarried daughter's death in an accident while absconding in the night with a scoundrel, also now dead, was something else entirely. Mr Philips and Sir William Lucas had come briefly to Longbourn on the second morning, joining Mr Gardiner and Mr Bennet, when a brief, hasty funeral service was held at the family cemetery. Their parson, Mr Pym, sent his regrets. They offered awkward condolences before quickly and furtively leaving. The Bennets kept to their home, cloaked in shock and silence. Mr and Mrs Gardiner stayed for a week but then left to attend to their family and business.

Mrs Bennet mourned her youngest daughter profoundly and bitterly and failed to understand why what Lydia had done was so wrong. Indeed, it was romantic, was it not? Lydia would have been married to a handsome and charming officer, and it was not her fault that a carriage wheel had splintered and broken on the icy, rutted road.

Mrs Bennet was not made for isolation. Finally, she took matters into her own hands. "Hill, order the carriage. I mean to visit my sister."

Elizabeth stared at her mother in dismay. She knew that a visit to Meryton would not end well. Mrs Hill also knew and tried to sidestep the command. "Perhaps, ma'am, you might invite Mrs Philips to Longbourn instead."

"I have sent her notes, but she does not answer!" wailed her mistress. "If she will not come to me, I will go to her. Jane, attend me."

Within the hour, the carriage was drawn up in front of the manor house, and Mrs Bennet was handed in, followed by Jane and then Elizabeth, who felt she had to join them. Jane was pale and nervous, her hands plucking at her black skirts. She, who judged little and forgave much, was terrified of conflict and knew that the visit would be painful. Elizabeth, while not exactly certain how their aunt would receive them, did not expect mercy. She understood that the Philipses were in an untenable position, on the edge of being themselves shunned. They had a business to maintain, not an estate to retreat to.

The carriage pulled to a stop in front of the Philipses' home and business. After being handed down, Mrs Bennet banged the knocker on the door to the residence. Several minutes went by, and their mother knocked again. A lace curtain on the upper floor twitched. Mrs Bennet looked up and briefly caught her sister's eye before the curtain was tugged shut. She gasped and was reaching for the knocker a third time when the door opened. It was the housekeeper. "Mrs Philips is not at home today," she said severely.

"She is at home! I saw her!" insisted Mrs Bennet, stamping her foot. She began to shout at the upstairs window. "Dottie! Dottie! Come down!"

The housekeeper stood her ground. "She will not come down, Mrs Bennet. She is not at home to you, madam."

Jane stood quietly by, staring at the ground, her face scarlet. Elizabeth could see her sister's chin trembling; she was about to dissolve into tears. She stepped forwards and took her mother's arm gently. "Mama, Aunt Philips cannot see you today. Let us go home."

Mrs Bennet, shaking, let her second daughter lead her away from the door. A small audience had gathered; several people had stopped to witness the miserable scene. A few cut them scornfully, but the majority sadly shook their heads and turned away.

“Mr Emmons, let us go quickly!” Elizabeth hurriedly handed her mother into the carriage, then Jane, who seemed positively ill, and finally leapt in herself just as the vehicle made its escape.

Mr Bennet was waiting at the door, ready to scold his wife until he saw her shattered demeanour. Instead, he led her gently up to her chambers and called Martha to put her to bed.

The next morning, Mrs Bennet once more sat in the drawing room dressed in her best, her hands primly in her lap. Elizabeth sat near her, pretending to read, watching warily. An hour went by, then another, and from her mother’s strangled cry, she saw that she finally understood. There would be no visitors, no friends, no sister. No assemblies, no teas, no dances, no parties. No chatting with neighbours after church. No gentlemen callers for her daughters. No courtships. No weddings. No grandchildren. Only the hedgerows. Mrs Bennet buried her face in her hands and wept heaving, keening, racking sobs. Mr Bennet raced into the drawing room and took in the scene of his anguished wife and frightened daughters. He lifted his wife from the chair and carried her in his arms to her chambers, where he sat with her and held her hand.

It was very late in the evening when the family finished their dinner. Mrs Bennet kept to her rooms. Mr Bennet sat with his daughters, speaking quietly of the day and how they all needed to set aside their own grief and care for their mother. Osbeck came into the sitting room. “Sir, there is a matter that requires your attention.”

Elizabeth wondered . Another matter? What could have happened that is more important than Mama’s utter collapse? Her father rose and left with the butler. Seconds later, she followed them silently. She was surprised when they turned towards the kitchen rather than the study. She darted into the butler’s pantry and left the door slightly ajar. She could hear the drone of masculine voices. Familiar voices. It was Uncle Philips. Why had he come so late? And to the back door?

“... and these are the documents relating to the affairs of Longbourn estate and your family. I am sorry, Bennet, but I cannot keep your business. I cannot risk it. There were...those rumours, you know...years ago. Before I married Dorothy. I cannot take the risk that the old gossip might be dredged up again. It would ruin me!”

There was a slight pause before her father answered sharply, “I can see why that would concern you.” After a moment, he continued in a gentler tone, “I do understand, Philips. I thank you for taking the trouble to inform me in person.” Their voices faded as they moved away, and Elizabeth heard the back door open and then close.

And so the days went by. At first, their thoughts were all of Lydia. It was hard to believe that she was gone; their home was so altered without her. Lydia had been loud, always causing a stir, leaving disorderly trails of used handkerchiefs, torn bonnets, half-eaten biscuits, knotted ribbons, and unravelling shawls. Arguing, laughing, complaining, teasing. The void she left behind was considerable.

As their sister’s absence began to sink in, the family began also to increasingly feel the absence of their community.

For years, Longbourn had been a lively house, bustling with activity. Mrs Bennet had her ‘at home’ afternoons, but that had been merely a nod to custom. The reality had been one of friends and neighbours dropping by any day at almost any hour. Elizabeth was surprised at how instantly that had disappeared after the accident. It was as if the Bennet family had never existed.

The Gardiners remained loyal, as did Longbourn’s servants and tenants. The farmhands, noting the frequent visits of the four sisters to the new grave, built a sturdy bench and placed it near Lydia’s resting place.

A month after the accident, as the severity of the shunning began to become clear,

Elizabeth received a letter:

My dear Eliza,

I grieve for you, my friend. My father has written to me of the calamitous event and the response of the community: a double blow indeed. Just when you need the succour of your neighbours, they turn their backs on you.

I am sorry that your concerns about Lydia proved to be real. You must be missing her considerably, for I know you loved her in spite of her behaviour.

At this time, I think it best that we cancel plans for any future visits to Hunsford. It would not do for even a hint of scandal to follow you here. You will be in deep mourning at any rate, so unable to travel.

My father and I have agreed to keep the knowledge of your trials away from my husband. There is no reason for him to know, and he will only speak of it to every person of his acquaintance, including our patroness, Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

My father wishes to continue the long-held association between our families at some time in the future, but my mother has a terror that it will damage Maria's chances for a match, so for now all connexions must be at an end.

It is with best wishes for your future health and happiness that I bid you goodbye.

Farewell,

Charlotte

Elizabeth was motionless, disbelieving what she had just read. Her eyes ran over the lines again, but the words had not changed. It was not unkind, in view of the

circumstances, but still a blow; so final. Then the tears came, as they came so often and so easily now. Sometimes she was not even certain what exactly she was crying about; perhaps just the enormity of it all. But this was Charlotte, with whom she had shared a special bond for most of her life, in spite of the disparity in their ages. Charlotte, her dear and sensible friend, had cut ties with her. She put her face in her hands and wept bitterly, though at the same time understanding that it should not be a surprise. Charlotte was married, and her allegiance was to her husband and family, not a childhood friend. The Lucases had cut them too.

That had been made clear several days earlier when Elizabeth and Kitty had dared to walk along a brook that ran between Longbourn and one of Sir William's fields. They spied Maria Lucas not far away on the other side.

"Lizzy! I see Maria!" Kitty cried. "Maria! Maria!" she called, jumping up and down and waving.

Maria gasped when she saw Kitty. "Go away," she shouted. "I cannot talk to you!" Bursting into tears, the girl ran towards Lucas Lodge. "Go away!" she shrieked once more over her shoulder.

Kitty, her arm still suspended over her head mid-wave, her jaw sagging, was frozen in shock. "Kitty!" cried Elizabeth and tugged at her sister's arm.

Kitty lowered her arm and turned her disbelieving eyes to Elizabeth's. "She will not even talk to me."

Elizabeth put her arm around Kitty and guided her back towards Longbourn House. She could not think of a thing to say. To be cut so painfully by a particular friend was inconceivable. Kitty began to weep. "I hate Lydia," she gasped between sobs.

Old friends, all gone. Well, there it was. The Bennets had only each other to depend

on now. The Gardiners, bless them, would help when they could, but they had their own very busy lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Elizabeth was sitting with her mother as she slept when she heard footsteps running up the stairs. It was Mary, pale-faced with red-rimmed eyes. She went immediately to her chamber and within minutes ran back down the stairs, a pile of books in her arms. Elizabeth slipped out of the room and followed her sister.

Mary ran through the kitchen and out of the back door towards the barns. Mrs Jenks, who was chopping carrots, and Ruthie, elbow-deep in dough, stared after her. Stopping where the goats were penned, she dropped the books in the dirt, chose one, and threw it into the pen, where it was taken up immediately and chewed upon by a whiskered billy goat.

Elizabeth managed to grab Mary's arm as she reached for another book. It was her well-worn copy of Fordyce's Sermons for Young Women . "Mary! Stop! Mary, why are you... What has happened?" Elizabeth cried.

Mary was wild-eyed and breathing hard. She stared at Elizabeth as if snapping out of a dream, looked at the book in her hand, then tossed it into the pen as well.

Elizabeth could not believe her eyes. "Tell me what has happened."

Mary sagged and collapsed to the ground. Her voice shook. "I went to see Mrs Pym today, to return a book I had borrowed from her. Mr and Mrs Pym did not invite me in and said that we should not attend church services in future."

She clasped her hands together and in a mocking imitation of the rector's voice, said,

“‘It will be uncomfortable for you and your family, Miss Bennet. If you require my services, send a message and I shall come to Longbourn. It would be better than you coming here.’ Then they closed the door in my face.”

Elizabeth gasped.

“I felt so dirty! All these books are lies! They are useless! I have striven to live by these ideals, but it does not matter how much I have tried to meet these standards, it is all for nothing. We are smirched, Lizzy! Tainted! It is as if we have a disease, and no one wants to even look at us for fear of catching it. Even our own rector does not want to see us.”

Elizabeth scanned the remaining books. Titles by James Fordyce, Hannah More, and Thomas Gismore lay in the dirt. While they purported to teach young women piety and proper conduct, did they teach forgiveness? Empathy? Compassion? Charity? She did not know; she had never read them. Elizabeth did know her scripture, however. Faith, love, charity, mercy, forgiveness were fundamental. Judge not, that ye not be judged. To love, especially to love the unlovable; those were the ideals that struck a chord with her.

Seeing the dejection on Mary’s face, she picked up one of the books. “May I?” she asked.

Mary’s laugh sounded like a sob. “Please do,” she said, wiping her eyes. With a flick of Elizabeth’s wrist, the book soared into the pen and was soon being torn apart by two rambunctious kids.

“Goats will eat anything,” Mary sniffed, a tremor in her voice. “Even things that make us sick.”

When Mr Bennet was informed of the rector’s words, a picture formed in his mind of

the family box pew at the parish church. The wooden seats were worn and scarred from the backsides of many generations of Bennets, shifting and yawning there since time immemorial, but the sides of the ancient box were gloriously carved with biblical scenes. He remembered trying to sit still when he was a little boy, his grandmother rapping his knees with her fan. An idea formed in his head, and he wondered at himself. Am I truly that petty? With a bitter smile, he went to speak to Caleb.

When Mr Pym entered the nave of the church the next morning, he admired as usual the light streaming in through the stained-glass windows, their rich colours glowing above the graceful marble altar rails and the carved pulpit. But something felt different. He looked up at the windows, then at the vaulted ceiling and the altar, and finally turned slowly about; and there it was. Where the largest and most beautiful family pew had stood for centuries, only the pale outline of its perimeter on the floor remained.

Mrs Bennet's grief transformed into a deep melancholia. She had always enjoyed society as much as her husband did not. She needed the company of others, the gossip, the interactions, like she needed air. Assemblies and parties had always energised her. Although her husband and daughters tried, they could not pull her out of her decline. Over the weeks since Lydia's death, she had gone from keeping to her rooms to keeping to her bed.

As was common in the chill damp of springtime, an inflammation of the lungs wended its way through the household. They were so isolated that it was impossible to say how it had come to them. Through a tenant family perhaps? Their tenants had remained loyal, but they had more freedom to move about the neighbourhood. Mrs Bennet, in her weakened state, was severely afflicted, with a high fever and a racking cough. After several days it became apparent that she did not have the strength, or will, to fight it.

An express was sent to Gracechurch Street, and that evening one of the stable boys carried a note to the Philipses' home. Mr and Mrs Gardiner arrived the next day, and the family set out to make Mrs Bennet's last days as full of comfort as possible. Mrs Philips arrived under the cover of darkness; she wept as she begged her sister's forgiveness and was rewarded with a faint squeeze of her hand. A few days more, and Frances Clementine Gardiner Bennet breathed her last, surrounded by her family.

Elizabeth was up at dawn the next morning. In her previous life, as she thought of it, she would have tramped all the way to the river, or to Oakham Mount. After being rudely cut too many times when she met her neighbours, she no longer ventured beyond the boundaries of her father's lands. She paced back and forth between the gardens and the wilderness, tears streaming down her face.

She had never been her mama's favourite. As a child, Elizabeth had imagined herself to be the opposite, constantly vexing her mother with her active habits and her intellectual curiosity. Still, she felt her mother had cared about her. She could not imagine Longbourn without her. In the distance, she saw farmhands, shovels balanced on their shoulders, making their way to the family cemetery. In the house, she knew Hill and Ruthie and Martha were once again preparing a body for burial. Would they dress their mistress in her best, as they had done with Lydia? Or would they feel compelled to follow the law? Who would know or care if they did not? Good heavens, were they not outlaws already? What did it matter? It was something she could do for her mama. She turned back to the house. What the gentlemen did not know would not hurt them.

So it was that when Mrs Bennet was laid to rest next to her daughter, she was dressed in her favourite green silk ball gown, embroidered silk slippers, formal gloves, and her largest, laciest, ribbon-bedecked cap underneath the grey shroud. Mr Bennet chose not to call on the faint-hearted rector and instead read the service himself from his prayer book as Mr Gardiner and Mr Philips attended.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dinner that evening was eaten in heavy silence. All were preoccupied by memories of past times when they had all been together at the large table; the noisy animated conversations enjoyed over bounteous meals. After the dishes were carried off, Mrs Gardiner exchanged a significant glance with her husband and led the ladies away to sit in the drawing room.

As Osbeck poured out the port, Mr Bennet raised an eyebrow at his brother-in-law. "I take it you have something to tell me?" Mr Gardiner nodded his thanks to the butler and sipped his wine. "Bennet, you do not need me to tell you how difficult your life is at present. Not only is your sorrow profound, your family suffers greatly from their isolation. It is not good for your daughters. It is too soon to speak of this since you have your mourning period to consider, but my wife and I wish to plant the seed. What are your plans for the girls' futures? Lydia's disgrace has ended any chances of their marrying locally. Madeline and I wish to take them, each in turn, to live with us in London, where the scandal is less likely to be known. They will each have a turn, Jane first. We shall introduce them to men who could be prospective suitors. Educated young men of business or professional men who would accept a gently born wife even with a scandal in their background. There would be no coercion, no obligation on the part of the girls to accept any of them. But we all are aware that they must marry."

Briefly, Mr Bennet looked as if he might argue, but then he hung his head and spoke softly. "You are right, of course." He sighed. "I did not provide dowries for them, nor did my wife and I engage a governess who might have prepared them with the knowledge required for employment." He barked a laugh. "Poor Fanny was

convinced that wealthy men would be beating down our door to marry Jane, who would then find rich husbands for the rest. Yes, Gardiner, I will consider your plan. But my daughters must also agree of their own free will.”

Several days later, Jane and Elizabeth watched as the Gardiners’ carriage rolled out through Longbourn’s gate and disappeared from view. Without speaking, Elizabeth took Jane’s arm, and they walked around the house and through the garden, where they gathered daffodils. With the breeze ruffling their hair, they proceeded to the fresh graves in the cemetery and decorated them with the flowers. Elizabeth finally broke the silence. “What think you of our aunt and uncle’s plan? Do you wish to return to London?”

Jane answered after a few minutes of reflection. “I think it wise, and besides, it is our only hope. Of course, we could remain at home, but we are so isolated we might slowly wither away. Even if we tried to seek employment, our scandal would prevent respectable families from hiring us.”

“Can you be reconciled to marrying without love? Do...do you still think of Mr Bingley?”

“Lizzy, will you believe me when I tell you that I have not thought of him even once since Lydia’s accident? I am speaking the truth. Only days before, his sisters finally returned the visit I had paid to them a fortnight prior. They were rude, full of their own consequence, and made it very clear that I had no hope. It hurt me terribly, but I began to realise that if Mr Bingley had any love for me, he would not have let his sisters have so much influence in his life. Why should my future happiness depend on people so determined to dislike me? It also made me ponder the difference between love and infatuation, both on his part and on mine. Even had he resumed his attentions and we had become betrothed, I would have been obliged to release him in light of the scandal. That would have been much harder to bear.”

“Are you certain, Jane?”

“I am.” Jane turned to Elizabeth in earnest. “These last few weeks, though dreadful, have taught me how important my family is to me. I have learnt about strength and forgiveness and practicality. I deserve a man who will be strong for me when I need him to be. We all do. While I am not willing to do as Charlotte did and accept any man out of desperation, I hope to find a husband who is intelligent, kind, and respectful of me. Not just of my outward appearance but of my heart and mind. If two people of good will can offer that to each other, it seems likely that regard, perhaps even affection, may grow as well. Our full mourning will be over in six months. In September, I shall go to London and seek my future.” She smiled. “In preparation, I have asked for Mrs Hill’s instruction in running a household.”

“You have changed, Jane,” said Elizabeth, laying a hand on her sister’s arm.

“As have we all. Let us hope we have changed for the better,” Jane agreed.

Darcy walked from his steward’s cottage back towards the house. Although the Derbyshire air was still cool, the sun was increasing in strength. Already it was March; Eastertide was approaching, and his mood was darkening. With every year, his aunt’s demands grew more onerous. With every letter, her insistence upon his marriage increased in vehemence.

He recollected the previous year’s visit; Lady Catherine had monopolised the conversation, and Anne, almost completely buried in shawls, had said nothing, having been either in a deep doze or staring raptly at something no one else could see. This year, having briefly entertained a vision of what true happiness might have been, he was even more reluctant to travel to Rosings.

The post awaited him on his desk. It was a larger stack than usual, and he began to sort it into business and personal letters. One missive stopped him. The hand, blotted

and obviously written in haste, was that of Charles Bingley. He had not heard from Bingley in several weeks. He opened the letter enough to see the first line. Bingley was announcing his marriage!

Darcy dropped the letter as if it were on fire. Had he not mere months ago got Bingley out of a scrape? What had happened? Had he returned to Netherfield after all? His heart quickened at the prospect. Or had another fortune-hunter sunk her claws into him? He should never have left his friend to fend for himself in town!

Darcy sank into his chair, regretting his hasty flight from London just before Christmas. He had selfishly surrendered to bad temper and vexation. What a blessed relief it had been at the time!

After his escape from Hertfordshire to London, he had attended enough parties and entertainments to satisfy even his aunt Matlock, though she had argued that he should at least stay for the round of Twelfth Night balls. He had informed her that he had found the current crop of aspiring Mrs Darcys to be sadly lacking, though he knew in his heart that was not the reason for his disappointment. His own requirements for a Mrs Darcy had changed radically. In addition to impeccable connexions and a large dowry, she must be intelligent, well-read, pert, and teasing. She must laugh often, have an original mind, wildly curling chestnut hair, and large, expressive eyes. She must be exactly like Elizabeth Bennet, only with no entailments, a substantial fortune, and a completely different set of relations.

If the young ladies he had encountered in the brief few weeks he had spent in London after fleeing Hertfordshire were any indication, he would never find anyone with those qualifications.

Darcy had needed to escape, to remove himself to Pemberley. His only regret had been leaving Bingley, still suffering from his disappointment over Miss Jane Bennet. He had considered inviting his friend to join him, but his sisters would have insisted

on accompanying them. Bingley had never been able to put up any resistance to them. Darcy had hoped that his friend would do as he had always done in the past and quickly find distraction in other pretty ladies. And now it appeared that he had been snared by the parson's mousetrap.

He steeled himself and warily opened the letter fully, only to sigh in relief. While there was reason for surprise at Bingley's choice, there was no reason for concern. His bride-to-be was Miss Rose Grantley, a nice enough girl with an acceptable dowry, an old, established family, and no embarrassing relations or connexions to trade. Bingley might have done better, but she was an appropriate choice for a tradesman's son. Worthy as Miss Grantley was, Darcy would never have considered her for himself.

The wedding was to be as soon as the banns were read, which they had already been once, so in two weeks' time, in Lincolnshire, only one and a half days' drive from Pemberley. Bingley asked Darcy to stand up with him, which brought a rare smile to his face. At last, he felt vindicated that he had warned Bingley against returning to Netherfield. He had quickly found someone else, as Darcy had known he would. He was safe from entrapment by Miss Bennet and her mother in a marriage without true regard.

Even more pleasing, Bingley's wedding provided him with an excellent reason to avoid Rosings this Easter. Darcy would send his regrets to Lady Catherine and a list of topics to Colonel Fitzwilliam for consultation with the steward. He sat down at his desk to immediately pen his acceptance.

CHAPTER SIX

The eldest Bennet sisters stood at the door of Mrs Bennet's room, which had been closed for several days. Hill opened the door and grimaced at the rush of stale, heavy air that smelt of the sickroom.

To Elizabeth's surprise, Kitty was sitting alone in the gloom. "Kitty! Why do you sit in here?"

Kitty raised red, tear-filled eyes. "I miss Mama."

Mary appeared at the door with a large wicker basket. Kitty jumped up. "This is Mama's room! You are not taking her things away? You must not! She is scarcely cold in her grave!"

Kitty had been subdued since Lydia's death, much altered from before. From the time she was small, her reticent personality had been overwhelmed by her dominant younger sister. After her encounter with Maria Lucas, she preferred not to go out at all and had filled her days by sitting with her mother. Now her mother was gone as well. Elizabeth realised that she had seen little of Kitty all week.

"Kitty, are you worried that we shall pack all her things away and forget her? We would never do that!" said Elizabeth. "We are merely airing out the room and taking what needs to be laundered."

Mrs Hill was observing Kitty, her eyes thoughtful. "Is there something more that is grieving you?"

Kitty hesitated, then slowly extended her hand. In her palm lay a small, grubby object that was not immediately recognisable as paper. Elizabeth took it from her and examined it. It had been crumpled up at least once and then smoothed; it had been folded and refolded so many times that the creases were barely hanging together.

“It is from Lydia,” said Kitty. “She pushed it under my door the night she ran away. I did not find it until the next morning.” She began to cry, sinking back down onto the bed. “I heard her in her room, moving about very late in the night, but I was so sleepy that I did not get up. If I had, she might not have run away and been killed, and Mama would not have died.” She put her head in her hands and wept as if her heart was breaking. Mrs Hill quickly sat next to her on the bed and held her tightly.

“You are not blaming yourself, are you?” cried Elizabeth.

Mary huffed. “You are blameless! Did you pack Lydia’s things for her? Did you help her into the cart? No, you did not! You are an innocent victim, just like the rest of us!”

“I felt that I might have stopped her, but I did not. So instead I tried to show Mama how much I cared for her. I thought... Well, I thought if I did, she might wish to get well again. But perhaps she did not care enough to stay for the rest of us.”

Although Elizabeth had also wondered whether their mother cared equally for her daughters, she would never admit that to poor, fragile Kitty.

Jane replied softly, “Kitty, I am certain Mama loved us all, but I believe Lydia reminded her of her own youth. Mama fell into her melancholia partly because of our sister but mostly because she realised that due to the shame Lydia brought upon us, all her hopes and dreams for any of us would never come true. She had always feared the future because of the entail. Because of our repudiation, her worst fears of being forced to leave Longbourn were more likely to happen. It was not because she did not

choose to live. In fact, I believe she had been gaining in strength until she became ill.”

Elizabeth carefully opened the fragile note. It had been handled so much that it was barely legible. Jane leant in to read, and together they deciphered the untidy scrawl.

You will laugh when you discover that I am gone, and I cannot help laughing myself for surprising everybody! I am going to London with Wickham, though he does not know it yet! He is so in love with me, even though he pretended interest in Miss King. I shall answer for it; he never cared three straws about her. Who could about such a nasty little freckled thing? And now she is gone to Liverpool or somewhere; I am sure I do not care where. I know he loves me because he kisses me so well, better than Denny or Pratt. He teased me last autumn that we would be wed, and today I discovered that he has ordered a carriage from the livery stables this very night! He means to carry me to London, I am sure. How nicely we shall be crammed in! I shall hide in the carriage and surprise him, and he will not need to come to Longbourn. I do not want to wait here in case the carriage noise wakes up Papa. What a good joke it will be. I can hardly write for laughing! Mama will be proud of me for thinking of it, and it will be very good fun besides. How I shall like being married before any of you! Then I shall hold balls and parties in my home and get husbands for you all. When you see me next, I shall be Mrs Wickham! Goodbye!

Elizabeth read it through and then read it aloud for her sisters to hear. When she finished, the room was still.

It was Mary who broke the silence, her eyes wide. “Lydia kissed men? Mr Denny, Mr Pratt, and Mr Wickham? She kissed multiple men ?” she stammered, her voice beginning to rise.

Jane had taken the note from Lizzy and was reading it, shaking her head. “I cannot believe it, even of Lydia. Yet here is the proof in her own hand.” Her voice trailed

off. “The last thing she ever wrote...”

Kitty sniffed. “I do not even think that Lydia was in love with Mr Wickham. She never spoke of him more than any of the other officers. She thought all the officers were in love with her though. She always said she would be the first to be married, even when Mama thought Mr Bingley would pro—” She clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh! Jane, I am sorry!”

Jane’s chin rose, her expression resolute. “Do not think of it, Kitty. Mr Bingley was not the man we thought he was, and it is for the best that he has gone.”

Overwhelmed by a wave of fury, Elizabeth paced to the window, her fists clenched. “Lydia was so selfish! She never gave a thought to anyone else. Not her sisters, not even her own mother who spoilt her so!” She turned to face her sisters, tears running down her face. Her voice shook. “I can see it now. Lydia was always destined to ruin us. It was only a matter of when, not if. Somehow, some way, some time, it would have happened. She wanted what she wanted and had no care for any damage she would cause in order to get it. The older she got, the worse it became. Do you suppose Mr Wickham was truly going to carry her to London, or did she simply impose herself on him, and he took advantage of her foolish conceit? Lydia lied, cheated, and stole to get her way, and she was never a bit sorry for any trouble she caused!”

At this, the bitter floodgates opened; old grievances and long-suppressed grudges were aired.

“She was never sorry for taking my things. She always said they would look better on her in any case. Mama never made her give them back, even when I had bought them with my own pin money!” cried Kitty. “Lydia never cared for me at all. I was just an audience to her!”

“She continually mocked me for my music and my clothing,” chimed in Mary. “She mocked everyone who did not behave as she did!”

The gentle, firm voice of Mrs Hill cut through the rising rancour. “Ladies, while your feelings may be justified, might I point out that you are the ones who will be damaged by carrying such anger in your hearts. Miss Lydia will not. Her behaviour was very bad, very wicked indeed, and it is true that it has hurt you all deeply, but it has cost her her life. She is dead at the age of fifteen. Think on that.”

The sisters were silent, sniffing. “You are right, Mrs Hill,” said Elizabeth. “I am sorry.”

The housekeeper went on. “You will need to forgive Miss Lydia, and perhaps even your mother, so that you may proceed with whatever lies ahead for you. Although it may not seem so now, as you are being isolated and punished by your neighbours, you can go on to have respectable and happy lives. Do not let your futures be blighted by old hurts.

“You can love others in spite of their faults, even if they cause you pain. Now this may be thought of as quite improper, but if you will permit me, I would tell you of my experiences with persons, though deeply flawed, who showed great kindness to me when I was a child.”

It was indeed improper, as it was customary for the distinction of rank to be carefully preserved between masters and servants, but Longbourn was in an interesting state. Because they were being shunned, there was no outside company. The situation was gradually creating an increased familiarity between all the inhabitants of the manor, regardless of rank.

Jane nodded. “Yes, Mrs Hill, please speak freely.”

“I was born in a workhouse,” Mrs Hill began to a chorus of gasps from the sisters. “My mother, the very young woman who gave birth to me, died within hours. I never knew her name because she refused to give it. I do not believe that she was married to whoever my father was. I was later informed that she was gently born and had been expelled by her family when her condition became known. Some years later, one of the elder residents of the workhouse told me that I bear a strong resemblance to her. I have a necklace that was hers, the only thing she had other than the clothes she was wearing.”

Elizabeth joined her sisters, now all gathered on the bed listening to Mrs Hill’s tale.

“That in itself was something of a small miracle, since the master of the workhouse would keep any object that might have value for himself. But the woman who became my friend and mentor took the necklace before he could get to it and saved it for me. She also asked that she be allowed to care for me, rather than sending me to an orphanage.

“My friend was called Mrs Gilson, though upon later reflection I realised that was probably not her true name. She was a lady, and had been a wife and mother, but she had a fatal weakness for strong spirits, and her addiction caused her husband to throw her out without a penny. Even her children repudiated her. When she was herself, which was most of the time, she was intelligent, gracious, and genteel. Occasionally troublemakers would smuggle in strong drink, and she could not refuse it. She became a different person. She did and said very bad things. She would go off with men. It was very frightening to me. The master and mistress of the workhouse always took her back after these episodes, to their credit. I have since wondered whether her family paid them a substantial sum to keep her from living on the streets.”

Mrs Hill smiled. “She spent countless hours with me, teaching me to read and write, to do sums, to act and speak like a lady, even though as the natural child of unknown persons, I could never be one. I believe she missed her own children and

grandchildren, and I was their substitute. My best alternative in life was to go into service, and she prepared me to serve in a gentleman's household. She even taught me to play chess and backgammon, since she had no one else to play with.

“Mrs Gilson told me once that I should think only of the past as its remembrance gives pleasure. At that time, I did not quite understand what she meant, but now I think it a very good philosophy. So, you should try to only remember happier times with Miss Lydia and your mother and try not to think on any sadness and anger.”

Elizabeth thought about that and understood. She did not want to spend the rest of her life, whatever it may be, dwelling upon the shame Lydia had brought to them, carrying the burden of anger and resentment. She would only remember pleasurable days.

“Now, let us show our care for your poor mother and freshen her room just the way she would have liked it,” said Mrs Hill, and they set to work.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The inn in the hamlet nearest Grantley Park in Lincolnshire was small but clean and comfortable, with simple, hearty fare. Darcy had arrived late the previous day, and after a full country breakfast, he boarded his carriage to meet Bingley's new family.

Grantley Park was everything the family was: a small estate and a manor of middling distinction, well-kept and respectable, demonstrating a firm preference for the country over the great metropolis far to the south. Mr Eustace Grantley was a member of the House of Commons, hence their long stays in the city.

As his carriage drew up to the house, he spotted Bingley awaiting him on the front steps with Miss Grantley and her parents. Their anticipation of his company was obvious. Upon stepping down from the carriage, he bowed over Mrs Grantley's hand and shook hands with her husband. It was when he turned to greet his old friend and his betrothed that he first noticed a change.

Bingley was smiling but not in his usual way; a calm, contented smile rather than the usual wide grin. There were no expansive gestures, no bouncing happily on his toes. He took Darcy's outstretched hand and shook it heartily. There was no back-slapping embrace. Even his voice was well-modulated.

"Darcy, how good it is to see you at last!"

Darcy smiled. "I would not miss your wedding for the world, Bingley." He turned to Miss Grantley and bowed. "Allow me to wish you every happiness."

“Let us go inside. There will be refreshments in the green parlour,” said Mrs Grantley, extending her arm towards the wide front door.

It was a week till the wedding, with several small celebrations planned. Darcy observed the usual social obligations: shooting, early morning rides, afternoon teas, and formal evening dinners. The Grantleys were agreeable, and good stewards of the land. There were long discussions about farming over cigars and port. The family had taken Bingley into the fold, instructing him in the duties of a landowner through their family stories and experiences.

Bingley took an active role in the farm talk. He was just as often spending time with his new relatives as he was with Miss Grantley herself. The couple seemed well-pleased and companionable together, but there was a notable lack of obvious sentiment. They were not lovebirds billing and cooing. Darcy wondered about it, contrasting it with how his friend had been completely unable to tear himself away from Miss Bennet’s side.

Darcy wished to speak to Bingley but was unable to find a private moment with him; he was so involved with his new family. He had hoped to ride alone with Bingley on a planned trip to The Elms, the estate that Miss Grantley had inherited from her great-aunt, but all the family came along.

Mr and Mrs Hurst arrived, along with the Bingley aunts and uncles from Scarborough. Miss Bingley sent her regrets. Hurst immediately became one of the party, unable to resist the warmth of the family. Mrs Hurst was more reserved, but she too was at last won over. Darcy had never seen them so relaxed.

The day before the wedding, Darcy rode over early to the Grantleys’. To his surprise, Bingley was awake, and he was alone. The company had stayed up very late the night before, and most were still abed. “I am not used to finding you up and about earlier than I,” Darcy teased his friend.

Bingley laughed. "Yes, that has always been your role, has it not? Now I am finally learning to live with country hours. Rose and I plan to spend most of the year here. We both feel we have had a surfeit of town life and are relieved that we are not obliged to take part in the Season unless we wish to."

Darcy stared at him, unsure what to say. "I was always under the impression that you enjoyed society."

"I thought I did too. But this winter it just seemed so..." He cast about for the right words. "So soulless and mercenary. I was forced to squire Caroline around and could barely stand it. Every ball or party is the same. For the first time in my life, I found no pleasure in dancing or going to the club or anything really. I have turned into you, Darcy," he joked.

Darcy felt his world slowly rotating upside down. He had removed Bingley from Miss Bennet and then abandoned him. Had he then fallen into some kind of melancholy? He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Bingley... Charles...are you well? It has become clear to me that you are not the same man I know and esteem. Are you unhappy?"

"I am quite content. I am marrying an excellent lady, and we are planning our future together. I feel as if I was a boy who has finally grown into a man. No more silly effusions, no more foolish infatuations. Rose and I are the closest of friends, and we can speak to each other of anything in the world. This is a steady, comfortable kind of companionship, and I believe it to be a superior foundation upon which to build a marriage. Her family are warm and welcoming and have been happily received by my relations, except for Caroline of course.

"My sister is furious with me for not choosing a leading lady of the ton. I have given her control of her own dowry with instructions for my man of business to help her manage it. I have also settled some further funds on her so that any companion she

might hire will be very well compensated for what is sure to be a difficult position. Louisa at first shared Caroline's opinion, but lately she has tired of our sister's theatrics and likes being connected to the Grantleys. She and Hurst are also planning to spend more time in the country at their estate.

"For myself, I feel the satisfaction of having carried out my father's wishes. My betrothed is a member of an ancient family, and we have an estate of our own. My father-in-law is a respected member of Parliament, although his is a small, rural constituency. Our children will be true ladies and gentlemen."

Darcy took a breath to cover his surprise. Had Bingley given up on love? "Was your change of heart because of your feelings for Miss Bennet?"

Bingley met his eyes. "It began with that. I was distraught when you told me that she did not reciprocate my ardent admiration and was only acting in accordance with her mother's wishes. Rose saw my sadness and offered compassion and a listening ear. I confided in her, you see. Reckless, I know, but you had gone to Pemberley, and I had no one else who would listen. We became each other's confidants. We developed a deep friendship. I realised then that I had been going about this all wrong. You were correct in emphasising the importance of choosing a wife with attention to fortune and connexions. Rose has those things, although they are relatively minor. She and I spoke about this at length, and we decided that we would rub along well together. We trust each other and are suited in every way. We choose to build a life together. My only regret is that I did not communicate well with Miss Bennet, particularly since Louisa informed me that she had been in town for several weeks and had called on them. Rose scolded me for that. She felt that I should have ascertained Miss Bennet's feelings for myself in the beginning. But so many weeks had gone by since I left Hertfordshire, I felt that any communication would have done more damage."

Darcy, stricken with guilt, nodded slowly. He had been wrong in so many ways, and now it would affect his dearest friend forever. He had kept Bingley from returning to

Netherfield because of his own attraction to Miss Elizabeth—he had to admit it to himself. Bingley, in his disappointment, had acted in accordance with his own habits and taken the path of least resistance. Not that he thought Bingley would be unhappy. Miss Grantley was an estimable woman of respectable family, though not as wealthy and well-placed as some. Their union would be entirely unexceptionable, as most couples from their circles chose to forego romantic love in marriage.

The estate did not have its own chapel, so the wedding was at the parish church. The company was friendly, warm, and cordial. There were smiles all round. The bride and groom were sedate in their joy, but there was no doubt of their contentment. After the celebration, Mr and Mrs Bingley left for a brief wedding trip to Bath. They planned to return for the spring planting.

With the Bingleys gone, Darcy departed immediately for Pemberley. As his coach pulled away from the inn, his mind replayed the events of the past week, his feelings in a tangled knot. His selfish actions had prevented Bingley from following his heart, but he seemed happy with his choice. Why could he not feel more joy for Bingley? Or relief that he had escaped mercenary ladies? Was this not exactly what he had wanted for his friend? The new Mrs Bingley was an exemplary woman. Instead, Darcy felt regret, as if he were mourning a loss.

For one, Bingley would not need him any longer. He would receive guidance in managing his estate from the Grantleys and would be occupied with his wife and soon, God willing, with his children. They would no longer meet in town, sit in lively discussion at their club, go shooting at Manton's, haggle over horses at Tattersall's. He sorely missed the old Bingley; the joyful enthusiasm, the frank expression of emotions, the lack of pretence. He would miss seeing the world through his cheerful, exuberant eyes.

But that was not all. Over the winter, Darcy had been afflicted upon several occasions with what, if he were not a sober and rational man, he might have called a vision. He

could not account for it and dismissed it as an aberrant day-dream. The scene was in the church in Longbourn village on a sunny autumn morning. He and Bingley were standing up together, as they had just done, but in the day-dream they were standing opposite Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth. He groaned. It would seem that a tiny part of his heart stubbornly wished for that outcome, as unacceptable as it was. And now it was impossible. Bingley had been his last link to Netherfield and to the denizens of Longbourn. Now that link was gone, and he would most certainly never see Elizabeth again.

Darcy banished that image from his mind forever, as if he were putting out a candle and locking the door of a secret room. Then he determinedly picked up his book and opened it.

Mr Bennet, sitting at breakfast, accepted his day-old newspaper from Osbeck. He was alone at the table. Elizabeth was in the garden, and Jane was in the stillroom. Mary and Kitty had not yet made an appearance.

He accepted a plate of toast and bacon from Ruthie and opened the paper. As was his usual practice, he skimmed the headlines, then returned to the articles that interested him the most. As he turned the pages, a familiar name caught his eye. It was in the society pages, which he detested.

Mr and Mrs Eustace Grantley, of Grantley Park, Lincolnshire,

are pleased to announce the marriage of their daughter Rose to Mr Charles Bingley on March 30.

The couple will reside at The Elms, their

Estate in Lincolnshire.

Well, well. The world moved on, did it not? It was no surprise. Still, his heart hurt for his eldest daughter. He remembered the evening of the ball, Mr Bingley clearly besotted with Jane and Fanny shrieking about their betrothal as a certainty, but within two days, Netherfield Park had been emptied and shuttered, as it remained. Fanny had talked of nothing else for weeks until poor Jane had fled to London with the Gardiners to get away from her lamentations.

“Well, Mrs Rose Bingley, I wish you luck with that capricious man-child you have shackled yourself to. Not to mention his sisters,” Mr Bennet muttered. He separated the society page from the rest of the paper and laid it on the fire to watch it burn to ash.

A few miles away at Haye-Park, Mrs Crombe, as was her habit, pored over the society pages. She smiled at a particular wedding announcement. Fanny Gardiner’s daughters would not marry well—or at all, if she had anything to say about it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

April 1812, Pemberley

Since he had achieved his majority and entered society, Darcy had spent the spring in London for the Season. He had not been at Pemberley for the spring planting since he was a boy, before he was sent to school. The talk of farming with the Grantleys had stirred within him a desire to remain in the country, to observe for himself the beauty of the springtime and the awakening of the land. To immerse himself in the ancient rhythms and traditions of the agricultural year. He took pleasure in the scent of the newly turned earth and the sight of tiny leaves unfurling. His decision gave him peace. Why had he ever spent so much time in the city?

George Darcy had been deeply attached to the lands of his fathers and had instilled that attachment in his son. Darcy's mother, however, had been a creature of society. Lady Anne's parents had been leading members of the ton, and when he had completed his education, the Fitzwilliams had expected him to attend the Season. After he inherited, he had felt an even greater obligation to participate in order to seek a high-ranking lady suited to be mistress of Pemberley.

So it was that in the spring of 1812, to the surprise of his steward, Darcy did not go to London. Bingley was not going to be there, and although he had other friends, no one in society cheered him so well. He directed his thoughts towards his estate and his senses towards the sights and scents of the awakening earth.

Lady Catherine had sent a flurry of letters, berating him for not attending her over Eastertide in favour of the wedding of a mere tradesman. He had responded civilly to

the first few, but as more angry missives arrived with vague threats, he ignored them. After all, what could she do? He was his own master.

By the end of April, planting was nearly done and lambing well underway. Darcy had been inspecting fields with his steward, but they parted company at midday so he could return to his study. The sun was strengthening, but the breeze was still cool. He breathed deeply, savouring the fresh air. Urging his horse into a gallop, he flew down the road to Pemberley House until something flashed past the corner of his eye.

The next thing he knew, he was on his back in the dirt, opening his eyes to see two old men bending over him. “He’s wakin’ up, Squire,” said one to the other. Darcy’s brain registered the familiar lined face of Mr Pritchard, a near neighbour of Pemberley. The man who spoke, he vaguely recognised: a prosperous yeoman farmer whose holdings were also close. James Hedges, though Jamie was the name he was known by.

Darcy made to get up, but both men gently pushed him back. “You had better stay where you are, Darcy,” said the squire.

“Aye, we’ve a wagon comin’ for you,” said Mr Hedges. “Looks like a deer scared your horse.”

After an uncomfortable and undignified interval of being manhandled onto a farm wagon and taken to the nearest house, Darcy was assisted to a sagging armchair near the fire in a large, old-fashioned sitting room. The house was that of Mr Hedges, a rambling old farmhouse built of native stone and added onto higgledy-piggledy over many years. The heavy oak door to the sitting room was closed, but he could faintly hear voices beyond it; many voices, both children and adults.

Although glad of the aid he was receiving, Darcy had no idea how to speak to these relative strangers. He had met Mr Pritchard often enough at social events but was not

on terms of familiarity. He had never spoken to Mr Hedges at all.

A stout, white-haired woman bustled into the room, bearing a tray with a basin of water and clean rags. She saw Darcy and gasped. “As I live and breathe, Jamie, if he isn’t the image of old Mr Darcy! Just sittin’ in that chair like in old times!”

She set the tray down on a low table next to the armchair, took up a cloth, and soaked it in the warm water. Without so much as an introduction, she began dabbing carefully at Darcy’s forehead. “Fell off your horse, did you? I declare you’re lucky you don’t have more than that scrape.”

A young woman entered through the open door carrying a tea tray. She stopped abruptly, her mouth agape. “Ma, it’s Mr Darcy!”

Squire Pritchard spoke up. “This is the younger Mr Darcy, child. Now do pour us some tea while your mother takes care of his scrapes, there’s a good girl.”

The girl did as she was told, though she continued to stare at him. Within minutes, she had left the room, and Mrs Hedges had finished and taken away the tray, leaving Darcy with a cup of tea and a plate of cake sitting next to him on the table.

Darcy, somewhat rattled by his fall, sipped his tea and attempted to sort out this new information. “My father visited you, Mr Hedges?” he blurted, then took a breath. “I mean to say, I thank you both for your assistance, and for Mrs Hedges’s care.” Lightly touching the bandage on his head, he winced, then looked up. “Did anyone see to my horse?”

The two men exchanged a glance. Hedges spoke first. “Aye, lad, your horse is tied up by the stables, but you won’t be ridin’ again today.”

Mr Pritchard agreed. “As to your other question, your excellent father did indeed

regularly spend time here, as well as at my home, and those of other farmers and landholders in the area. We spent many evenings, dining together and playing cards or backgammon, and enjoying long conversations.”

Mr Hedges nodded. “That chair you’re in, that was his spot. When his health took a bad turn, we’d pull it closer to the fire and fill him up with my wife’s lamb stew. It was his favourite.” He smiled. “Brings back both sad and happy memories, it does.”

At this, Mr Pritchard cleared his throat. “I cannot say that your lady mother was aware of our little club. The brief times she was in residence at Pemberley, your father did not join us. Lady Anne liked to see the distinction of rank preserved, and your father did not wish to displease her. You see, son, your father was at heart a farmer, happiest when he was caring for the land and sharing stories with other farmers.”

Darcy sat in thoughtful silence, sipping his tea. His father had apparently had to conceal the friends he was most comfortable with from his wife. He knew his father preferred the country and his mother the city, and they had spent less and less time together over the years. He himself had been born at Pemberley, but Georgiana had been born in London.

As Pemberley’s mistress, Lady Anne had delighted in her role as principal lady of the area. Her parties and entertainments were unmatched, though she did not always attend herself. She was less inclined to personally tend to those beneath her. Her beneficence was implemented from the proper distance, as she was unable to appear interested in their small concerns. Mrs Reynolds and other servants carried out visits to tenants and distributed alms. Darcy knew Mrs Pritchard herself cared assiduously for their tenants as well as others in need. He was proud of the Darcy family’s reputation for generosity, but he suddenly realised that his family did not directly involve themselves with the beneficiaries of their charity. He himself did not; he had people to do that, but suddenly that seemed insufficient.

And instantly Elizabeth was back, once again jumping the fences that guarded his mind. He remembered catching glimpses of her as he rode the paths near Meryton, standing at the door of a tenant house with a basket or sitting on a stump with a very small boy on her lap, helping him to learn to count with his fingers.

He startled a bit at Mr Pritchard's voice. "Let us get you home, Mr Darcy. My gig awaits you. We'll tie your horse behind." He wagged his finger at the younger man. "Mrs Hedges's orders."

Darcy rose slowly and stiffly. Carefully and tentatively, he bowed to Mr Hedges and thanked him for his kindness and hospitality. "Please call me Darcy, as you addressed my father. I would very much like to join your club."

On his way back to Pemberley, the squire regaled him with more tales of his father and of other neighbours. Mr Hedges had sent a servant with a message to Pemberley, and Mrs Reynolds and Georgiana were waiting for him. Mr Pritchard touched his hat and winked as he turned his gig around. "See you at the club, Darcy."

CHAPTER NINE

September 1812, Longbourn

Spring's gentle awakening transformed into a lush, green summer, then faded into a September of brilliantly coloured leaves and honey-gold afternoons. The harvest was bountiful, both in their fields and in their gardens. The girls helped their gardener with the harvest and assisted Hill and Jenks with the preserves. There is so much food! Who will be here to eat it? Elizabeth wondered.

It had been six months since their mother's death, almost eight months since Lydia's.

Although isolated, some news of the neighbourhood had occasionally filtered into Longbourn through tenant farmers and servants, and in one case, an itinerant tinker. Netherfield still sat empty. The Purvises had removed to Bath for the foreseeable future so Mr Purvis could take the waters for his rheumatism. The Harringtons had gone on holiday by the sea in Weymouth and kept putting off their return. Several young men had taken the king's shilling and departed. The militia had left for Brighton.

The most shocking report had been the discovery and extent of Mr Wickham's depravity. Elizabeth felt that it reflected on her family and made their own shame worse. They had befriended, indeed championed, a criminal. Their parents had never made any effort to curb Lydia's behaviour with the officers, and she herself had been quite foolishly taken in by the villain. Although she did not speak of it to her family, it made her doubt her own judgment.

Mr Philips had notified them when he moved his business and his wife to Buckinghamshire, leaving an empty building on the high street. Meryton was now without a solicitor. Elizabeth considered how unusually quiet the little market town must be. How strange it all was. The last time she had shopped there, two days before the accident, her life had been unexceptional. She had not seen Meryton since her mother's humiliating attempt to visit Aunt Philips, who no longer lived there.

Jane had been readying herself for her future. She and Mrs Hill spent their days in the kitchen, stillroom, and linen closet, taking inventories, calculating budgets, and planning meals. Mr Osbeck also acted as instructor on the fine points of maintaining china, silver, and glassware, of working with footmen, and of curating the wine cellar. Jane accompanied Hill and Osbeck to Hertford for shopping. Over time, the other sisters had joined in, initially to provide some relief from the monotony of the days. They had soon become more serious as they began preparing for their own futures.

Late at night, Elizabeth was sitting in Jane's room, watching her fill a trunk with the things she would need in London.

"Do not pack anything black," she said as Jane pulled gowns from the wardrobe and held them up.

Jane made a face. "I should take one black gown at least, just in case, and black ribbons to add to these others. I only have two that could be used for half-mourning—the grey and the lavender. I am glad we did not dye any of our best gowns."

"There were times, after it became apparent how isolated we would be, that I wondered why we put on our blacks at all," admitted Elizabeth.

Jane wagged a finger at her but with a wry smile. "Mourning is not merely for

appearances, Lizzy. It is one way to show respect for those we have lost. It is in the Bible.”

Elizabeth smirked. “The Bible also says we should rend our garments to shreds, cut off all our hair, and smear our faces with ashes. But I agree with you.”

Jane turned and pulled a shimmering pale-gold silk evening gown from the wardrobe, the one she had worn when she had last seen Mr Bingley at Netherfield.

“Please do not tell me you are going to discard that,” said Elizabeth. “You look so beautiful in it.”

“Of course not, Lizzy! I have only worn it to one ball!” Jane’s chin came up. “I received effusive compliments on it from a gentleman there, though I do not recall his name.”

Elizabeth laughed with delight. Jane would be well, better than well. She would take London, at least the Gardiners’ little corner of London, by storm.

It was a sobering thought. Elizabeth rose and moved to embrace her sister, tears pricking at her eyes. “Shall we ever live under the same roof again? This parting is different from our last.”

Jane hugged her tightly, her own eyes brimming. “It is different. I shall no longer wait for someone else to decide my future. I am going to pursue it myself.”

And so it was that early the next morning, a beautiful, misty mid-September morning, Jane began the day sitting alone on the rustic bench in the cemetery. She told her mother and sister where she was going and prayed for them, and for her future. She then boarded the Bennets’ carriage, accompanied by her father, leaving for London with her family’s love and blessings, not to mention a generous clothing allowance.

September 18, 1812

Gracechurch Street, London

Dear Sisters,

It has only been three days, but my stay with the Gardiners is already more pleasurable than my last. I spent the first days of my visit delighting in the company of my little cousins. Aunt does not wish to hurry me, but I believe she greatly anticipates our shopping excursions.

I have already spent one afternoon at Aunt's favourite dressmaker's, though she is acquainted with several because of my uncle's trade in textiles. She has helped me choose such designs and fabrics that can serve as half-mourning and be altered later.

Although finding a match is my reason for being here, I am relieved that I am not required to seek one right away. Laugh at me all you wish, but since Aunt Gardiner informed us of her determination to help us find respectable husbands, I had half feared that I would be immediately confronted by a queue of single gentlemen each waiting for an interview!

Aunt and I had a little adventure earlier today. You recall Uncle Gardiner's love of history. He is lately pursuing this in a manner other than through the books in his library. He purchased some land adjacent to his warehouses with the intent to expand but has since discovered that the dilapidated building on the property was once a chapterhouse, all that remains of a medieval abbey, and is quite historic. He no longer intends to knock it down but to restore it and find another property to purchase for the warehouses. He has hired an architect, a Mr Magnussen, who is making a name for himself in restoring ancient architecture, and we all toured the building this morning.

Dear sisters, I shall keep you apprised of my progress.

All my love,

Jane

A letter for Elizabeth arrived ten days later, full of news about the society in which Jane now found herself. Elizabeth's heart soared at the joy in her sister's letter.

Several times each week, Aunt's dinner table includes guests from among their acquaintance: men of business, men of science, ships' captains, even those with connexions among the ton . If they are married, their wives attend as well, but most are single. Other ladies come to tea, friends of my aunt's or those who share her interest in charity work.

Next week, my aunt will accompany me to a ball given by one of Uncle's business associates, where I shall see many of the same people. I had planned to wear the gown I brought with me as I have only worn it once, but Aunt Gardiner thought I needed a new one for a new chapter in my life. It will be ready for the ball.

Mr Magnussen visited my uncle, and after discussing the work on the chapterhouse, he showed us the plan of a manor house he will restore for a family in Norfolk. Mr Magnussen plans to recreate the house as it was four hundred years ago when it was built. The family hopes to live in the restored house, though it has been uninhabited for many years.

As I studied his drawings, it was apparent to me that the house would be quite inconvenient. The food would be cold before the footmen arrived in the dining room, as the kitchen is very old and is separate from the rest of the house. There are no servants' passages. There was no proper place for storage of linens and no butler's pantry, and the stillroom was small. Given all I have learnt from Mrs Hill, I was feeling rather bold, and I mentioned the lack to Mr Magnussen, who was much struck by the idea. He had not given much thought to the daily needs of the residents or

servants. His primary objective is authenticity.

He took me seriously and listened carefully to every word I said, which gave me a feeling of great satisfaction. I have met few gentlemen who would listen to a lady's contradictory opinion and even thank her for it.

I shall write more about the ball in my next. I so miss our late-night conversations!

Elizabeth smiled. She missed them too, but reading the elation and pleasure in Jane's words was reward enough.

The final day of October brought a letter with the most joyous news Longbourn had received all year.

October 31, 1812

Gracechurch Street, London

My dear Lizzy,

I accompanied Aunt and Uncle to a dinner party and a musical performance this week. We shall attend another small private ball this evening. I dance and converse and enjoy myself greatly, but I find lately that I prefer the company of one gentleman in particular.

Mr Magnussen is personable but not handsome. He is intelligent and capable, and his interests are wide-ranging. His father was a gentleman, but he is a younger son and has had to make his own way. Because of this, he can speak to any person of any rank with ease and courtesy. He has become my friend. He tells me about his work but also about his family and his life before he became his own master. He shares his hopes and aspirations with me and asks me about mine. I treasure our discussions.

I shall end for now. I must prepare for the evening's entertainments. I shall finish this letter tomorrow.

Oh, Lizzy! This will not be the letter I thought it would be only yesterday. No describing the ball, no anecdotes of shopping or visiting, no stories about my little cousins.

This morning my aunt woke me up early with the promise of touring another interesting house with Mr Magnussen. To my surprise, Uncle Gardiner was to accompany us. We rode to the outskirts of town to a very pretty house that has seen better days. It was built over a hundred years ago as a manor house, but the city has grown up around it, and most of the land attached to it has been sold off, though it still has a small walled park, gardens, and a stable.

Mr Magnussen met us at the front entrance, and we walked around the ground and first floors. He pointed out some lovely features of the house and what needs to be repaired and restored. Just as I became aware that my aunt and uncle were no longer with us, he took my hand and asked whether I would like to live there. He said he has never before desired anything more than the rooms he lives and works in, but lately he has realised he wants a home and a family of his own. With me! He asked me to marry him. Of course I said yes, with great joy.

Alexander (that is his given name) had already asked Uncle for permission and has sent a letter to Papa, though he knows I am of age. He will purchase a common licence since I had already described to him our family's isolation and separation from our home parish. He knows of our scandals and shunning and does not judge us. He said our former neighbours do not deserve to hear our banns called!

My happiness is different this time, Lizzy. It is quiet and bone-deep. I can rely on Alexander absolutely. I can trust him. We speak freely and honestly. I know for a certainty that our relationship is equal and that our feelings are mutual.

I cannot wait for you to meet him.

Your Jane

Much happiness ensued, and letters and documents flew back and forth between Longbourn and Gracechurch Street. Mr Bennet approved the settlement, and a date was set for the Bennets to travel to town.

When Jane married, she and Mr Magnussen would move into their new home, making room for the next Bennet sister to go to Gracechurch Street. It would be Elizabeth's turn.

CHAPTER TEN

A cold November breeze swirled around Elizabeth as she walked and pondered; low, heavy, grey clouds appeared suspended only a few feet above her head. Only a few leaves, fluttering in the chill wind, still clung to the branches of the trees in Longbourn's small but beautiful park. Although she had suspected that Jane would quickly find a gentleman who would earn her regard in London, she was still unsettled by the reality that her sister would henceforth be a visitor to Longbourn. It would no longer be her home.

And now it was her time to go to Gracechurch Street, to take the step that might carry her away from all she loved. Elizabeth walked through their little wilderness and turned to look back at the house. Longbourn was not grand, but it was lovely and beguiling, with its ancient manor house, lush, old-fashioned gardens, and enormous trees, and her dear papa likely dozing over a book in his cosy book-room. Her people had lived there for centuries, and her roots went deep.

Not yet. She was not ready to leave, not ready to consider marriage. She turned back to the house to speak to Mary.

“Mary, what think you of taking your turn with the Gardiners before me?”

Mary looked at her sharply. “Do you mean next week? When we go to Jane's wedding? I would leave Longbourn?”

Elizabeth watched the play of emotions—anxiety, confusion, but also curiosity and even hope—cross Mary's face.

“I should like to go,” she said slowly. She met Elizabeth’s eye but then looked away. “I have sometimes felt envy when you and Jane visited them.”

“Oh, Mary, I am sorry,” Elizabeth said and took her sister’s hand. “You always said you did not like the city.”

Mary smiled wryly. “I told myself that.”

Elizabeth flushed with shame. She had never even wondered what Mary wanted. “None of us will force you to go if you do not wish it. Only when you feel ready.”

“I do want to go. I only thought I would have more time to consider it. I do not think I am ready to marry, even if Aunt Gardiner can find a man willing to take me.” Mary raised her face to the window, seeming to choose her words carefully. “I want to be a different person, Lizzy. I do not know any other way to say it. I have spent my life trying to stand out, to gain notice in a large family of sisters. But I know it only brought tolerance at best, mockery at worst.” She blinked back tears. “Even when Papa made me stop exhibiting...” She took a deep breath. “I wish to become a different person.”

Elizabeth remembered their father’s dry comment at the Netherfield ball. “You have delighted us long enough.” Her own eyes pricked with tears. What a terrible humiliation it had been for Mary!

But what a change the last months had wrought in her next younger sister! Although still of a serious nature, Mary’s rigid sense of morality had softened. After learning of the destruction of the moralising tracts she had pored over and painstakingly copied out, Mr Bennet had taken the opportunity to guide Mary through the writings of classical philosophers and even novels to discuss aspects of human behaviour.

Mary continued. “I miss attending worship and hearing choirs and singing hymns. I

want to learn new things and meet different sorts of people. I want to listen to musical performances and gaze upon works of art. I am a little afraid that the city will overwhelm me, but I shall be with the Gardiners, and Jane will be near.” She looked down at her plain, grey half-mourning gown and ran a hand over the fabric. “Will you think me vain if I admit to wishing for new gowns?”

Elizabeth squeezed Mary’s hand and smiled at her, her eyes soft. “Never. Perhaps you wish to be the person you already are inside. Perhaps old family and neighbourhood roles have prevented you from meeting your potential. You will bloom, dear sister.”

Jane’s wedding was planned for the third week of November but was delayed by a week when the entire Gardiner household succumbed to heavy colds.

On a cold but sunny Thursday, Jane Bennet and Alexander Magnussen were united in marriage at St Benet’s Church. Pale sunlight slanted from high clerestory windows, colourfully dappling the floor before the altar, turning Jane’s hair to spun gold. The couple signed the register, and all returned to the Gardiners’ for a celebratory breakfast. The bride was attended by her sisters and father, aunt, uncle, and small cousins, though the groom had to make do with letters of delighted congratulations from his mother, sister, and brothers far away in Lancashire.

The happy chatter in the Gardiners’ drawing room was reminiscent of old times. Replete with excellent food, savouring Jane’s happiness, Elizabeth settled in a window seat and took in the scene before her. She had approved of Mr Magnussen immediately, and her family was joyously welcoming a new member. They had suffered scandal and tragedy, and in fact still suffered from bereavement and isolation, but today was a celebration of hope and optimism. Their future seemed bright.

She suddenly realised the date. It was November 26—one year to the day since their

lives had begun to change. As they had prepared for Mr Bingley's ball, they had fully expected Jane to be betrothed by the conclusion of the evening, but it was not to be. The inmates of Netherfield had absconded, Jane's heart had been crushed, their mother had become increasingly frantic, Lydia had ruined them all, two family members had been lost, their community had abandoned them, and a person she had thought to be charming had turned out to be an iniquitous knave. No, their current troubles had not stemmed from the ball, but somehow it seemed that it was a turning point.

Elizabeth had not given a thought to Netherfield, or its tenants, in many months, but now she could hear Mr Darcy's voice as clearly as if he were speaking in her ear. "Mr Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his making friends—whether he may be equally capable of retaining them, is less certain." Suddenly, she had a sense that Mr Darcy, in his own frigid, superior way, had been trying to warn her. If so, she had been too full of righteous indignation to understand. Even Miss Bingley had seconded that opinion, albeit with a sneer that had further inflamed Elizabeth's own temper.

Yet another regret, but she would follow Mrs Hill's advice and not think on it. For indeed, Jane had found a steady, intelligent, admirable man who would be a better husband than capricious Mr Bingley could ever have been. Though he is not rich, Mama.

Aunt Gardiner, carrying her sleepy two-year-old son, sat down next to Elizabeth. "Do not tell me you are overwhelmed by the noise, Lizzy."

Elizabeth reached over and stroked her little cousin's rounded cheeks with the backs of her fingers. "Oh no, I do enjoy a happy commotion. I was thinking of poor Mama. She will miss all our weddings, though I must confess that she would have made Jane's life difficult with her demands."

“Indeed, she would have. Poor dear Fanny.” Mrs Gardiner sighed and, shifting the baby on her lap, freed one hand and gently cupped Elizabeth’s chin.

“Lizzy, are you sure you wish to give your turn to Mary?”

Elizabeth nodded decisively. “I am certain. You do understand I always enjoy travelling to London and visiting you and Uncle. But after some consideration, I realise the prospect of marriage does not appeal to me just yet, and I prefer to remain at Longbourn for now. More importantly, Mary is more needful of your attention and advice. She has taken me into her confidence about her hopes and wishes, and I have urged her to be equally frank with you. I think you will be pleased to hear her thoughts.”

By midday, Jane and Alexander had departed for their new home; their family gathered in front of the house on Gracechurch Street to wave them away. Mary’s trunks were installed in the room Jane had vacated, and amidst farewell tears and embraces, the three remaining Bennets climbed into their carriage for the journey home.

The formerly crowded old carriage was woefully spacious with only three passengers. Tucked up with blankets and hot bricks, after a few remarks on the wedding, all were lost in their thoughts, and Kitty was soon fast asleep. Elizabeth leant her head against the window as the scenery rolled past. Although she was tired, a mix of emotions and thoughts tumbled through her mind: joy, regret, her mother, Lydia. She and Jane had shared a room the night before the wedding. They had reminisced a little, but Jane’s thoughts were all of her betrothed and their future life together. She smiled ruefully to herself; that was as it should be. She turned her gaze towards her father. He sat alone in the forward-facing seat, staring gloomily out of the opposite window. She rose and carefully moved to his side.

Mr Bennet startled a bit as Elizabeth sat down next to him. “Are you well, Papa?” she

asked.

He barked a laugh. “I was just remembering riding in this carriage with five bickering little girls—no, no, make that four, since Jane never bickered in her life.” He mimicked a child’s high voice: “Mama, Kitty’s gown is touching mine. Make her move over.”

They both laughed, then sobered. Mr Bennet smiled wistfully. “Perhaps it has just occurred to me that if my brother and sister Gardiner have their way, my daughters will all be gone from Longbourn within a year or two. I am a selfish being, and I would keep you all at home forever if I could.”

“Papa, surely you knew we would all marry someday,” Elizabeth chided gently.

“Yes, but I suppose I imagined that you would all marry within the neighbourhood and remain close to home.”

“Perhaps we might have, had there been a larger supply of gentlemen available. If you recall, there were not even enough to dance with, much less marry.”

“How unlucky that you should have a reasonable answer to give, my Lizzy! I suppose I should be so reasonable as to admit it,” said Mr Bennet. “Now tell me, what think you of your new brother?”

“I like him. He is a good man. He respects and cares for Jane. And only think, you have a son who shares your interest in history and architecture!”

“That is true. I also like him, and I know that if there had been any question about him, your uncle would not have encouraged the match.”

Elizabeth sniffed. “Alexander is certainly a better choice than Mr Bingley ever was.

He is his own man. Jane can rely on him. He will not be swayed by the opinions of others.”

Mr Bennet nodded in agreement. “Did I tell you that Mr Bingley was married several months ago? I saw the announcement just after Easter.”

Elizabeth gasped. “So soon! Well, it certainly did not take him long to find another! I suppose it was some rich and grand lady that his sisters chose for him.” She rolled her eyes. “It did not seem so at the time, but perhaps his leaving without a word was a blessing in disguise. But Mr Bingley is best forgot. Let us speak of other things. What did you give Jane as a wedding present?”

Her father puffed out his chest in mock pride. “You must tell me that I am the best papa in the world, for I have given Mr and Mrs Magnussen the means to hire a housekeeper, a cook, a gardener, and a maid-of-all-work for one year. Your aunt will help Jane choose the best candidates.”

Elizabeth clasped her hands to her chest and laughed. “Yes, I shall tell you that. What an excellent notion! How clever and thoughtful you are!”

Mr Bennet smirked. “And now that you have given me the accolades, I shall be honest. It was in fact Hill’s idea.”

Elizabeth stuck her tongue out at her father. “Oh, you! God bless our Mrs Hill, then!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

December 1, 1812

Gracechurch Street, London

My dear sisters,

It is less than a week since we parted, but I already miss you both, though my stay is so far everything I hoped for. I have had wonderful conversations with my aunt and with Jane as well. I have shared my wishes and aspirations with them, and they are resolved to help me.

I am impressed by Aunt Gardiner's energy and kindness. She has not only taken me to a dressmaker to be measured for several new gowns, she also permitted me to attend her and Jane as they interviewed applicants for the positions in Jane's household. It was most enlightening. She and Uncle are allowing me to have pianoforte lessons with Cousin Margaret's music master, a distinguished gentleman from Germany. He is very dignified, and I am a little in awe of him.

As you suggested, Lizzy, I have been practising my sociability as if it were an accomplishment to be learnt. I can see now that a proficiency in conversation is in fact a true accomplishment, more useful than any others. (How strange it is that netting a purse is considered an accomplishment!) It smooths the way with strangers and puts others at ease. I observe and learn from my aunt and uncle, who speak well and have many friends.

Although Advent has scarce begun, we have been discussing our plans for Yuletide. The Gardiners will take their family to Longbourn for Christmas as they have always done. Jane and Alexander will make the long journey to Lancashire so Jane can meet his family.

My new gowns should be ready by then. I greatly anticipate your opinions on them!

Sending my love,

Mary

“I am glad they are coming to spend Christmastide with us,” said Kitty. “I think it would be too sad if it were only you, Papa, and me.”

“Yes, especially since it is quite a bit of bother for them to travel. Uncle must leave his business, and it is a long ride for the children,” agreed Elizabeth. “Perhaps we should go to them. I confess that the thought of spending Christmas here has little appeal for me.”

The two sisters shared a long look. Their mother had loved the festive season, causing the house to be decked completely with evergreens, holly, and mistletoe, hosting parties and lavish dinners for their friends and neighbours. Christmases at Longbourn had been crowded, noisy, extravagant, and delectable. Every hearth had a fire, and many wax candles had shed their light on the happy faces present.

“I do not know whether decorating the house will raise our spirits or cause us to miss Mama and Lydia more,” she mused.

“Perhaps we could try decorating only the drawing room?” suggested Kitty, a hopeful expression on her face. Elizabeth had her doubts, but Kitty seemed to wish it, so they would make it so.

Their celebrations were peculiarly uplifting: poignant, thoughtful, but with a surprising sweetness. The Gardiner children brought joy and laughter; Mrs Jenks's meals were less elaborate than in the past but comforting and delicious. With no neighbours or other guests, the Bennets and Gardiners contented themselves with indoor and outdoor games, music, and conversation. They remembered old traditions and made new ones. They sat near the fire and read stories together, which inspired them to read plays, each person taking on various roles; activities that neither Mrs Bennet nor Lydia would have been able to sit still long enough to participate in.

After spending a quiet evening and saying their good nights, Elizabeth had retired to her room when she heard a knock at her door. She opened it to find Mary standing there and invited her in.

"I know it is late, Lizzy, but we have hardly had a chance to speak privately since we arrived, and Aunt is already planning our return to town," said Mary. "Or do you wish to go to bed?"

"I was not ready to sleep yet. I was just going to read for a while. But I would much rather hear how you go on in London! Letters are delightful, but they are nothing to a good chat!" Elizabeth smiled. She sat on her bed and patted the spot next to her.

Both girls sat cross-legged on the bed and faced each other. Mary took a deep breath. "I do like it there, as I have said in my letters. But sometimes my feelings are so mixed up! I like the attention, yet I feel guilty over it. I like shopping, especially the bookshops, but I also like the drapers and the dressmakers...but the expense of it all! I try to allow myself to enjoy it, and Herr Heidemann says that expressing joy is necessary?—"

"Herr Heidemann?" asked Elizabeth, her brows high.

An uncharacteristic blush spread across Mary's face. "Oh, did I not tell you...well,

Herr Heidemann is the music master I share with little Margaret. He is from Germany and was what they call a kapellmeister there, for a noble family, though he always wished to teach at a university. He has a patron, a noble German lady who married Lord Findlay. Under the patronage of Lord and Lady Findlay, he will soon be employed as a lecturer and professor at Cambridge, but until it can be arranged, he is taking on students for needed income. Margaret and I have each had several lessons with him so far. I have learnt so much already about the theory and structure of music. I had no idea there was so much more to it than knowing the proper fingering.”

“And you were discussing joy?” Elizabeth’s brows crept higher, but she managed to suppress her grin.

Mary sighed and looked down. “The first time he heard me play, he asked me questions. I expected things like who had taught me, how did I learn to play, and so on. But he asked me why I played. I told him because it was a suitable discipline for young ladies and how important it was for ladies to have accomplishments. He looked at me over his spectacles, then rolled his eyes and muttered something in German. Then he explained that in order to have true artistry in music, one must take personal joy in it.” She looked up again, straight into Elizabeth’s eyes. “That is when I understood the difference between your musical abilities and mine. You have always found joy when you play the pianoforte, have you not? It has never been just exhibiting for you, has it?”

Elizabeth smiled. “No, it has not. I can lose myself in music, though I am not what anyone would call a great proficient.”

Mary nodded. “I am learning to change the way I experience music. Herr Heidemann has suggested I choose music that is lighter and brighter, at least for a time, and that I should not stop and try to fix my mistakes. I should just keep playing and think about them later. He also told me about what composers are thinking as they create their

music. Music is written to express feelings.”

Elizabeth nodded, pleased at the changes in her sister.

“Our aunt has also given me some of her favourite novels to read,” Mary continued. “She feels that it is important to find joy in many aspects of our lives. We can talk about the characters in the novels as if they were real people and laugh at them. She says it is a good way to gain understanding of human nature. I also have that opportunity when I meet their many friends and colleagues.”

At this, Mary paused. Tilting her head to one side, she said softly, “I think I shall be ready to consider marriage sooner than I ever believed.”

All too soon, it was Twelfth Night, and the London party returned to their business and their home. As the Bennet family came nearer and nearer to the anniversary of their life-changing event, the letters between the family members increased in length and frequency. Elizabeth dreaded the date and was not sure how to feel. Their half-mourning would officially end. The ache of loss had lessened; a year’s worth of experience had inured them to the absence of their mother and sister. The loneliness of their shunning was still there to some degree, but now they were making new friends, even though they were miles away in London. Their world had grown, and Jane’s marriage and Mary’s happiness in town gave them hope for the future.

When the day came, the anniversary of the day that had shattered their former lives, any sense of sadness was brightened by unexpected news from London.

January 27, 1813

Gracechurch Street, London

Dear Sisters,

It is likely that you have just received my last and are wondering why on earth another letter has arrived on its heels. How I wish I could share my news with you in person, but I shall just have to imagine what your responses may be. I have had an offer of marriage! You will have no trouble guessing who my future husband is. I have often spoken of him to you both. It is Herr Heidemann. He says that I have the bloom of youth but that I have an 'old soul'. He means that I am more careful in my thoughts and behaviour than other young ladies and that pleases him. He says he is an old soul as well!

This may seem quite sudden and whimsical to you. I have been pondering my feelings for Herr Heidemann for some time but could not quite bring myself to confide them to anyone. (I find there remains a small part of me that fears mockery on subjects closest to my heart.) Aunt and Uncle guessed that Herr Heidemann and I had formed a bond weeks ago, though they did not act as though they knew.

I have written a separate letter to Papa, enclosed with letters from Gerhard and from Uncle Gardiner.

I shall close now so as to send this along with the others.

With love,

Mary

Elizabeth set the letter down and looked at Kitty, seated next to her. Kitty's eyes were misty. "Mary sounds very happy, does she not?" she said softly.

"Aye, that she does." Elizabeth nodded. "Mary never expected such joy, which makes it even more splendid."

Their father appeared at the parlour door with a handful of letters. "My girls, it

appears that another trip to London is in the offing.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

March 1813, Pemberley

“L ord, Darcy, but you look like something the cat dragged in!”

Darcy, soaked in slush and mud, turned away from the roaring torrent of dirty water to see his friend Jamie Hedges dismounting from his horse on the road behind him.

“You’re going to need some mighty big logs to stem that tide,” Jamie said, shaking his head at the ferocity of the flooded stream.

Darcy nodded. “We have been considering that same possibility. Trees are being cut as we speak—the largest we are able to drag down here. I am concerned about first moving them into place, and once moved, how long they will last.”

“Pritchard and I can send some men to help yours, and I bet old Fletcher will help too. He ain’t that far away. And it don’t need to be a permanent repair, just long enough to put up some protection for the buildings downstream. It wouldn’t do to try anything fixed till the stream’s down to a trickle in summer.”

Above the noise of the rushing water, Darcy heard another voice. “Count me in too, lads. The more hands we throw at the problem, the sooner it’ll be repaired.”

It was Everett Perkins, another farmer with holdings similar to those of Hedges, dismounting his horse. He looked at Darcy and slapped him on the back. “What happened to you, son? Did you fall in?”

The snow melt in Derbyshire had been far worse than usual, compounded by heavy spring rains, resulting in rivers and streams too full and fast to be confined in their banks, pushing rocks, trees, and vast quantities of mud downstream. One of the casualties had been a small earthen dam on Pemberley land that had partially collapsed. Darcy and his steward had spent the morning slogging through the mud and slush endeavouring to come up with a plan to prevent the dam from giving way entirely, thus endangering cottages and farm buildings in the shallow valley below.

The three men, along with the steward and the workmen in Darcy's employ, talked through a plan and agreed to come back in the afternoon with more men, horses, lots of stout rope, and the logs from the trees being cut down before going their separate ways.

A short time later, clean, warm, and full, Darcy thought with gratitude of his neighbours, now also his friends. Georgiana had called them his former cronies, and he had laughed at the idea. He valued the time he spent with them and had been surprised at how they had embraced him as one of their own after he had barely taken the time to know them for so many years. They had more than filled the vacuum left behind by Bingley's marriage and removal from society and Fitzwilliam's long absences. In his secret heart of hearts, he treasured the fact that these old friends of his father's called him 'son'.

They comprised a motley group. All were older than he, a few from his father's generation. All were landowners but at varying levels of society; Jamie Hedges and Everett Perkins especially could not be considered gentlemen. He could understand why his father never mentioned them to his mother; she might have insisted that he end those friendships he so enjoyed. Strangely, they reminded him slightly of the neighbourhood surrounding Netherfield Park, where he had stayed over a year before. He had not taken the time to know those people either, having considered them beneath his notice; an eccentric collection of country folk worthy only of the barest civility, certainly not friendship.

A few hours later, gentlemen, farmers, and labourers were gathered back at the dam site. Before they could go forwards with their plan, Mr Pritchard pulled up in his gig, a younger man sitting next to him.

“Ho there, lads, wait a bit! I have someone here who can advise us!” The younger man helped the old man down from the gig, and they walked over to Darcy.

“Darcy, may I present Mr Lionel Fielding. He has inherited the old Harrison place, Birchwood Grange.”

Darcy was impatient to begin and wondered why introductions were necessary at this particular time. He opened his mouth to speak, but old Pritchard interrupted, one finger in the air. “ And , he is a trained engineer! He has experience with dams and bridges!”

Darcy laughed and bowed to Mr Fielding. He held out his hand. “Welcome to the neighbourhood, sir! You are just the man we need!”

Work was delayed until Mr Fielding could consider the situation. For the rest of the day, they laboured with ropes and horses, moving the great logs into place upstream, guiding them down the stream bed with ropes on either side, easing them into place and letting them settle. The quantity of water escaping the dam slowed and then diminished. While water from snowmelt was still flowing into the reservoir, it was mostly contained for now, and they would spend the next few days devising ways to protect the properties in harm’s way with a mix of diversion schemes involving ditches and earthen dikes. But for now, they could rest.

It would be, Darcy mused, another excellent excuse for avoiding Easter at Rosings. Not an excuse, he chided himself, a reason , a very important reason. The next day, he wrote to Fitzwilliam and to Lady Catherine, explaining that necessity dictated he remain at Pemberley to deal with the floods.

The next week, he received two letters in return. Lady Catherine filled several pages in a blistering screed, castigating him in strong language that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, threatening him with ruin if he did not come to Rosings immediately and marry Anne. She is mad, truly mad, Darcy thought as he set the unsettling letter aside. He would not dignify it with an answer, but he would notify his uncle.

The other letter was from Fitzwilliam and consisted of a single page containing a single word: Coward.

In his adult years, Mr Bennet had not enjoyed the city, though he could admit it possessed some diversions. He could even understand there were pleasures to be had and remembered being something of a London gadabout on his university holidays. Now here he was, on his way home from another journey to the city, another wedding. After rarely leaving Longbourn for years, he had been to London three times in the last six months. Strange indeed.

He had wondered whether he would have anything to say to the German fellow, Mary's new husband. Music was not a thing he understood. Strangely, given the shrillness of her voice, Fanny had been the one with the ear for it, the sense of rhythm and melody, but had never had musical training. She had been a delightful dance partner. He had liked Herr Heidemann, however, and recognised in him a character similar to Mary's but with a dry sense of humour. Heidemann was a well-educated man, twelve years Mary's senior, old enough to understand her singular character and recognise her attributes. They would complement each other nicely, and he would take great care of her.

One daughter with a husband and household, one more daughter married in St Bennet's, one other daughter now ensconced in the house on Gracechurch Street. Which of his daughters was the surprise. Kitty was the daughter he was leaving behind, and Lizzy was dozing in the seat across from him in the carriage, bundled in

blankets for the bumpy return to Longbourn.

The Gardiners had expressed concern when they learnt that Elizabeth had again deferred her stay in London in favour of a younger sister. Lizzy was almost two-and-twenty compared to Kitty's eighteen years of age. She was certainly not on the shelf; how he despised that expression! But Kitty, although she had matured a great deal since their great trauma over a year before, was still very young. Mr Bennet and the Gardiners agreed to view Kitty's stay as a chance for her to acquire some polish and further her education. They would postpone introducing her to any single gentlemen for the time being.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Unexpectedly, Kitty was a faithful correspondent. Her letters, both to Elizabeth and Mr Bennet, expressed her delight in the bustle of the great city.

March 21, 1813

Gracechurch Street, London

Dear Lizzy,

How lucky I am to be here in London, staying with the best aunt and uncle in the world! I never dreamt of living in such a place. So many people, horses, carriages, wagons, houses, shops... I do not know whether I shall ever cease to be amazed by it!

Mary told me that she once envied you and Jane for having had the opportunity to spend time in town with our aunt and uncle. I never did envy you. I am ashamed to say that I was so silly and ignorant that I thought it better to stay at home and chase officers in Meryton. All I ever thought about was giggling with Lydia and Maria, dancing, and what ribbons I should purchase with my pin money.

Jane and Mary took me to see some beautiful paintings at a gallery, and it made me wish to learn to draw. Alex says he will teach me! I listen to Aunt and Uncle, and Jane and Alex, and now Mary and Gerhard, and I learn so much about being an adult. I visited Uncle's offices and got a small idea of how his business works.

Do you know what I think is the saddest thing about Lydia? She will never see

anything beyond Meryton. She will never see any other part of the world or understand about different points of view. She did not even imagine anything beyond our little town. She thought she was already a grown lady, not a foolish girl. She did not know that she never even came close to being a lady.

I miss you so much, Lizzy! I miss Papa too. I wish you were both here. I do understand why you want to stay at home longer; I also miss Longbourn. I have promised myself to write often to Papa, even if he does not write back. I do not want either of you to ever be lonely.

All my love,

Kitty

Elizabeth put her letter down and looked at her father. Mr Bennet was reading his own letter from Kitty. The March afternoon was dark with heavy clouds, and it was raining hard. They had settled cosily in his library, a fire blazing in the hearth, as they had often done since she was a little girl. It had been a shared refuge: for him from the noise and chaotic dissatisfaction of his wife, for her from enduring her mother's criticisms. She opened the letter to read it a second time; it made her so glad.

Gracechurch Street, London

April 2, 1813

Dear Lizzy,

My work proceeds apace. You will think it ridiculous, but I call it my work, the work of learning. It is also my pleasure. My drawing lessons, my cousins, Aunt's charity work, their friends, our wonderful dinners with clever people. I can almost imagine myself to be clever, not like you are clever, Lizzy, but I understand more of the

conversation every time. Aunt has given me books to read, and I do enjoy them very much. In my next I shall share with you my thoughts on The Romance of the Forest .

I am happy for Mary and Gerhard since he has taken up his position at Cambridge and they have moved away, but I miss them. He can no longer be my music master, but Aunt's friend Mrs Newfield says she will teach me. She is often Aunt's guest for tea, and last week she brought her son, Mr Henry Newfield, to dinner. He is intelligent and speaks well. He wishes to work as a barrister, and Mrs Newfield says he will be called to the bar very soon. I do not quite understand what that means, but I think he will be good at it. It made me think of Aunt and Uncle Philips. Do you remember their little card parties and the delicious cakes that their cook baked? They were always so kind to us. I know they had to cut us, but I miss them. I have sent a letter to them and hope they do not mind it. I like receiving letters, but to receive them one must write them. I did not previously enjoy writing letters, but I do now.

Your loving sister,

Kitty

In late May came the news Elizabeth had anticipated. Mr Newfield had proposed to Kitty.

...Aunt says she is very proud of me and that I have grown up a great deal in the last year and during my time in London, but that I am full young to be married. You may agree, and I do understand. But I am almost nineteen. Mama was only seventeen when she and Papa married and was a mother when she was eighteen. Somehow, I think Mama never truly grew up. It makes me sad to realise that, and to understand that they were neither of them happy.

But I have grown up, enough to know that growing up is something that we do all our lives. I can tell because it seems the more I learn, the more I understand how much

more there is to know. I also know that marriage is work, and the more one works at it, the better one's chances. All young ladies think about is the wedding, when we should be thinking about the marriage. When I remember how foolish was my behaviour, how ignorant I was only sixteen months ago, it mortifies me. Henry never saw me as I was then, and for that I am glad.

Uncle has sent a letter to Papa with his thoughts on the matter. Lizzy, would you please ensure that he reads it and responds to Uncle in a timely manner?

Mr Bennet performed his paternal duties with some alacrity. At the breakfast following Kitty's wedding, he and Elizabeth were seated next to Captain Samuel Bancroft, godfather to Henry and longtime friend and counsellor to Mrs Newfield. The captain, who Mr Bennet thought only nine or ten years younger than himself, stood up with Mr Newfield during the ceremony.

"Lieutenant Henry Newfield Senior, an excellent man, gave his own life to save the lives of several of his shipmates, including mine, during the sea battle at Pulo Aura in the year four. We had known each other since we were middies, that is, midshipmen," the captain explained. "Mrs Newfield was utterly lost without him, and I felt a great responsibility towards her and her son. With her permission, I introduced her to a good man to act as trustee for her money, a solicitor her late husband knew and trusted. Together we made sure she received her late husband's prize money and any other moneys due to him."

"You provided funds for Henry's education, I understand," said Elizabeth.

The captain blushed and cleared his throat. "That is not generally known, but yes, I did, and gladly. Mrs Newfield would not hear of young Henry going to sea. He needed a gentlemanly occupation. We are fortunate that he chose the law. He quickly found that he had an aptitude for it, and it interests him. He will do well."

“You are fortunate to be in England to see your godson married, sir.”

“I would not usually be. My former ship, the frigate Juniper , sustained considerable damage on our last voyage. The Admiralty chose to have it decommissioned. I have been waiting to hear of my next command.”

It was a remarkably enjoyable conversation. Although somewhat reticent, Captain Bancroft was well-spoken and intelligent and had lived a fascinating life as unlike their own as possible. Mr Bennet noted that the good Captain seemed to warm to Elizabeth’s interest in his travels, and he tucked it away in his mind for later consideration.

“Kitty will do well, do you not think so, Papa?” said Elizabeth as their much-abused carriage again travelled north to Longbourn after the wedding.

Mr Bennet nodded slowly. “I never thought I would say it, but Kitty has become a sensible young lady. Henry’s godfather, Captain Bancroft, is a sober and thoughtful fellow. Although he is more often away than not, he seems to have been a good influence in that young man’s life.”

And without the influence of Lydia and Fanny in her life, Kitty has come into her own, poor child , he thought to himself sombrely. His regrets were never far from his mind, but at present, he was more concerned with Elizabeth. For a third time, his Lizzy had chosen not to stay in town . As their carriage passed through the land showing the effects of the summer weather, he wondered whether she was putting her concern for him over her future happiness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

July 1813, London

“Colonel Fitzwilliam, sir,” announced the butler from the threshold of the study. Darcy looked up from his work, saw the expression on his cousin’s face, and set down his pen.

“What has happened?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam dropped into an armchair and turned a solemn face to Darcy. “I have news of Wickham.”

Wickham! Darcy had heard nothing of the man since he was at Netherfield over a year and a half ago. He had known that the villain would reappear to cause mischief eventually. He would have had plenty of time to stir up trouble in eighteen months. What kind of ruin had he caused this time? How many innocents had been harmed? He felt his stomach begin to churn.

November 26, 1811 . The day of Bingley’s ball and the penultimate day he had spent in Hertfordshire. The day he had last seen her. They had danced, and she had challenged him over the blackguard.

He bit back a groan. When had he begun to measure the chronology of his life by his time with Elizabeth Bennet? He had no idea when it had started; he was in the middle before he knew he had begun. His memories of his adult life were arranged in his mind as happening either before or after he had met Elizabeth. She stood stubbornly

at the centre.

He slid a weary hand over his face and sagged back in his chair. “What has he done now?”

“He is dead.”

This was indeed a surprise. “Dead!” Darcy echoed in disbelief, lurching forwards. “How did you hear this news? Who told you?”

Darcy’s scepticism was well-founded, as his cousin knew. Wickham had been cunning and utterly without morals, tormenting Darcy since they were both boys. It would be like him to disappear for a while, playing a long game, then ambush Darcy with a fresh scheme.

“I had it from a colonel in the ___th militia. They are currently preparing for a change of quarters. They have been encamped in Hertfordshire for several years, with the exception of a summer in Brighton in 1812, but they have now been reassigned to Bedfordshire. They have a new commanding officer, a Colonel Downing, and while they were emptying a storage room, they came across some property of Wickham’s. That regiment has always had a high turnover rate, so none of the men have any firsthand knowledge of him. The word is that he died in a carriage accident well over a year ago.”

Darcy slowly rose, crossed the room, and stared out of the window. He had avoided that part of Hertfordshire like the plague for over a year and a half. He did not want to go there. Rather, he did, but he could not. Should not. “I had better go and see what that property is, then.”

Darcy had spoken little of the months he had spent with Bingley in Hertfordshire except a brief mention that Wickham had turned up in the militia there. His cousin

likely assumed that the place had made little impression on Darcy. He was mistaken .

“ We had better go and see what it is. Shall we set off early tomorrow?”

The early morning sun was already warm when they walked out to the mews. ““But now the sun is rising calm and bright’,” the colonel quoted with a yawn, stretching his arms above his head.

“You remember your Wordsworth at least, not that it will help us today. Let us get this over with,” grumbled Darcy, after which he went silent. They mounted their horses and rode north.

Once they left the environs of London, they urged their horses to a quicker pace, arriving in Meryton at about the time breakfast was being served to those keeping city hours.

Darcy led Fitzwilliam down the high street towards Colonel Forster’s former office. He kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, unwavering. He would not be searching the cobbled streets for a light and pleasing figure or listening for a gurgling laugh. Even so, he realised that something was different about the town. On this brilliant July morning, the street was quiet. Few people were out, and they kept their heads down. He noticed an empty shopfront and realised that the excellent bookshop he had been so surprised to discover on his previous visit was gone. He looked around. So was a haberdasher and a sundries shop. Curious, but he would not dwell on it.

Arriving at the militia office, they were greeted by a younger man who saluted smartly then held out his hand to shake. “Colonel Fitzwilliam, I presume? I am Colonel Downing. I thank you for attending to this so quickly. Our preparations are nearly complete, and we are anxious to move to our new quarters in Bedfordshire.”

Fitzwilliam introduced Darcy, telling Colonel Downing only that they had both

known Wickham since they were boys but had received no word of him for a considerable length of time. They did not elaborate on Wickham's character or lack thereof. As Colonel Downing excused himself to fetch Wickham's belongings, Darcy heard the office door open behind them. He turned around and was surprised to see Sir William Lucas.

"Sir William!" he exclaimed, just barely remembering to bow.

The older man also seemed surprised to see him. "Mr Darcy." He returned the bow, and the two men shook hands.

"Sir William is the magistrate here. I have asked him to speak to you about the matter of Mr Wickham's death, as neither I nor any of my officers were assigned here at the time," offered Colonel Downing as he returned, setting a dirty, battered portmanteau on the desk. He turned to Fitzwilliam. "Colonel Fitzwilliam, may I introduce Sir William Lucas, magistrate and former mayor of Meryton."

More handshaking ensued, then Colonel Downing gestured for Darcy to open the box. Fitzwilliam and Darcy exchanged a look when they saw the pathetic contents. A stained and frayed militia uniform, some scuffed shoes, a worn pair of boots. Threadbare shirts. Stockings with holes. At the bottom, a balding velvet bag. Darcy picked it up, pulled open the drawstring, and glimpsed a few jumbled bits of metal. He held one up. "Richard, does this look familiar?"

It was a medal, the Army Gold Cross for bravery. His cousin gasped. "Lord, I have been missing that for years! I thought it had been lost when I was shipped home from Portugal on a litter, insensible most of the way."

"Your name is inscribed on the back. That is why we sought you out, Colonel," said Sir William. "We had no idea that you were related to Mr Darcy."

Darcy turned the bag upside down over the desk and shook it gently. A few coins, a pocket-knife with a broken blade, a quantity of lint, a paste jewel, and last of all, an old-fashioned ring with a cracked emerald landed with a heavy thump.

“Great-uncle Preston’s ring!” Darcy picked it up and examined it. “I have not seen it since I was a boy.”

Fitzwilliam peered at it. “The stone is cracked, and the shank has been cut. Do you suppose he was trying to remove the emerald?”

A criminal to the last, thought Darcy. “What happened to him, Sir William? How did he die?”

“Quite simply, he deserted the regiment and chose the wrong night to abscond. It was late in January of the year twelve. He hired a horse and an old dogcart from the livery stable, and it is believed he was bound for London. It was after dark. The night was a fearsome one. There was sleet and heavy rain that turned to ice when it met the ground. He must have been driving at a dangerous speed when a wheel broke, sending him flying into a tree and the cart off the road. The only reason the accident was discovered was because a nearby farmer heard the horse screaming. They had to put the poor beast down.”

Sir William let out a breath, shaking his head. “Wickham was barely alive when help arrived. He was badly injured and in great pain. He died before we could have him moved. The portmanteau was found the next morning and turned in to Colonel Forster, who put it in storage and apparently forgot about it in the preparations to move to Brighton.”

Darcy thought of his father. How grieved he would have been that his favourite had ended thus. Desertion! The walls must have been closing in on him, and he had tried to evade justice one last time.

Sir William had not yet completed his tale. He pulled an unusually fine-looking purse out of his large coat pocket, along with a sheaf of papers covered in figures. “Now this is very strange, Mr Darcy. Wickham had a large amount of money on his person.” He handed the purse to Darcy, who opened it, then stared at the older man.

“There must be somewhere around two thousand pounds here!” he gasped.

“What! Let me see!” cried Fitzwilliam, and Darcy handed him the purse. “Where would Wickham get two thousand pounds?”

“Two thousand, one hundred and seventy-seven pounds, four shillings and thruppence, to be exact,” said Sir William. “When the purse was discovered on his person, it contained exactly three thousand pounds. After Wickham’s death, it quickly became evident that he had left behind a mountain of debt. Merchants, tavern keepers, innkeepers, debts of honour, not to mention the cost to replace the horse and cart. I convened a meeting of local merchants and required that all complainants bring in their account books to prove what Wickham owed. Since the man seemed to have no family, we paid all his debts with the money.”

Sir William, looking uncomfortable, cleared his throat. “We also paid the families of two young women, a maid and a farmer’s girl, who had been seduced and abandoned by him, so that their families would have the funds to secure husbands for them.” He shook his head sadly. “Everyone thought him so charming when he arrived. When it was learnt how much harm he had wrought in three short months of residence here, it was agreed that he should be buried in the old potter’s field down the road from the smithy. He did not deserve a grave in the churchyard amongst our friends and relations.”

He handed the papers to Darcy. “Here are all the accounts of the money paid out. You will find them in good order, sirs, if you wish to examine them.”

Darcy took them and shook his head as if to clear it. "I thank you, Sir William. We have complete faith in your honesty."

The two men took the portmanteau, purse, and accounts, and left. Colonel Downing looked curiously at Sir William. "Why did you not tell them about the girl who died in the accident?"

The older man sighed heavily. "Mr Darcy was briefly acquainted with her family. He was the guest of his friend, a Mr Bingley, who leased the Netherfield estate just two miles away from here during the autumn of 1811. During their stay, Mr Bingley paid marked attention to the eldest daughter of the Bennet family, who have lived in the neighbourhood for many generations. Indeed, so open and obvious were his attentions, it was generally expected that Mr Bingley would propose marriage to her, but then their entire party left without notice, never to return. The girl who perished was the youngest daughter of that family.

"If I had told Mr Darcy of the girl's death, and the subsequent ruination of the entire Bennet family, word of their scandal and humiliation might have spread to people they were once acquainted with in London. I wished to prevent that. They have suffered enough. In truth, I am perhaps too protective of them, but our families were close. My wife was friends with Mrs Bennet, who died of a fever within weeks of the accident. Mr Bennet and I enjoyed many a lively discussion over port, and our children grew up together. I would prefer to visit them again, but my wife is too frightened of censure to renew the connexion for now. This small omission is one way for me to protect my old friend's family. And Mr Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam, so wholly unconnected to the Bennets, do not need to know any of this."

Darcy tied the portmanteau to the back of his saddle, and the men turned back towards London. He was again silent, deep in thought. His cousin understood that he must not ask about Wickham, or anything about Meryton, so he also rode silently, biding his time, waiting for an opportunity to probe further. Darcy was unlikely to be

grieving his perfidious former friend. Something else had happened here in Hertfordshire.

As they reached the end of the high street, Darcy reined his horse in and stared down a lovely wooded lane, dappled with sunlight and lined with wildflowers, for several long moments. Slowly, he brought a hand to his chest as if he could not breathe, and visibly swallowed. Fitzwilliam could contain himself no longer.

“Is that the path towards the potter’s field?” he asked.

“No,” Darcy answered, and not another word was spoken all the way back to town.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A little over a mile down that beautiful lane sat Elizabeth, admiring the perfect day. All she could wish for was to have her sisters with her. She missed them, but they were all happily married now, and there was much for which to be grateful.

She and Mr Bennet sat in the garden amidst a riot of vivid blooms; she with a stack of letters and he peering at a chessboard he had brought out of doors. Her father had invited her to play a game, but Elizabeth had wanted to read her letters. They compromised with she reading parts of the letters aloud and he playing himself in a match.

“Mary and Gerhard are at last settled into their house. She adores their little garden and anticipates spending many happy hours there. She has made the acquaintance of her neighbours as well as the vicar and his wife. They both feel very much at home in Cambridge.”

Elizabeth shuffled pages and read sections of Kitty’s letter: “Kitty says that Mrs Newfield sends us her regards. Oh! Henry has been called to the bar at last!”

Elizabeth smiled as she read Jane’s most recent missive.

Come autumn, I may be too busy to assist Alex. Yes, sister, I am with child! Aunt Gardiner brought Mrs Alden, the midwife who attended her lyings-in, to see me, and that lady said that if all goes well, we can expect our child to be born sometime in November.

“Oh, Papa! You are to be a grandfather!” cried Elizabeth. “Such happy news!”

As Elizabeth expressed her joy, a peacock butterfly alighted on her knee. Within minutes, a painted lady had settled in her hair.

“Why, Lizzy, remember what your mama used to say about butterflies? Someone must be thinking about you.”

No sooner had Mr Bennet spoken, when a purple emperor landed on her shoulder and a ringlet on her sleeve. “Perhaps for one butterfly, Papa, but four butterflies! Does that mean four people are thinking about me at once? Or is one person thinking of me very hard?” She waved her hand at the profusion of flowers surrounding them, which had attracted a dozen or more of the beautiful creatures. “Could not our garden in bloom be the real cause of the attraction?”

Mr Bennet shook his head. “You will note that no butterfly has availed itself of my person. No, it must be something particular to you .”

Elizabeth made a dismissive gesture, as a small blue kissed her nose and fluttered away. “Be serious, Papa. No, I shall ask Mrs Hill if perhaps my gown was laundered in sugar water!”

The day wore on so pleasantly that she called for a light luncheon to be served to them out of doors.

“Black bishop to black king’s third square, sir.” Father and daughter both looked up. Hill was standing with a plate of sandwiches and a teapot in her hands, but her eyes were on the chessboard.

“Mrs Hill, has my father played himself into a corner?” Elizabeth asked with a smirk.

Mr Bennet scrutinised the board again and chuckled. “Hill, I must thank you. You have shown my black queen the way out of a bind.”

The housekeeper smiled and set the tray on the table. “Will you require anything else?”

“Thank you, Hill, I think not.” As the older woman left them, Mr Bennet asked his daughter, “Lizzy, were you aware that our housekeeper plays chess? Apparently very well too.”

Elizabeth was staring abstractedly towards the hills, a wistful expression on her face.

“Lizzy?” her father repeated.

“What? Oh yes, she told us once that she had learnt as a child.” She moved to sit at the table and set out two teacups. “Oh look. Lemon cakes.” Mr Bennet smiled at his daughter’s pleasure, but he also saw her restlessness and dissatisfaction. Elizabeth poured his tea and then her own. They drank in silence, though unbeknownst to her, a serious conversation was in the offing.

“I would never have imagined, Lizzy, that you would be the child who had to be pushed from the nest.”

Elizabeth stared at him. “What do you mean?”

“You are unhappy, my dear girl.”

“I am not unhappy.”

“You are not happy either. Your sisters are out in the world, building futures together with their husbands. Do you not wish to find a partner to share your life? To live in

London, or somewhere else to explore?” When she did not reply, Mr Bennet pressed on. “We must secure your future, child. Longbourn is not and never has been truly our own. We are merely custodians for future generations, who unfortunately will not be Bennets, though I am certain Mrs Collins will be an excellent mistress.

“I have an idea that you stay on for my sake, so that I shall not be alone. I miss your sisters, and I shall miss you terribly, but for your own welfare, I feel I must send you to your aunt and uncle Gardiner. It does not have to be immediately, though we need to plan for it.”

Elizabeth did not know whether she could adequately explain her tangled, ambivalent feelings, but she would have to try.

“Papa, my reluctance to leave you and Longbourn behind is only part of my dilemma. I do not even know whether I wish to marry at all. I know it is considered the only choice for the daughters of gentlemen. My sisters have found wonderful husbands, and they are helpful in their professions, but I wish to be more than a helpmeet, to have something of my own...some sort of occupation or pursuit or...some independence...”

Failing to find the right words, she looked at him beseechingly, willing him to understand. “I want more for my life, and I doubt that I shall ever find a man who would understand that. Even if I do find a good man whom I can respect and admire, would he take me seriously?”

Her father listened to her carefully, then sat back in his chair, folding his hands in his lap. At last, he spoke.

“I love all my daughters dearly. But you have been the one I took the most pleasure in watching grow up. I know things were difficult with your poor mama. The two of you were like chalk and cheese. You have courage, imagination, and quicksilver

intelligence. You are stubborn and strong-willed, and you have a temper. You have a need to be active. Most of all, I daresay, you need a true test of your own abilities.”

Her father paused, considering his words.

“For most ladies, becoming a wife, supporting their husband, raising their children, and making a home is enough to bring them fulfilment and satisfaction. Perhaps that state is not suitable for you at this point in your life.

“It will indeed take an unusual sort of man to appreciate you or treat you as an equal. One with a similar spirit to yours.” He gazed at her with understanding and sympathy. “You do not have to marry. You will not be required to meet any single gentlemen if you do not wish it. However, you must admit that our little society here, even before our shunning, was confined and unvarying. I do not doubt that such men exist, but you must consider going to your aunt and uncle for a time. You will not meet the right sort of man here.”

The sun was lowering in the sky when Darcy and Fitzwilliam rode into the mews and wearily dismounted. “Give them extra mash, Wilson. They have earned it.” Darcy untied the portmanteau and carried it into the house.

“Let us refresh ourselves and meet in my study.” Shortly after, clean, fed, and revived, they stood at a library table looking at the pathetic detritus of George Wickham’s life.

A quick knock on the partially opened door sounded behind them, and Georgiana came into the study. Darcy closed his eyes in chagrin. Why did I not close the door?

Fitzwilliam muttered, “You will have to tell her at some point. Why not now?”

“Where were you off to so early this morning? Have you just now returned?” asked

Georgiana. She saw the portmanteau and its contents spread out on the table. “What is that?”

Darcy steeled himself out of habit. Although his sister was long recovered from her heartbreak and now understood that she had had a fortuitous escape from the worst sort of rogue, they had not spoken of him for many months, and he had no idea how affected she would be.

“Dearest, we were recently notified that Mr Wickham died some time ago, and Richard and I were asked to remove his belongings from the militia offices in Hertfordshire. This is all he left behind.”

Georgiana looked curiously at the bedraggled heap of clothing and wrinkled her nose. “Oh! Disgusting!” She peered into the portmanteau. “There were no letters?”

Darcy felt anxiety take hold of him and grasped the edge of the table. With a warning glance at his cousin, Fitzwilliam asked in a conversational tone, “Did he have letters of yours in his possession, my dear?”

Georgiana, catching sight of her brother, answered slowly, “I... Yes, he begged me to write letters to him. In Ramsgate, we saw each other most every day, but he wanted me to write to him so that he could think of me when we were apart.”

Darcy pinched the bridge of his nose and sank into a chair.

“Would you say that they were love letters?” asked the colonel.

“Yes, that is what they were. I suppose he threw them away, and I am glad,” said Georgiana.

Let us hope so, thought Darcy, but likely not . Wickham had had only a few pathetic

possessions left to his name; he was desperate, he was deserting, and mysteriously, he had three thousand pounds. The man had been dead for well over a year, yet Darcy could not ignore the sense of foreboding that rose in his breast.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Once Elizabeth allowed herself to think of leaving Longbourn, she could not stop. Although she tried to force it from her mind, once faced with the truth, she could not deny her discontent, her sense of being left behind while the world passed her by. The more she argued that her reasons for staying were sound, the more she wondered what other course her life might take. Yet how could she leave her father alone? How could she leave Longbourn? And how on earth would she ever find a life that provided the more stimulating experiences she desired when she did not quite understand it herself?

The letters she received from her sisters were full of what they were learning and the people they were meeting; accounts of their busy lives with husbands who were, amazingly, all excellent men. Perhaps that was not such a miracle when she considered what exceptional people the Gardiners were. Of course their acquaintances would be of a high calibre.

In the end, the decision was taken out of her hands when Martha called to her. “Miss Lizzy! There is a man riding up the drive!”

Good heavens! How long had it been since any person had openly come to Longbourn? She ran to the front door just as the man reined in his horse. It was Captain Bancroft. A stable boy ran up and took charge of his mount.

“Captain Bancroft! Welcome to Longbourn, sir. Please, do come in,” Elizabeth said, rising from her curtsy. Within minutes, her father joined her in the entrance hall and offered his own words of welcome.

She wondered what purpose the man could have in coming all the way out to Longbourn, but no matter. She and her father had both enjoyed his conversation when they had dined in town, and visitors of any kind were sorely lacking.

She ordered refreshments, and the three sat together in the drawing room. After the usual enquiries about health, the roads, and the weather, conversation flagged; Captain Bancroft was a quiet fellow. Elizabeth began to speak of Longbourn House and the estate, Mr Bennet joining in, which kept them going for a while. In response, the captain told them a little about his past travels. After a few minutes of consideration, Elizabeth asked him whether he had heard anything from the Admiralty, and the captain brightened.

“I have been offered the command of a fine third-rate frigate in the East India Squadron, serving under Admiral Langley. I am very pleased to have been given another mission. When the Admiralty’s plans for reduction were announced, I was concerned. While I had considered retirement in some distant future, I hoped for at least one more extensive mission, though I have enough of an income through investment of the prize money I have earned over the years to be completely independent. I simply wished for one more voyage and to build a house on some land I purchased several years ago. In fact, I spoke to Mr Magnussen yesterday about designing a house for me.”

He is a good man , Elizabeth thought. Though he seems rather lonely. Perhaps that is the result of being in command.

By the time Captain Bancroft finished speaking, they had far exceeded the usual visiting time allotted; however, the captain made no move to leave, having come a long way apparently with no other object but to speak to them.

Then the conversation took a turn very quickly. The captain very properly asked Mr Bennet whether he and Elizabeth could take a turn in the garden, within sight of the

windows. She blinked in astonishment and turned to her father, who also appeared to be quite taken aback. He recovered quickly and looked back at Elizabeth, who, though still surprised, nodded slightly. The three rose to their feet, and she led the captain out to the garden.

In silence, they strolled slowly past the banks of flowers; dahlias, late roses, yarrows, and purple verbena, swaying gently in the pale golden light. The captain spoke first, saying quietly, “What a wonderful place this must have been to grow up. It is beautiful.”

“I do love it dearly. The Bennet family has been here for several centuries. It is, however, not truly ours. It is entailed in default of heirs male. In our case a distant cousin named Collins.”

“Ah, I see. How ridiculous.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “I could not agree more.”

“It has been a delight to meet your aunt and uncle, your father, and your sisters. Your family obviously derives much happiness from being together. You are all very close, I perceive.”

“We have grown closer in recent years, after we lost our youngest sister and our mother. I always loved my family, but now I cherish and value them more.” A few minutes went by with only the sound of their footsteps in rhythm together. Elizabeth asked, “Do you have any family, Captain?”

“No close family. My father went against his parents’ wishes when he took orders and married my mother rather than where they had chosen. All communication was cut off. When I was very young, he and my mother, who had no family to speak of, died when our village in Dorsetshire was afflicted with typhus. No one knew quite

what to do with me, but at last a distant cousin sent me to the naval academy in Portsmouth.”

Elizabeth was aghast. There was no one to take in a poor little boy? “That must have been a horrible time for you.”

“I recall little, to be honest. I do remember enough of my parents to know how good and affectionate they were. My father was my tutor and taught me to love books. I have tried to live as they would have wished me to.” He glanced away for a moment and continued. “Yet the naval academy was the making of me. I loved the demands the academy placed on me, to test my mettle, and I have always loved the sea. I consider it a great privilege, a gift, to be able to serve my king and live a useful and fulfilling life.”

As they walked through the garden in the direction of the wilderness, Elizabeth noted the family cemetery in the distance. She had planted flowers beside her mother’s and sister’s graves, and she could see that they were blooming too.

Captain Bancroft followed her gaze and began to speak quietly. “Miss Bennet, I shall be honest with you. I have some knowledge of your family’s troubles...”

Elizabeth stepped back and looked at him warily. The captain flushed slightly. “I have no talent for small talk, so I shall speak directly. I was informed of your trials by Mrs Newfield. She can be...rather free with information at times. She is a dear lady, Miss Bennet, and she dotes on young Mrs Catherine Newfield as if she were her own daughter, so please do not think ill of her. I merely wished to express my admiration for the way you and your family have coped in a dire situation.” He nodded in the direction of the cemetery. “Tell me about your mother and your sister.”

They made their way to the bench that overlooked the graves and sat down. She told him of Lydia’s accident and the aftermath, and how their mother’s grief had led to her

death. She described how her aunt and uncle had intervened and the successful marriages that had resulted, yet how they were still isolated from the surrounding community.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Perhaps it is foolish of me, and I cannot account for it, but I sometimes feel that this shunning, this permanent cutting of our entire family, is some kind of revenge. It feels malicious. Our family has its flaws and shortcomings, as any family or person would. I have given this much thought, and I cannot think of any way we have hurt anyone.”

Captain Bancroft nodded sombrely. “I understand your feelings. It is an extreme punishment.” He shifted a little on the bench and looked uncomfortable. Terribly uncomfortable. “You see, Miss Bennet, I too have had to cope with scandal, or in my case the threat of scandal. I have an enemy. There is a person who wishes me harm.”

Elizabeth stared at him in disbelief. What could he possibly have done to gain such an enemy?

The captain must have taken in the surprise on her face, and he hastily added, “I have never deliberately or knowingly hurt anyone in my life, except the combatants I have faced in battle. No, my enemy is another naval officer who believes that my accomplishments have somehow hindered his own rise. He and I served under Nelson early in our careers, and I discovered evidence of some malfeasance on his part. I did not threaten him with it or report anything to my superiors but tried to remedy the situation myself. But he knew that I knew.

“I shall not reveal his name, but he is a younger son of a wealthy and powerful family. His father is prominent in the House of Lords. His perspective is that of one who has been wrongfully deprived of some great acclamation and fame that is owed to him. He is convinced of his own brilliance.”

Elizabeth listened, wondering about such a person who believed himself entitled to rewards and accolades just for existing.

“After we served together, our careers diverged. I have endeavoured to keep my distance from him over the years. On two occasions, however, I was awarded commands that he thought he should have had by virtue of his family’s money and influence. The sloop *Morwenna* in 1797, and the frigate *Juniper* eight years later.

“He settled upon me to blame for his self-perceived lack of success in his naval career, even though his family has influence and wealth enough to smooth over repeated misconduct and ensure his promotion to captain.”

Captain Bancroft broke off his narrative, his face sombre. “Miss Bennet, you are too intelligent not to wonder why I am here.” He stood and began to pace. At length, he stopped and spoke. “I am not a marrying sort of man. I now find, however, that I must marry.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was a longer walk to Oakham Mount than Elizabeth remembered, having last taken the path almost two years before. She still knew the way, however, even though the sun was still low in the eastern sky. She had walked out early to avoid meeting any of her neighbours along the way, though few ever made the effort to climb the steep, uneven path even on fine days. Oakham Mount had always been her place to think and work her way through any dilemma, and as she reached its summit, her thoughts became clearer.

“I am not a marrying sort of man.”

She knew of such men even though she probably should not. She was conversant in the ways of the ancient Greeks, of course, not to mention her perusal of some books her father thought were hidden away. She found that this did not frighten her. The captain had been completely open with her even though it was difficult and dangerous for him. She valued his trust.

His enemy had searched for evidence to use against him and had discovered some rumours from long ago. To protect his career, indeed to save his own life, Captain Bancroft needed evidence to rebut the allegation, if indeed the threats were carried out. Could she act as his evidence?

Apparently, Captain Bancroft had been quite impressed with her when they had spent much of Kitty's wedding breakfast conversing. Her delight in his sea stories had made him sense a spirit of adventure within her, and he had noted her quick intelligence. He needed a wife, though in name only, and she was his choice.

But to give up everything she knew in such an irreversible way, just to help a man she hardly knew who had been threatened by someone more powerful? An awful notion gripped her. She had responded with such sympathy to Mr Wickham's lies about Mr Darcy. Was she being fooled again?

After thinking on it, she decided that she was not. Mr Darcy had wounded her confidence, and Mr Wickham's easy charm had been a balm to those wounds. Captain Bancroft was a good man—a serious, courageous, and honourable man; blunt, honest, and far, far from charming.

Her father had shared with her the letter Mr Gardiner had sent. Her canny uncle approved of the captain, though he had a concern about the age difference. Her uncle's acquaintance was wide and varied, his connexions were myriad, and he knew how to get information. Mr Gardiner had investigated him and found nothing but respect and admiration among other naval men. There had not been the faintest whisper of anything scandalous. And she had already witnessed for herself how the captain had cared for the Newfield family after Lieutenant Newfield had been lost in battle.

What a lonely sort of life he has lived , Elizabeth mused. Suddenly, a fragment of a half-remembered conversation surfaced in her mind. "There were...those rumours, you know...years ago. Before I married Dorothy. I cannot take the risk that the old gossip might be dredged up again." She gasped and sat up straight. Quiet, kind, intelligent Uncle Philips, married to a loud, stupid, vulgar woman like her aunt. She had heard once that he had been a promising young barrister in London but had chosen the quiet life of a village solicitor. Perhaps not chosen but had been driven to it. Poor Uncle!

Her sisters had all married men they had not been acquainted with for long. They seemed to be successful unions. Jane was an equal partner with Alexander, who loved and respected her for her mind and talents, not just her beautiful face. Mary had

found happiness with Gerhard, who had opened up her ability to find joy in music and humour in life. Kitty not only loved Henry, who respected her intelligence, but she was finally receiving the maternal love and guidance that their own mother had never been able to give all her daughters in equal measure.

And now there was Captain Bancroft, this quiet man who had spent his life fighting battles in both external and internal ways. Could she accept him? Give up everything she knew, leave everyone she loved, and follow a relative stranger around the world? Could she go with this man and have no hope of putting distance between them if the union did not go well? She would be confined to a small wooden ship, a speck in the middle of the endless sea, with no way of escape.

It would be a classic case of Charlotte's assertion that it was best to know as little as possible of the defects of the person with whom you are to pass your life. Elizabeth shuddered, thinking of what her old friend might have since discovered about Mr Collins.

Elizabeth had not taken her turn in London. Should she now, rather than marrying the captain, go to live in the house on Gracechurch Street? How long would it be until she was introduced to eligible businessmen or lecturers or barristers? They would all be good men. Would it be enough for her to marry one of those men and have a pleasant house with pleasant children in a pleasant part of town? Was that her only alternative?

She had never experienced romantic love, though she had witnessed the damage caused by unrequited love and incompatible pairings. She had never felt a profound physical attraction to any particular man, though she had always admired masculine faces and forms. She had always imagined herself as an aunt more so than a mother. I cannot miss what I have never experienced.

If she married Captain Bancroft, what other experiences might be in store for her!

She had always wished to see more of the world, the places with exotic names she had seen on her father's globe and read about in his books. Was this her test, her chance to discover what she was capable of?

The thought was exhilarating and roused her to more anticipation and optimism than she had ever felt before. This must be why some people gamble. For it was indeed a gamble, betting her life, her future, everything she was, on a throw of the metaphorical dice.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She had come to a decision.

A few days later, Elizabeth and her father were in their accustomed places in his study. "My child, you seem to attract silent, taciturn men," Mr Bennet said as he set aside the settlement papers.

She blinked at him. "Whatever do you mean, Papa?"

"Captain Bancroft is quiet and reserved, to the point of seeming stern. In fact, if one was not acquainted with him, one would never know of his other outstanding qualities. His courage and leadership, his kindness and generosity. He even has an excellent sense of humour, but it is well hidden. I can think of one other such man who was attracted to you, whom we never did become truly acquainted with."

"And who would that be?" she asked, genuinely confused.

"Mr Darcy," her father said with a smirk.

"Mr Darcy!" She stared at him in disbelief and then laughed. "Papa, he only ever looked at me to catalogue my faults! I am certain he had a long list. Perhaps he ran out of paper, and that is why he hurried back to town so precipitously!"

They laughed together, then Mr Bennet spoke. “When a gentleman admires a lady, he watches her. He cannot help but look at her. He cannot turn away, even to the point of rudeness. We shall never know about Mr Darcy, and it does not matter, since we shall never see him again, but it is my opinion that he admired you but thought himself too far above us to act upon it.”

He took up the settlement contract again and signed it. “I shall miss laughing with you as we do today, but I believe you have made a good decision. You will live a difficult life, but one with many rewards.”

Suddenly, a thought seemed to strike him. He pulled open a drawer, rummaged around in it for a short time, and pulled out a long wooden box. He handed it to Elizabeth. She looked at him and then opened it. It was a brass telescope, one that could be adjusted by turning. She removed it from the box and turned it over in her hands, studying it. Then she looked at him questioningly.

Mr Bennet enlightened her. “It belonged to my father. Although he never went to sea, he studied the stars. I would like you to watch the stars for me. Write to me and tell me where you are when you can no longer see the North Star and when you begin to observe the southern constellations that we cannot see from here. Keep a journal of what you see.” He rose and pulled some leather-bound books from a stack on a bookcase. “Here are some notebooks to use on your journey. I know you will write to me, and I shall make the attempt to be a faithful correspondent as well.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

September 1813, London

A unique sort of wardrobe was required for a sea captain's wife, but with the advice of the elder Mrs Newfield, Mrs Gardiner was up to the task. Within two weeks in town, Elizabeth had a small yet serviceable wardrobe of sturdy travelling gowns that could be adjusted to suit a variety of climates, new petticoats and undergarments, pelisses and shawls, half-boots and shoes. She brought one evening gown for any captain's dinners or other formal occasions. Any belongings she wished to take with her would need to fit into a remarkably small space. She had never owned much in the way of jewellery or other impractical possessions. Her small garnet cross was all. A set of personal items for her toilette, a complete sewing kit, her writing desk and journals, and the little telescope were all she had. She carefully considered which books to take and was gladdened to discover that the captain had similar tastes in literature and already owned many of her favourite titles.

A quiet anticipation began to grow within her. She spent part of the day before her wedding with two naval officers' wives, Hannah Langley and Molly Dunbar. They had spared her no details of what her life aboard ship would entail. If she truly meant to be a support to her husband, there would be hard work with little leisure time. The rewards in return were great.

Elizabeth instantly admired these women. They were strong, practical, unflappable, and with a dark sense of humour. She was happy for her sisters; they had found lives and husbands that suited them perfectly. She hoped that with her unconventional marriage and role as a naval wife, she had found a life that suited her too. She and

Samuel had friendship and trust between them, and that was the basis of any good marriage, was it not?

They spoke their vows at St Benet's church the day before they set sail. Elizabeth's trunk was moved to the captain's quarters, her new home on his new command, the frigate *Melisande*. Her husband had given her his bunk, and he would sleep in a hammock slung from hooks nearby. Although their marriage was only one of convenience, and Samuel had no interest in her person, they would live in very close quarters.

They said their farewells at the docks. All her family had turned out, even Jane in her delicate condition. Elizabeth embraced each one fiercely, whispering special words in their ears. Every eye was wet, even Bancroft's. At length, she stood before her father.

Mr Bennet wiped his eyes and hugged his Lizzy tightly. His voice uneven, he said in her ear, "You must come back to me, my girl, and point to all the places you have been on the globe and tell me of your adventures. Be safe, my child."

He released her and shook the captain's hand. "She is precious to us all, sir. I know you will keep her safe for us. We shall welcome you on your return, my son."

Bancroft held his new father-in-law's hand in both of his. "It is my solemn vow. I will bring her back to you."

Sending each of his daughters out into the world had been hard, but letting Lizzy go had been the most painful. Mr Bennet was inclined to go home to Longbourn to sit in the privacy of his study and lick his wounds in solitude like some injured beast, but his London family would not have it.

After being prevailed upon to extend his visit twice, Mr Bennet was in better spirits. He reacquainted himself with museums and booksellers. He attended performances

and lectures. He took unexpected delight in the company of his loving family and sights and places they showed him. He witnessed the intelligence and decency of the men his daughters had married, and it soothed his conscience. He attended court sessions with Kitty, who proudly watched her husband argue his cases. He listened to Herr Heidemann work on his compositions and was fascinated by the plans and models of Mr Magnussen's projects. Most of all, he held his first grandchild in his arms after Jane unexpectedly went into labour weeks early. The tiny girl was small but strong and had Mr Bennet's own mother's eyes. Now, another babe was expected in the winter, this time Mary's.

The only person absent was his Lizzy, but even she made appearances in the form of letters, which he reread on the journey home to Longbourn. The letters had been posted from the Royal Observatory, from Dover, and finally Portsmouth before she and Bancroft set off into the great sea, with the promise of much more correspondence to follow from wherever they went. She described her experiences so far, their tiny quarters on the *Melisande*, how the ship's bells ordered their days, and how other officers' wives befriended and advised her.

The news of Elizabeth's departure and his solitary presence at Longbourn soon leaked out, and less than three weeks after his return from town, the first neighbourly visitors in almost two years presented their cards at Longbourn House.

It was a Tuesday, formerly Mrs Bennet's 'at home' day, when Hill tapped Mr Bennet's library door and announced visitors. "Mrs Crombe and Miss Crombe are here, sir. Are you at home?"

He raised his eyes from his book and squinted at her. "Who? Do I know them? Ah, Goulding's sister, is it? Why are they here?"

"They are here for a visit, sir," Hill answered gently. "Do you wish to receive them?"

Mr Bennet opened his mouth to give a resounding 'No' to such foolishness but changed his mind. It had been too quiet lately. "Oh, I might as well. Perhaps there will be some sport in it . "

There was none. The elder of the two ladies expressed her sincere condolences upon the death of Mrs Bennet, whom she had known all her life, and emphasised how deeply affected she was. There was nothing said of Lydia. She remarked slyly upon how a manor such as Longbourn must suffer for want of a mistress. The younger lady said nothing at all. Mrs Crombe made a few attempts to share village on dits with him, and he shrugged. "I am unacquainted with those people," he finally said. After they had taken some tea and biscuits, staying much longer than the acceptable quarter of an hour, they finally left. He stomped off to his study, muttering, "Lord, Fanny was at least entertaining when she gossiped."

By the next Tuesday, blood was in the water, and the hunters had caught the scent. Mr Bennet was again uprooted from his sanctuary. Mrs Long called with her nieces. Within a quarter of an hour, they were joined by the Miss Robinsons and Mrs and Miss Crombe. Lady Lucas arrived for a visit, only to find Longbourn's parlour well-populated with local ladies and their single female relations. With a stubborn set to her jaw, she settled in to share her grief on the death of her particular friend Mrs Bennet, but mostly to ensure nothing happened to prevent her eldest daughter from taking her future place as mistress of Longbourn. A half an hour of suspicious sidelong glances among the ladies and stilted conversation ensued, which was mildly amusing for a short time. To put an end to it, their host made up some business that required his attention.

Mr Bennet was disgusted. "Condolence calls, my foot! Why do they come here now? My wife is dead because of them. My daughters were compelled to leave their home because of them. Why do they interrupt my peace?" he grumbled as Hill brought him his luncheon on a tray.

Mrs Hill looked at him, clearly incredulous. “It is a truth universally acknowledged, sir, that a single man in possession of his own estate and needing an heir, must be in want of a wife,” she said calmly, her hands clasped neatly at her waist. “Do you require anything else at present?”

Mr Bennet stared at her, unable to move. “No,” he finally said. “Thank you, Hill.” He rose slowly to his feet and stared out of the window as the housekeeper’s remark sank in. After all these many years, he was again a single man. It simply had not occurred to him before. A single man. A man who might marry. A man who might marry and sire a son. What a thought! Did he wish to marry? What would his daughters think? Even if he did marry again, did these women seriously believe he would choose a wife from amongst the community who had caused his family so much pain?

He was still in mourning, still bereaved. He had not realised how terribly he would miss his daughters, all his daughters, even Lydia. Fanny too; even her nerves. As badly suited as they had been, he had grown accustomed to her and missed her noisy bustle, her genuine joy over gowns and parties and lavish dinners. She had always remained for the most part a silly girl, both taking delight in and fussing over frivolous, simple things.

It was time to put an end to the farce. Mr Bennet duly informed Hill that he would be at home the next Tuesday, and to batten down the hatches.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A week later, at precisely two o'clock, Longbourn's door opened. Within five minutes, the parlour was quite crowded with local ladies. Mrs Crombe seated herself next to the largest low table, certain she would be asked to pour out. But when the housekeeper entered the room with the tea tray, Mr Bennet directed her towards another visitor and said, "Lady Lucas, if you would be so good as to pour." Then he asked after the health of Mrs Collins, leading Mrs Crombe to assume he was paying his respects to the future mistress of the house. Lady Lucas straightened in surprise and preened a little. Mrs Crombe bristled.

Mr Bennet spoke to the general company but directed his commentary mostly to Lady Lucas. He spoke of the silver tea service that had belonged to his great-great-grandmother, which her daughter might someday use. He pointed out the portraits of his father and grandfather on the walls. Mrs Crombe strongly resented the turn of the conversation. She, who would have been mistress of the house had not Fanny Gardiner interfered, should by rights claim that position. She should be the one who described the family portraits—indeed, her own portrait should be gracing the wall! Finally, she could contain herself no longer.

"What an ancient and distinguished history Longbourn has," Mrs Crombe said, loudly enough to quell other voices and ensure all eyes were upon her. "I declare your late mother would turn in her grave to see the state it is in at present. The late Mrs Bennet was clearly not up to the task, not having been raised as a lady. You did the honourable thing after her deceitful entrapment, but at what cost to your family's legacy?"

There were quiet gasps from the other ladies, who then turned their complete attention to their host. Mr Bennet calmly took another sip of tea, but anger flashed briefly in his eyes. “Do you know, Mrs...” He tapped his chin. “Ah yes, Crombe. Pray, pardon me. There was indeed an entrapment, madam, but there was more to it, as you are well aware. Your mother, the late Mrs Goulding, schemed to force a marriage for her only daughter, with me as your prey. At a dinner party at Haye-Park, I was called to the library, ostensibly to see a book, but no one was there except my dear Fanny. I later discovered you were to appear shortly after, with your gown artfully torn in strategic places. Mrs Goulding was to discover us together in an incriminating position. But she had reckoned without the late Mrs Gardiner, who had already placed her daughter in the library to entrap Colonel Millar.”

Mrs Crombe knew perfectly well that he had not forgotten her name but had done it to make her a laughingstock, and her temper was further enflamed. Before she could respond, Mr Bennet continued. “I had no idea of the planned scheme until your own brother shared it with me shortly after my wedding. He had witnessed your mother tear your gown herself. He thought it a great joke.” He chuckled. “My poor Fanny was quite disappointed when she was forced to marry me instead of a handsome officer. We were ill-suited, of course, but I suppose we rubbed along together well enough. My wife created a beautiful home for us. We brought lovely daughters into the world.”

“Do you include Miss Lydia, sir?” challenged Mrs Crombe. All eyes turned to her, then back to Mr Bennet to hear his answer.

“Even poor, foolish Lydia. A father’s love does not stop, even when a child has made grievous mistakes. You see, our family’s grief has drawn us together. My daughters and I have chosen to forgive the faults and mistakes of others, to recognise our own, and to think only of the past as its remembrance brings us pleasure.” His guests sighed in approval.

“Your ‘lovely daughters’, as you put it, have been forced to marry anyone who could be paid enough to take them!” In her anger she did not notice that her audience glared at her in disapproval.

Mr Bennet replied mildly. “You are mistaken, Mrs Crombe. My daughters have all made advantageous marriages of their own free choice. Jane is married to a gentleman architect who has recently earned the imprimatur of the Crown Estate. Mary has made a happy match with a distinguished lecturer at Cambridge. Kitty has married a gifted young barrister, and my Lizzy recently married a naval captain who was one of the heroes of Trafalgar. They sail on a mission to the East Indies as we speak.”

Mrs Crombe watched as Mr Bennet carelessly rubbed his nails on his lapel. “They are better marriages than they could have found locally, at any rate.”

His audience gasped, and all heads turned to Mrs Crombe for the return shot, but Mr Bennet had not finished.

“I had wondered at the thoroughness of the shunning my family endured. It almost had the feeling of some sort of revenge being taken. Then, when the last of my daughters departed with her husband, I marvelled at the sudden reappearance of so many of my wife’s old friends after being so conspicuously absent for almost two years.”

Her face heating, Mrs Crombe took in the arched brow and the mocking glint in Mr Bennet’s eye as he continued.

“I thought it very strange and could not understand it. Indeed, my servants had to explain it to me: that as a single man, I have more value to the local ladies than as a husband or father. No doubt they wondered at my naivety. In truth, the idea that I might remarry would never have entered my head but for this sudden interest in my

society. I was never this popular even in my younger days. I wish you and your families all well, but I can promise you, were I to marry again, it would not be to anyone from Meryton or its environs. I forgive, but I do not forget.”

Mrs Crombe, her design to assume the role of mistress of Longbourn in shreds, rose. “We do not have to sit here and listen to your petty resentment,” she said angrily.

“I do not hold resentment. It is you, madam, who is the picture of what happens if you do not let go of old resentments, and it is a lesson for us all.”

Mr Bennet watched as Mrs Crombe rose and took her leave, shouting for her humiliated daughter to follow. After they had gone, the drawing room was silent. Finally, Lady Lucas rose, tears in her eyes. She apologised for not being there for his family. Sir William had not wanted to interrupt their friendship, but she had been too afraid. One by one, the ladies all left with whispered apologies and farewells.

Quietly, Mr Bennet began to keep company with friends again. The local ladies, although they had driven him to stage quite a performance to rid himself of their company, had broken the ice. Sir William came to call first, to invite him to dinner at Lucas Lodge. Mr Robinson followed suit, as did others. Even a sheepish William Goulding visited, apologising for his sister, who in her fury was making his life so unbearable that he was taking her shopping in London and then for a seaside holiday. He had taken pity on his niece as well and sent her to stay with her father’s people for a prolonged visit.

Mr Bennet rode through Meryton for the first time in nearly two years and was shocked at the change. Longbourn’s custom was not the only missing source of revenue for the merchants. Netherfield was still empty, as was Purvis Lodge; the Harringtons were still gone, and his brother Philips’s establishment was vacant. The militia had decamped completely and gone to Bedfordshire. Would that they had left two years before.

He was pleased beyond measure for his daughters. The Gardiners' initiative and generosity had transformed his great failure as a parent into success and happiness for the girls.

But now he was truly alone at Longbourn. He welcomed his privacy but missed his family. How strange to feel both sorrow and peace. How strange to miss the behaviours that had aggravated him for years, like a persistent painful condition suddenly healing, only to find he missed the familiar ache.

Mr Bennet began to take his meals in his study. Sitting alone at the long, polished table in the dining room was both ridiculous and unnerving. Ruthie brought in a tray and settled it in amongst his disorganised papers. After he had picked at it for a while, he rang for it to be taken away. Hill came in and noticed how little he had eaten.

“Was dinner not to your satisfaction, sir?” she asked.

“It was very good, but I have no appetite tonight,” he answered. “Please tell Jenks that her efforts are appreciated.”

Mrs Hill, tray in hand, dipped a quick curtsy and turned to go.

“Hill,” he blurted, then stopped.

“Yes, sir?” She met his eye quizzically.

He frowned and looked down at his hands. “I... ’Tis nothing. You may go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Etheline Crombe, having extracted the promise of a carte blanche shopping trip in London from her exhausted brother, now stood at the entrance of one of the more exclusive dressmakers. All thoughts of an expensive gown disappeared when she recognised one of the customers there. She knew an opportunity when she saw one. So, Thomas Bennet thought he had had the last laugh at her expense, did he? This tradesman's daughter, for that was all she was despite her twenty thousand pounds, was just what Mrs Crombe needed to get her revenge on Thomas Bennet, on Fanny Gardiner, and on those happily married daughters of theirs.

Now that was a difficulty. Unfortunately, the remaining Bennet sisters had landed on their feet and were all well married. Their father did not care whether he was outcast or not. Mrs Crombe's efforts to ensure their eternal disgrace had failed. But Miss Bingley did not know that, and she would never return to Netherfield to confirm whether any gossip was false or exaggerated. She would just unleash it on the world.

Caroline Bingley was seated at a table in Madame Laurent's waiting room, impatiently flipping through fabric samples and railing at her companion. "Make haste, Miss Mills! I do not have all day!"

She did in fact have all day, as her beleaguered companion knew, since her social calendar was not what it once had been. But this was by far the best paying position the unfortunate Miss Mills had ever had, so Caroline knew the woman would put up with it a while longer. "Here are the fashion plates, Miss Bingley."

Caroline was far from friendless, but both the quantity and quality of the invitations

she received had decreased noticeably due to her brother's marriage and removal to Lincolnshire and the Hursts' long absences from town.

As she perused the latest pictures, Caroline felt a sensation of being watched. She raised her head to see an older lady staring at her with an odd expression on her face. She stared back and with some horror realised that she was looking into the face of one of the ladies, if one applied that term loosely, of Meryton.

"Miss Bingley, how delightful to see you," the lady said with a curtsy.

Caroline had no choice but to rise and perform the barest of curtsies. "Good day to you, madam. Is your family in good health?" she said, having no recollection of the woman's name.

"My family is well, I thank you," the elder lady answered. "And your sister and brother? I saw the announcement of Mr Bingley's wedding last year. My congratulations to him and his bride. Do they have a house in town?"

Caroline disregarded the question. Her brother had never purchased a townhouse or a grand estate of his own, and in truth was never seen in society. Her disappointment in Charles's choice of a wife still rankled.

Before she could answer, the lady—Crumley? It was Crumley, Caroline now was certain—continued. "I must say the sparkle went out of our little country society when you left, Miss Bingley. Your company is sorely missed. Meryton and its environs have become quite dull. Unless of course you count— Oh, I must not tell it. It is too abhorrent. The poor Ben— No, I must not say." She feigned agitation. "A former leading family brought down by scandal. But I must not continue. It is unspeakable." She shook her head sadly and sighed deeply, dabbing at her dry eyes with a handkerchief.

Caroline's senses tingled. Her eyes snapped to attention, though her posture remained languid. Something terrible and scandalous had happened to the Bennets! That family—how she despised them!

“I am terribly saddened to hear that. Simply heartbroken!” she cried. “I daresay you are speaking of the Bennets. No, no, my dear, you did not tell me—I guessed. We were such intimate friends! What could have happened? What a terrible misfortune it must have been!”

Caroline listened gleefully to the colourful narrative that followed, though in truth, the information of the Bennets' downfall was useless to her. The Bingleys had left Netherfield and its surrounding neighbourhood in their dust long ago. Her brother was married and safe from Miss Bennet. Even if Mr Darcy had been momentarily distracted by Miss Elizabeth, he would certainly never act on it; besides, he was tucked away in Derbyshire most of the time. Still, she found a peculiar satisfaction in it. Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth had been reaching too high, trying to enter her own sphere. She felt the faintest of twinges for the elder sister but thrilled at the account of Eliza's life of toil and degradation. No, this information was something to be treasured for its own sake, to take a small delight in, even though it was no longer useful to her.

As the conversation waned, both ladies curtsied once more and, noses in the air, turned to go. Unknown to the other, they were like a pair of bookends, each feeling that they had cleverly used the other to accomplish their goal. Both were triumphant, wearing identical smirks, thinking the same words: Horrid, vulgar woman, but she does have her uses .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

January 1814, South Atlantic

Elizabeth lifted her face to the stiff breeze. It teased and tangled a short wisp of hair that had escaped her simple linen cap; another radical change in her life but a good one. She had not realised how heavy her hair was until Molly Dunbar, a new friend and wife of the captain of the Narwhal, had cut short the long, tangled mass of curls before they had left the docks in London. Her head had felt so light she feared it might float away. She had no regrets. It was much easier to comb and keep clean. The few inches of hair remaining had coiled into loose corkscrews without the heavy weight of the rest pulling it down.

It was the first bell of the forenoon watch, and her three students, young midshipmen, scurried off to their duties after their lesson. Although the day was young, she could tell the sun would be strong and she should don the battered wide-brimmed straw hat that she now wore in place of a bonnet. Bonnets were another thing she had abandoned, though she had retained one in case of a formal situation. She had never liked them in any case, often feeling as if she was wearing side blinders like a dray horse. The hat protected her eyes and her complexion from the white-hot glare of the tropical sun.

She gazed out over the water. The sea and the sky never ceased to amaze. One would think the sight of the sea to be unvarying, but Elizabeth had found the opposite to be true. The colours of the water and of the light shifted and changed from one minute to the next. In her few months on board, she had seen waves that shimmered like gold, or moved in deep rolls of olive green, or lapped gently in bright turquoise. Now, the

Melisande was sailing through tropical waters, west of Africa. Their first stop had been at Gibraltar, then briefly at Cabo Verde. After a swing to the west to catch the trade winds, their next, God willing, would be Simon's Town, at the Cape.

Her early worries about being an idle accessory to her husband had vanished. Elizabeth had wondered about finding her purpose on board, but in truth, there were not enough hours in the day. The Melisande had been without a schoolmaster for the younger midshipmen, and she had taken on the responsibility. The key had been to follow her husband's example by keeping the success and wellbeing of their mission foremost in her mind. She had laboured over learning the name of every crew member but now felt she had almost conquered it.

It had taken a few days to get used to the constant movement of the deck beneath her feet; a few weeks to get used to the ship's bells sounding at all hours. It had also taken time to get used to the sight and sound of so many men. Longbourn had been so overwhelmingly feminine. Shirtless men, barefoot men, men of all shapes and sizes and colours and places of origin. Some had chosen to join the Navy; many others had been pressed into service.

At first, the sight of half-dressed seamen had shocked her. She had not known where to direct her eyes. She had rarely ever seen her father even in shirtsleeves, and only once, the night of Lydia's death, in his nightwear. Now, she had grown used to it. How sheltered she had been!

She had been surprised to discover she was not the only woman aboard. The quartermaster's mate, Youssef, was also accompanied by his wife, a Portuguese woman named Agueda. She was a strong, practical older woman who introduced Elizabeth to some of her more harrowing duties. She would be expected to help care for sick crewmen. In battle, she would work with the wounded in the surgeon's area of the orlop deck, far below the water line. Elizabeth liked Agueda and found herself wanting to please her. She promised herself she would be strong and not shirk the

most difficult of her duties.

There was also a passenger, a Miss Alice Channing, the daughter of a diplomat in Singapore, who had completed her education and was rejoining her family there, accompanied by her aunt, a maidservant, and two officers.

They had received letters at Cabo Verde and had news of Jane's baby daughter, Mary's pregnancy, and the progress of the house in Somersetshire overlooking the Bristol Channel. Kitty and Aunt Gardiner had sent several long missives, and there were letters for Samuel from not only Henry and Mrs Newfield but also Uncle Gardiner and Alexander. There had even been letters for both of them from Papa.

Along with the mail packet came a letter to Samuel from a colleague at the Admiralty. Standing by the desk in the captain's quarters, he opened it and gasped in shock.

"What is it?" cried Elizabeth. She had never seen him so perturbed.

He handed her the letter. It contained the news that his nemesis, Roger Maltravers, youngest son of Lord Akers, had been removed from service and quietly court-martialled. The elder Lord Akers had died and been succeeded by his eldest son, who had no interest in shielding his youngest brother from the consequences of his own actions. After a particularly egregious series of behaviours, including an inability to control his temper, acts of brutality towards his crew, and even once issuing commands that would have run his ship aground, it had at last become impossible for the Admiralty to overlook the issue.

To Elizabeth's surprise, Samuel was more apologetic than relieved. "Had I known that this action would take place, I would never have taken you away from your home and family. You have sacrificed much to help me, and now to discover that it may have not been necessary!"

“I would not trade this time for anything!” she exclaimed, gently laying her hand on his arm. “This life on board has taken some time to get used to, but it has given me a sense of purpose that I have never had before, even in my former occupations of tending to tenants and my household tasks. You have given me your trust and friendship, Samuel, which I value beyond measure. You are my mentor and have given me the gifts of experience and adventure. I have no cause to repine.”

“You are certain?”

When she nodded, Samuel responded with one of his rare smiles. “I, too, am glad of our friendship, Elizabeth. I have come to depend on you. You have gained the respect and admiration of the crew. Indeed, you have improved the happiness and welfare of all the men and raised the tone of the entire mission. You are my partner in command, and you will always have my deep and abiding respect.” He indicated his stack of letters. “And I have gained a family of quite prolific correspondents.”

Elizabeth was recalled from her thoughts when Miss Channing appeared, her arms filled with paper and pencils. “Are you ready for our lesson, Lizzy?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In January, the festive season concluded, Darcy left Pemberley and travelled to London on business, planning to return north for the rest of the winter. He had been in town for several days, meeting with solicitors and business agents. As was his custom since the previous year, he had ordered the knocker left off the door, which enabled him to have more control over his time. Determined to avoid any persons connected with matchmaking parents or ambitious ladies, he dined with his uncle, aunt, and cousins, made quiet visits to his club and to Angelo's, and sat unnoticed in the shadowy rear of his box at the theatre for a few performances.

He informed Lady Matlock that if she made any attempts to introduce him to young ladies, he would immediately decamp to Pemberley. While he did not wish to share his personal thoughts with anyone, he had decided to wait until after his sister married to seek a bride. Although Lady Matlock was not well-pleased, Georgiana, after much discussion with her companion and her guardians, decided that she would make her debut in Derbyshire, surrounded by neighbours and family friends, when she turned eighteen and no earlier. She had spent the last two years growing in confidence and poise but felt that before she took the plunge, she should have definite ideas of what she required in any prospective husband. She most definitely did not want to be paraded around London "like a prize heifer angling for the highest bid" .

His current visit had been pleasant, and Darcy was pleased to be reminded that there were things he enjoyed about the great city. In another week or so, after concluding his business and making quiet visits to his favourite shops, he would happily return to Pemberley to settle in for the winter.

He had not anticipated Lady Catherine. A quiet tap on the door of his private sitting room warned him. “Enter,” he called.

His butler stepped in and murmured, “Lady Catherine de Bourgh is here to see you, sir. She seems to know that you are indeed in residence. I could not put her off.”

Lady Catherine appeared behind him, her stentorian voice making the butler jump. “There will be no ‘putting me off’ as you say, Bridges. Now leave us. I have business with my nephew that is of a private nature.”

At a nod from his master, Bridges left the room and quietly pulled the door closed behind him.

Darcy had seen little of his aunt in recent years, and nothing of his cousin Anne. Any contact they had had was through correspondence. Lady Catherine’s letters had over the last year become more heated and strident, more insistent that he do his duty and marry Anne.

He rose slowly, suppressing his annoyance at his aunt’s rudeness, more extreme than he had ever witnessed before. “Lady Catherine?—”

“You can be at no loss to understand the reason for my journey hither,” she interrupted.

“I am at a loss to understand why you have invaded my privacy. The knocker is off my door, and I am accepting no visitors. I cannot account for the honour of seeing you here.”

“I am here to see that you fulfil your mother’s wishes and do your duty. You have been disregarding me, avoiding me with nonsensical excuses like so-called emergencies on your estate and attending the nuptials of tradesmen. I am forced to

come to you to remedy this negligence myself. How dare you shirk your responsibilities! You pay no heed to what you owe your family. This has gone on far too long. Any further delays will not be endured. You are thirty years old. Anne is nine-and-twenty. You must fulfil your destiny and your obligation to my daughter.”

“Aunt, as I have stated on several occasions, my father said this business of any so-called engagement between me and Anne is a fantas?—”

“Hear me in silence!” Lady Catherine shouted, thumping her walking stick on the floor.

Darcy hardened his jaw. “I will not be intimidated by any tantrums of yours. If you are sensible of your own good, you will cease your attempts to interfere in my affairs.”

“If I am sensible?” Lady Catherine repeated, her face purpling. “Very well. I shall know how to act, though I hoped I would not need to,” she snarled. She opened her reticule, pulling from it a sheaf of papers, which she brandished like a weapon.

Darcy at once felt a sense of foreboding. What could they possibly be? Did Lady Catherine have some letter from his mother demanding that he marry Anne?

When his aunt’s hand stilled, he glimpsed the handwriting on the papers. He knew that hand. Georgiana! He felt his body grow cold, remembering the letters; the missing love letters that she had written to Wickham. It had been months since he had thought of them. Wickham had known of his aunt’s delusional attempts to force his marriage to Anne; he had mocked Darcy about it mercilessly when they were young. He knew that Lady Catherine would pay well for them. Everything fell together in his mind. Wickham had encouraged young, naïve Georgiana to write love letters—his insurance for when he needed money. Almost two years after Wickham’s death, the villain’s plans had come to fruition.

Lady Catherine stared at him, a gleam of malicious triumph in her eyes. Her chin rose, and she stalked slowly towards him. “You know what I have in my possession, do you not? I can read you, Darcy. You cannot fool me.”

She started walking around him, staring at him with hard eyes, like a cat toying with a mouse. He would not meet her gaze and affected a calm that he did not possess. “You will marry Anne, or I will show these letters to the newspapers. Georgiana will be ruined.”

“You would not dare injure your niece in such a way!”

“I have by no means finished,” she roared. “I will unmask you as an unfit guardian and take you to court to gain guardianship over her. Your father should have given her over to me when she was a child. You failed her, Darcy.”

Darcy grasped at a straw. “You cannot prove that Georgiana wrote the letters.”

Lady Catherine barked a laugh and brandished the letters before him. “Fool! I have letters Georgiana wrote to Anne. The hand is identical. No, Darcy, you cannot win! I will not hesitate to ruin you both unless you marry Anne!”

Darcy seized the letters from Lady Catherine’s hand while she looked down her nose at him. He quickly ran his eyes over them and counted eight letters but did not have time to toss them in the fire before they were snatched from his grip.

“Do not think of burning them, Darcy. There are more in my safe. I have the contracts prepared. You will sign them as they are written. There will be no negotiation. And ,” she continued, holding the letters high, her eyes dark with vindictiveness, “Anne will have the ruby ring.”

His mother’s ring, given to her by his father on the day of their marriage. His parents

had left it to Georgiana. His mind raced. Not since his mother's death had he felt so utterly powerless. He had been a child then; now he was a man but just as helpless. In order to have her way, Lady Catherine was ready and willing to destroy his sister, as well as the Darcy reputation he had worked so diligently to uphold. She would take Georgiana away from him and force her to come out in London and live a life she abhorred. She would steal a beloved family heirloom that she had always coveted.

"You would ruin your sister's child?"

Lady Catherine shrugged. "She ruined herself. Only you can save her."

There was no choice but to surrender.

The following morning, Bridges appeared at the study door. Darcy looked up, exhausted from a sleepless night.

"Miss Bingley is here, sir. Are you in?"

Alone? She had come to see him alone, and before visiting hours? After the previous day's interview with Lady Catherine, this was too much provocation. "I am not..." Darcy began, but it was too late. Astonishingly, Caroline Bingley appeared behind the butler and stepped around him.

"He will see me, Bridges."

This was beyond the bounds of anything he had ever seen, but there was more to come. Red-faced and wrathful, she walked to the desk and threw down a newspaper. "You told Charles that you would never marry Anne de Bourgh! How could you? She can never give you an heir!"

At that moment, two things became apparent. One was that Lady Catherine had been

so certain of her victory over him that she had sent notices to the newspapers before they had even met. The other was that Charles Bingley was never to be trusted with personal information again. Darcy was already bitter at Georgiana's foolishness and Wickham's deceit, fuming at his aunt's double dealing and extortion, and furious at his own powerlessness. Now he was fully enraged.

He rose to his full height and spoke quietly and coldly, the very air seeming to turn to frost around his words. "Did your brother also tell you how many times I informed him that I would never consider offering for you?"

"You have singled me out with conspicuous attention on many occasions! I have turned down other proposals in expectation of your offer!" she cried.

"That is ridiculous, madam. I have taken extreme care not to single you out."

"I am everything you could ever want in a wife!" Miss Bingley wailed. "I have beauty, accomplishments, a superior education, exquisite taste, breeding?—"

Darcy lost all control of his temper and cut in savagely, "Ah, yes, your great-grandfather the blacksmith. How could I forget?" He called his butler. "Bridges, have Miss Bingley seen to her carriage. And inform the servants that she is never to be admitted to Darcy House, or to any of my properties, in future."

It was Miss Bingley's turn to be enraged. She advanced upon him. "Let me assure you that I have no intention of calling on either you or your tiresome mute of a sister ever again."

Bridges stepped forwards to escort her from the premises. Miss Bingley went to turn but stopped suddenly, seeming to recall something. Her eyes glittered with malice. "Perhaps, sir, you might invite the Bennet sisters if you wish for female company." She clasped her hands to her chest in feigned dismay. "Oh, but how could I have

forgotten? You cannot because they are gone ,” she hissed. “I have recently had some interesting news from Hertfordshire! The youngest sister ran off with your friend Wickham and was killed almost two years ago. The entire family was ruined. Disgraced! Shunned by every person of their acquaintance! Their uncle in Cheapside, the tradesman, had to marry them off. Hasty, patched-up marriages to labourers!” Her voice rose in pitch and volume. “The eldest, so renowned for her beauty, married a carpenter. The plain one married a music master. I wish him luck in teaching her to sing! The vapid one married a clerk, and...”

Here, she paused, blotchy-faced, breathing hard, and her tone turned derisive. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet of the fine eyes. She was forced to marry a sailor! Perhaps she now abides in a boarding house by the docks. How coarse and vulgar she must have become! How lined her complexion, how chapped her hands! How graceful she must be as she hangs the sheets out to dry. Or perhaps she takes in the dirty laundry of others for a few extra farthings.”

It took every fibre of Darcy’s self-control not to strike her. “Get. Her. Out.” He bit the words off to the waiting footmen.

Miss Bingley was hustled away. Darcy closed the door behind them and paced rapidly back and forth from one end of the room to the other, clenching and unclenching his fists, breathing deeply in an attempt to gain control of himself. He stopped at the window but saw nothing, so staggered was he. Could it be? Was Miss Bingley speaking the truth? When had it happened? How had he not known? You did not know because you abandoned her.

He collapsed into a chair. His anger had gone, replaced by a wave of nausea and sudden exhaustion. He was empty, bereft, hollowed out. He put his head in his hands. Had he, in his prideful zeal to protect his family name, laid the groundwork to destroy Elizabeth’s family? He could have warned the Bennets and the other families in Meryton about Wickham, but he had not. He had instead fled the neighbourhood,

taking Bingley with him, who might have offered some protection to the Bennet family if he had married Jane Bennet. But he had not. Darcy had ruined that as well, and now marriage to Anne—cross, peevish, lumpish Anne—would be his eternal penance.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

February 1814, Rosings

Lady Catherine had obtained a common licence, so no banns were called. Using every ounce of her consequence, she invited the highest of the ton, many of them people she did not know well or at all. The guests for the wedding of her daughter must only be the most noteworthy, most prestigiously ranked. Even her long-standing neighbour Lady Metcalf had barely made the list. The ton had responded with rabid curiosity, cancelling previous invitations and dropping former plans.

In spite of his aunt's strident expostulations, Darcy did not arrive at Rosings until the afternoon before the wedding. He had refused to participate in any of the pre-nuptial festivities Lady Catherine had planned and chose to wait until Georgiana and Fitzwilliam could join him for the journey to Kent. He was resigned to the marriage but would not be flaunted triumphantly before all her acquaintance.

Georgiana rode with him in the carriage, barely conversant. Since learning how her letters had been used against her brother, she had become as painfully withdrawn as she had been after Ramsgate. The loss of her mother's own ring had worsened the blow.

The grounds and manor house of Rosings Park were humming with activity. With lavish spending and shameless bullying, Lady Catherine had pulled together an extravagant work of theatre. Workmen and porters were bustling about everywhere. Carts of potted palms, buckets of cut flowers, crates of wax candles, bolt upon bolt of silk draperies were being moved inside. Succession houses for miles around must

have been emptied of their blooms. Topiary evergreens were being tortured into elaborate submission; the dormant lawns were being rolled into flat surrender.

Upon their arrival, Darcy was escorted to Lady Catherine's receiving room. She sat on her elevated chair, the disgruntled earl and countess at her side.

"Do you have it?" she barked at Darcy the moment he entered the room.

He disregarded her to bow to his aunt and uncle. Lord Matlock rose and took his hand. "This is a bad business, Darcy, and I am sorry for it." The older man turned to his sister and held out his hand. "Give me the letters, Catherine."

"I will see the ring first."

"The ring? What ring?" said Lady Matlock.

"The ruby ring given to my sister by George Darcy at their wedding."

Lady Matlock gasped and turned to Lady Catherine. "George and Anne quite specifically left that ring to Georgiana!"

Lady Catherine thumped her cane on the floor. "That ring is for Mrs Darcy, and my Anne will be Mrs Darcy, mistress of Pemberley. Give it to me."

"I will take it, and the letters," insisted the earl, positioning himself between Darcy and Lady Catherine. Darcy placed his mother's ring in his uncle's outstretched palm. The earl put it in his inner coat pocket. "The letters, Catherine." He held out his hand for them.

Lady Catherine grumbled and withdrew a folder from her desk, handing them to the earl.

“Count them, Uncle,” said Darcy.

“You dare to question my honour—” Lady Catherine began.

Darcy interrupted. “Honour? You dare to claim honour when you bargained with a criminal? When you threaten to destroy your only sister’s daughter? There were eight letters in the file and two more in the safe. Ten in all, as affirmed by Georgiana. We shall count them.”

“Apparently, we are not to see the bride until the ceremony,” said Fitzwilliam as he poured brandy into two cut glass tumblers later that evening. He and Darcy settled into the heavy old-fashioned furnishings in Rosings’s neglected library. They were in their shirtsleeves, having played billiards and then a desultory game of piquet.

“I have not laid eyes on Anne for almost three years,” Darcy remarked wearily. “The last time I was here, Easter of the year eleven, she was barely conversant and did not even look at me. I do not even remember the last time I received a letter from her.”

“I was here last Easter when you were suffering the floods at Pemberley. She made only two appearances that I remember. Lady Catherine said she was indisposed.”

“And what else is new?” snorted Darcy.

“Whatever has happened to Anne, I wonder? She was always infirm and out of humour, but she was never so utterly inert before. She used to occasionally take part in conversation at least,” said Fitzwilliam speculatively. “What is Lady Catherine about? Could she be hiding Anne?”

“At this point, it does not matter. Anne could grow horns and a spade tail, and I would still have to marry her,” groaned Darcy.

“If she has horns and a spade tail it is because she inherited them from her mother.”

Georgiana entered the library, her head down. She sat next to her brother and laid her head on his shoulder.

“It is very late. Can you not sleep, my dear?” Darcy said, putting his arm around her.

“I cannot.” She sniffed. “I cannot stop thinking about how stupid I was.” She wiped her cheeks with an already damp handkerchief.

“Georgiana, remember how we spoke of this after we left Ramsgate? You were deceived by a practised liar. He played you with happy memories of your childhood. Our own father was fooled by him his entire life. You were only fifteen, dearest.”

“We made errors as well. As your guardians, we should have prepared you for men like him,” added Fitzwilliam. “We thought you would not need to learn about the worst kind of men until it was your time to come out in society. Your brother and I were also badly deceived by Mrs Younge.”

As his cousin spoke, Darcy silently withdrew into himself. He was not thinking about Wickham or Anne or Lady Catherine or the travesty of a wedding that faced him. His thoughts had returned to the shocking claims that Miss Bingley had made about the Bennet family. About Elizabeth. As soon as he could return to London, he was going to investigate.

“Anyone can be deceived. By an unscrupulous person, by society, or even by one’s own self,” he finally said quietly. “I deceived myself for years.”

Georgiana, who had been leaning into Darcy’s side, pulled away from him and sat up straight. “How so, Brother?” she asked, bewilderment written on her face.

Darcy stretched out his long legs and put his feet up on a footstool. He leant back into the cushions of the settee and reached for his sister's hand. "I believed that all that mattered in marriage was rank and fortune. Money and connexions. Marry someone, anyone, with whom you are somewhat compatible and who has the correct credentials. Someone whose family name looks well next to yours in an engagement announcement. That is what our parents did, and our aunts and uncles. Some married couples become friends, others become bitter enemies, most simply tolerate each other and cooperate as need be. Love matches, though celebrated in novels and fairy tales, are rare. I never believed in such foolishness.

"That is until I fell in love. She was..." He paused, a feeling of warmth suffusing his chest as he allowed memories of Elizabeth to fill his mind. "Enchanting. Intelligent. Kind. Captivating. She had no pretence. She was honest with me—honest in what she said but also in how she presented herself. She played no feminine games, which made Miss Bingley's behaviour all the more ludicrous in contrast. At the time, I was certain she flirted with me, but I later realised that I had in no way been singled out by her. She treated everyone with care and courtesy. That was my conceit speaking."

A small, crooked smile played about his mouth. "She even refused to dance with me. Twice."

"Miss Elizabeth Bennet," Georgiana said softly. Darcy blinked at her in surprise.

"You wrote about her in your letters," she explained.

"Ah, yes. You would have liked her very much, dearest."

"I like her still. Or the idea of her, I suppose, since we have never met."

Darcy looked down at his hands. "She was unsuitable in every way. Her father is a gentleman, barely, and so indolent that he had not bothered to create dowries for his

daughters. Her mother is probably the most vulgar, loud, foolish person I have ever encountered, and her people are in trade. Miss Elizabeth's eldest sister, to whom she was close, was kind and genteel, but the rest of her family seemed to exert themselves to behave in the most ignominious manner possible. Bingley fell in love with the eldest, Miss Jane Bennet, to the point where he was ready to declare himself. He went to London intending to return to Netherfield, but his sisters and I joined him in town and persuaded him to remain there.

"I never gave any thought to Miss Elizabeth or her sisters or what would happen to them when we left Netherfield," he said, feeling sick at his own thoughtlessness. "I only thought of removing myself and Bingley from a foolishly perceived danger. When I returned to London, I threw myself into society to prove to myself that she was not all that rare and that I could find someone like her."

"My mother remarked upon that, I remember, when she wrote to me. I was in Spain at the time," said Fitzwilliam. "She was happy to see you willingly getting out and about, but she wondered whether you were ill. You were at every ball, party, and soiree before the festive season with a monstrous scowl on your face until you abruptly left town."

"I thought that surely if I made a greater effort, I would find a lady like Miss Elizabeth with a more eligible background. Instead, I loathed every moment. Bingley was miserable, and Miss Bingley was under the impression that my cooperation with her meant that we had some sort of understanding. I finally threw up my hands in surrender and left. There is no other lady like Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She is unique."

"Mr Bingley married Miss Grantley only a few months later. Did he recover his spirits?" asked Georgiana.

"After a fashion. Bingley decided that he should follow my advice and marry for connexions and advantage. He chose not to seek out Miss Bennet again but to marry

Miss Grantley.” He paused, thinking of his old friend, content with his small estate, his sensible wife, their infant daughter, and the company of her family in Lincolnshire and his in Yorkshire. The wealthy son of a tradesman had become an insignificant country squire; shooting and fishing, hobnobbing with the local families, immersed in the business of farming.

“He is pleased enough in his marriage, but I shall always wonder whether he would have been happier with Miss Bennet. That is when I began to question my own beliefs about choosing a spouse,” he admitted.

“Then, just a few days ago, when the announcement of my engagement was published in the newspaper, Miss Bingley came to my house uninvited and quite literally shoved her way into my study. I wish you could have seen the look on Bridges’s face. She was furious. She had made assumptions about me, you see. She raged and shrieked at me about her misguided expectations. Before she was removed from the house, she made sure to pass on some malicious gossip about the Bennet family. She had disliked them extremely, especially Miss Elizabeth. Apparently, I did not conceal my attraction to her as well as I thought I had.”

“Malicious?” asked Fitzwilliam, glancing at Georgiana.

Darcy nodded and, recognising his cousin’s discreet reminder of Georgiana’s youth, edited his words. “Miss Bingley claimed that the Bennet family had been thoroughly ruined by the actions of none other than George Wickham. That they had been completely shunned by their entire neighbourhood and that their uncle in London had been forced to take the daughters to town to find husbands for them. She claimed that they have been compelled to marry men of the labouring class.” Next to him, Darcy heard his sister gasp. He reached an arm round her shoulder and hugged her to him.

Fitzwilliam snarled. “Wickham must occupy a special place in hell for all the pain he has caused! Did Miss Bingley say what exactly he did to ruin an entire family?”

“Apparently, on the night he was deserting, Miss Elizabeth’s youngest sister absconded with him. She was also killed in the accident.”

There was a brief silence before his cousin commented, “Rather strange, then, that Sir William did not mention it to you.”

“I thought it as well, but the Lucases and Bennets were very close. He may have been protecting their reputations from me.”

“From you? Why would he do that?” Georgiana sat up and asked.

Darcy felt his cheeks heat and looked away. “I did not give a good impression of myself when I visited Hertfordshire. I was full of my own consequence and above my company. I realised later that I must have left a very bad taste in the mouths of the locals. Bingley’s sisters did not help matters, lording their expensive wardrobes and superior ways over families that have been estate owners for many generations. Sir William may have believed those of our party would despise them for it and spread gossip. Which of course is exactly what Miss Bingley did.”

The colonel leant towards him, frowning. “That time you boasted to me of steering Bingley away from an unsuitable lady...was that Miss Jane Bennet?”

“It was,” he admitted. “I should not have done so. I did not know the lady well, and it was wrong to assume the worst about her. It was wrong to advise Bingley at all on such a personal matter. Worse, it was wrong to leave Hertfordshire without warning the community about Wickham’s propensities. You heard Sir William describe the extensive damage he did in the short time he was there.

“And now Miss Bingley has spitefully informed me that the damage was far worse than I could have ever imagined. Her objective was to wound me, and she has, deeply. I am far more distressed at the thought of what has happened to Miss

Elizabeth and her family than I am about the disaster facing me on the morrow.”

Darcy looked into the faces of his sister and cousin, faces he loved more than almost anyone else in the world. “I have learnt some bitter lessons over the last years. It is too late for me, but your happiness is of the utmost importance to me,” he said earnestly. “If either of you choose to marry, I want you to marry for regard. Marry the person who makes you happy, whom you will love and cherish and who will love and cherish you. Marry the person who will share your joy and sorrow, who will ease your burdens and trust you to ease theirs. Who will offer criticism when you need to hear it but also support you and give you strength.”

Fitzwilliam opened his mouth to speak, but Darcy was too quick for his objection. “I know you believe you must marry a lady of fortune, but I would much rather make provision for you myself. I shall gift you a property, or more than one if needed. It is far more important that you marry a lady whom you love.”

At that, Darcy swallowed the rest of his brandy in one gulp and took himself off to bed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Darcy stood before the altar in the palatial, gilt-encrusted baroque chapel at Rosings, staring at the floor. He refused to look down the aisle at the curious, whispering crowd, nor at the high painted ceiling with its pink clouds and dozens of plump cherubs peering down. The pews were packed tightly with the highest-ranking members of society, most of whom were barely acquainted with his aunt. Those who did know her disliked her. Lady Catherine wanted the ton to see her daughter married, and they obliged, eager to see and be seen, to be the first to brag to others about witnessing firsthand the wedding of the elusive Fitzwilliam Darcy. The only allies he had in attendance were Georgiana, the earl and countess, and Fitzwilliam. He had not written to any of his friends, not even Bingley. Lady Catherine would not have allowed a tradesman's son to attend in any case. She had not invited any of her neighbours or locals, nor asked her own parson to conduct the ceremony—or even attend—though in this, Darcy agreed. This wedding would be a horror already without having to listen to Collins's peculiar combination of the obsequious and the grandiose. Fitzwilliam stood at Darcy's side, silently offering what comfort he could with the occasional touch to his elbow. Curiously, no female attendant waited upon Anne. But, he thought, when would she have ever made a friend?

The processional began, and the doors at the rear of the nave opened. Anne entered on Lord Matlock's arm. The earl seemed agitated, meeting Darcy's eye with an ill-concealed expression of alarm. As they reached the altar, Darcy understood the reason: Anne reeked of alcohol. The pupils of her red-rimmed eyes were like pinpoints. She stood opposite him, swaying slightly, hunch-shouldered and seemingly half asleep.

The elderly bishop himself conducted the ceremony, slowly intoning the words of the service. Darcy spoke his vows flatly; Anne mumbled hers incoherently. Only once did he falter, when he took Anne's cold, limp hand in his and slipped his mother's ring onto her bony finger.

Once the register was signed, the entire company made their way to the vast ballroom where a lavish feast was waiting. Again, no expense had been spared. Long tables with gilt chairs ran the length of the ballroom, with the wedding party at a table on a raised platform large enough for a small orchestra. Another enormous table was covered with delicacies and dominated by a massive pair of swans, sculpted in ice.

From his position on the raised dais, Darcy watched footmen seat the guests while others scurried to and fro, up and down the long tables with trays and pitchers. They were sporting new livery and blindingly white wigs. At his side, Anne seemed to wake from her stupor, becoming possessed by a sudden energy, twitching and shaking and shifting in her seat, muttering to herself all the while. From a passing footman, she seized a bottle of wine and filled her glass. Drinking it down, she poured another.

Lady Catherine rose, and an expectant silence settled over the room. Before she could speak, the new Mrs Darcy leapt up, moving in front of her mother with a strange, wild energy.

"Welcome to the grand farce! Are you entertained by the spectacle, curiosity seekers? Because that is what you all are, is it not?" she shouted, her seldom-used voice rasping like a rusty hinge. Anne grabbed another goblet of wine from the table and swallowed it in one gulp. "My mother wishes to enact her jealous dreams through me," she shrieked, "and my cold fish of a cousin! Nobody asked me what I want!" She flung the goblet to the floor, where it shattered.

"I am not having it! Do you hear me? Rosings is mine ! I will not leave it. I will not

go to Pemberley!”

She turned on Darcy. “Go home! I do not want you! Go home and do not return!”

The entire room was frozen, stunned beyond any response. Darcy too was shocked to his core, but his well-honed manners took over. He rose solemnly from his chair, bowed gracefully to Anne, and answered quietly, “As you wish, madam.” He turned on his heel and made for the door at the far end of the ballroom. For several long minutes, the only sound was the tapping of his heels and the slow drip of the melting swans.

As he passed through the wide doors, he heard Anne’s rambling, disordered shouts from behind him, slurring her words. “What is this? I do not want this!” He heard the clink of metal hitting something nearby, but he was not about to turn around to see what it was.

“My ring!” shrieked Lady Catherine. Her voice seemed to break the spell. At her cry, the entire room erupted into life, shouting, screaming, hooting, chairs scraping the floor loudly as they were pushed back or tipped completely over. Darcy barely heard it, walking mechanically in the direction of his rooms as the shock wore off.

What on earth had just happened? Had Anne gone mad? She did not want him any more than he wanted her. Darcy’s hand had been forced; had hers too? Could she have stopped this travesty before it began? He had thought he would need strong drink to bed Anne, but apparently she had needed it to stand opposite him at the altar.

Darcy stopped at the door to his rooms. He could hear the muffled roar of chaos from the other end of the house. As much as he hated the idea, he must take up his responsibilities as Anne’s husband and return to the ballroom. He must help his aunt impose order. He shut his eyes tightly, took a deep breath, stiffened his spine, and with an exhalation, steeled himself to go back. As he turned to do his duty, Georgiana

reached the top of the stairs and ran towards him.

“Brother! We are to depart! Uncle says we must leave quickly! Anne will not have you in her house, and he believes she may calm if we go away. Your man and my maid can pack our things and leave in the second carriage.”

Behind her, Fitzwilliam hastened towards them. “I shall accompany you. Lady Catherine and Anne are even now quarrelling bitterly in front of the guests. Father is endeavouring to keep them from coming to blows. The gossip mill will surpass anything we have ever seen, I am afraid. Everyone will be racing to town so they can be first to tell it. Mother says that the best we can do now is try to lessen the damage to the family, perhaps bend the narrative in some way.”

He held his hand out to Darcy. In his palm was Lady Anne’s ring. “Anne threw it at you as you were leaving the ballroom. A footman went after it and brought it to me.”

Within minutes, their servants had their instructions. Shortly after, Darcy, Georgiana, and Fitzwilliam slipped out of a side door and were directed to a small, unremarkable black carriage. As the vehicle rolled away down a narrow lane behind the stable yard, they could see a tangle of splendid coaches pulling up in front of the massive ornamented front doors of the manor house. Coachmen were shouting, richly dressed ladies and gentlemen were streaming from the doors, horses were shying and rearing, and grooms were running about trying to calm them.

Darcy groaned. The whole episode had been a disaster from start to finish. Apparently, he was married to a madwoman. Their families would never be able to put it behind them.

Georgiana put her head in her hands, sobbing uncontrollably. “I am so sorry. This is my fault.” Darcy put his arm around her and dried her tears with his handkerchief.

“Now there is where you are wrong, my dear,” said Fitzwilliam. “This is solely Lady Catherine’s fault. Even if Wickham had not tricked you into writing those letters, she would have concocted some other way to force Darcy’s hand.”

“What shall we do now, Brother?”

“I do not know.” Darcy sighed. “I have always made every effort to live in such a way that scandal would never touch me. I do not know whether to go about town pretending that we have it all under control or to retreat to Pemberley and hope someone else suffers an even worse humiliation that will make the ton forget this.”

“Knowing you as I do, I suspect you will choose the retreat,” said Fitzwilliam. “In fact, you should. You are honest to a fault, Darcy. You will be besieged in town, and you will never be able to act as if nothing is wrong. Leave it to my parents. My father has some influence, but my mother is the true genius.” He leant back against the squabs, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Lady Catherine has been going on about your so-called cradle engagement for years. Everyone has heard it. We in the family are the only ones who know of the letters and her use of them for extortion, but it should be obvious to anyone who witnessed her behaviour today that she has been concealing Anne’s condition, whatever it is. Any condemnation will fall upon her. You have nothing to fear. Take heart, Cousin! Wickham is dead, you have the ring back, and the letters have been burnt.”

Georgiana was soon asleep. They had had a late night and a harrowing day. The two gentlemen rode in silence, until Darcy barked a laugh.

“What is it?” asked his cousin.

Darcy’s tone was laced with irony and self-reproach. “I fell in love with an ineligible lady. Not only did I refuse to court her, I left Hertfordshire so I would never see her again. All because I feared a scandal that would have been nothing to the events of

today. I could have saved her, and we would have been happy.”

After a day’s stop in London to repack, Darcy and Georgiana began the journey north to Derbyshire. Long conversations were spent trying to anticipate the extent of the damage to their family name, but they had given up, mentally and physically exhausted. There was simply no way of knowing whether they would be shunned forever or accepted back into the highest circles. Or if I even care, Darcy mused. If one had the rank and the money, the chances of acceptance, or at least the appearance of acceptance, were far better. But if one did not have money or connexions... His thoughts went again to Elizabeth. She and her family had been shunned for two years now. Had she truly been married off against her will to someone far beneath her? The first thing he would do when he arrived at Pemberley was begin his investigations.

It was full dark at the end of the third day when their carriage rolled to a stop at Pemberley’s doors. Mrs Reynolds was there to meet them. Tired, dusty, and ravenously hungry, they were ushered into their warm home.

After quickly washing and refreshing their clothing, they made for the small dining room. To their surprise, a welcoming committee was waiting. It was his ‘Crony Club’, as his sister called them. Fletcher handed him a glass of ale the minute he stepped into the room, and Mr Pritchard brought Georgiana a glass of watered wine. Delicious smells filled the air; there were dishes of fruit, cheeses, and freshly baked bread already on the table. At the centre sat a large, old-fashioned tureen; dented, well-worn, and definitely not from Pemberley’s kitchens.

Jamie Hedges proudly lifted the lid to reveal a steaming, savoury bowl of stew. “My wife’s lamb stew, Darcy. Had to ask your Mrs Reynolds whether I could bring this in, and she allowed it. It was your father’s favourite, and it comforted him near the end. Mrs Pritchard heard a little bit about the wedding—the gossip’s travelled to Derbyshire already, I’m afraid—just enough to know it didn’t go well. We wanted to bring you and the little missy here something to comfort you and lend you our

support.”

“Father’s favourite?” echoed Georgiana, taking in the table laden with plain, hearty fare. Her stomach rumbled, and she blushed.

Mr Pritchard chuckled. “Do not be embarrassed, Miss Darcy. We all get hungry, and I would wager that you and your brother are rather sharp set by now.” He gestured towards the table, and young Mr Fielding pulled out a chair for her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When he was not out dining with friends or quietly reading over a tray in his study, Mr Bennet, at the invitation of his upper servants, began to occasionally take his evening meal with them. At first it was quite awkward. As in many manor houses, the servants' frequent topic of dinner discussion had been the family that they served. But the servants of Longbourn had lost that family, all but one.

There was one subject, or more specifically four, in which they all shared an interest, and that was his daughters. After his first uncomfortable foray into sharing a meal with his servants, Mr Bennet hit upon bringing his letters from his daughters with him. They were read and dissected with enthusiasm at the table. Mrs Hill, Mr Osbeck, Mrs Jenks, and Mr Emmons were pleased to hear the family news.

Their meals together were not noisy. His servants had better manners than his youngest daughters had displayed. He shook his head when he remembered Lydia's inappropriate remarks at dinner, her loud self-absorption, and Fanny egging her on. They had been bound for destruction then, and he had not seen it coming. He had mocked them and laughed at them instead.

Hill's presence was particularly calming to him. She was obviously intelligent, and as Fanny Bennet's housekeeper, she had developed great expertise in solving problems and placating nerves. She carried herself like a lady and spoke like one. She smelt of lemons and beeswax and soap.

As the days and weeks passed, he began to share the occasional evening of cribbage with Osbeck and Emmons. It was a letter from Lizzy wherein she shared her celestial

observations and mentioned her chess games with Bancroft that reminded him that Hill knew how to play. With chessboard in hand, he asked her whether she would be willing to try a game with him.

Hill was quite good, even difficult for him to match. As Mr Bennet began to entertain other ideas about her, he could not help but compare her to his late wife. Hill's behaviour had always been that of a gentlewoman. She was clever and practical, and most of all she was a restful woman. Fanny had been anything but restful.

Hill was not a beauty, but her features were regular and pleasing. Her countenance reflected her intelligence, sense, and even humour. Mr Bennet began to wonder how his longtime housekeeper had become such a worthy woman. So, one evening, he asked her.

“He fancies you, Sarah,” said Daisy Jenks.

Mrs Hill stopped abruptly in the middle of making her monthly shopping lists. She set her quill down and pondered. Does he? Did Mr Bennet respect her as a person, or did he wish to do as some other masters did and treat his female servants as a convenience? She knew it happened at several of the local estates, Mr Goulding being the worst, but could not believe it of Mr Bennet; he had always been decent and courteous to all of them.

The barriers separating master and servant had been slowly crumbling since the beginning of their isolation from the rest of society over two years before. Mr Bennet appeared interested in her. He had asked about her upbringing, and she had been truthful, as truthful as she had been in telling it to his daughters after their mother's death.

She could tell it had shocked him, both the story and her frankness in telling it. To his credit, it had not caused him to treat her any differently.

“Do you like him?” Daisy persisted.

Hill answered slowly. “I do not dislike him. I took issue with the way he used to behave towards Mrs Bennet and the girls, but I believe the shock of his wife and daughter’s deaths has changed him. He is remorseful for his neglect of them, and perhaps a bit lonely.”

She smiled. Mr Bennet had been so utterly dumbfounded when she had informed him of the reason the ladies of the neighbourhood had shown so much interest. It had been rather comical, and in truth a little endearing. Perhaps he was thinking about marrying again. Still, it seemed highly unlikely that a gentleman with an estate of his own would propose anything honourable to a servant.

Osbeck came into the kitchen, flannel rags and a bottle of silver polish in his hands. “What would you do if he made you an honourable offer?” he said, having obviously been listening in.

“I do not know,” Hill said honestly. She was several years younger than Mrs Bennet had been. She was still of childbearing age and could possibly give him an heir, but what if she could only give him more daughters? Would she grow as nervous as Mrs Bennet had been?

“All I know is that I won’t work for that Collins,” said Osbeck definitively. “Neither will Davy, nor Emmons, nor any of the farmhands.”

“I won’t either,” Jenks joined in. “And I’ll take Ruthie and Martha with me. That so-called man of God pinched the girls’ bottoms and tried to corner Ruthie alone in the pantry. We’re lucky that Davy came in just then!”

Hill picked up her quill and went back to her list, but her mind was otherwise occupied. Would Mr Bennet make her an offer of marriage? Could she accept? She

did not mind his company. And perhaps the spectre of Collins as the master of Longbourn could be banished forever.

But of course, masters did not offer marriage to their housekeepers.

Rather than be put off by Mrs Hill's frank and unsparing tale of her childhood, Mr Bennet found that it only increased his respect for her. She had shown him the necklace her unknown mother had been wearing when she came to the workhouse. It was a simple gold necklace; a delicate chain with a pink topaz surrounded by tiny pearls, expensive but not showy, the kind that might have been given to the young daughter of a wealthy family. There was a distinct possibility that Mrs Hill's natural parents might have been of better standing than Fanny's, which he found amusing. She had been raised by another unknown gentlewoman, who apparently had known what she was about.

He was attracted to Hill but not in love. Mr Bennet had experienced calf-love a few times before the bungled entrapment attempt that had obliged him to marry Fanny, but he had never felt such pangs as an adult. He did not love his housekeeper, that would be ridiculous, but he did like and respect her. He had a feeling both he and his estate would benefit from a mistress like Mrs Hill, whether she could give him an heir or not.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

May 1814, Pemberley

Darcy left his steward's office and walked to the terrace on the west side of the house. It had been a long day, but he was satisfied with what he had accomplished. He was going to sit and enjoy the late afternoon sun until he heard the dinner gong.

The terrace had a marvellous vista that sloped to the stream before it widened into the small lake. A brisk wind was pushing small white clouds through the clear blue sky, their shadows rapidly moving over the green lawns and verdant fields beyond. He paused to imagine how much Elizabeth would have admired it; she should have been enjoying Pemberley and its terraces for two years already.

Oh, Elizabeth. Where are you?

Darcy had been true to his word in searching for her. He had hired investigators to travel to Hertfordshire. They had encountered unusually closed-mouthed residents in Meryton and were able only to determine that Mr Bennet was still the master of Longbourn. The daughters were married, but their whereabouts and married names were unknown. His solicitors had also written to Mr Philips, only to have the letter returned to them unopened. It appeared the man no longer had an office in Meryton.

Wickham's grave had been found in the potter's field, but there had been no graves marked Bennet in the graveyard around the church, though that was not unusual; many estates had private cemeteries or mausoleums on their grounds.

He had conversations about the efficacy of searching for one sailor's wife, surname unknown, in the teeming port cities. The investigator countered with a plan to go through the records of the Admiralty but was unsuccessful in obtaining access to what he sought.

Blinking away his disappointed thoughts, he saw Georgiana was already on the terrace, seated with Mrs Annesley and Mr Fielding. Mrs Annesley was quietly knitting as the two young people enjoyed each other's company, laughing and chatting. Over the months since his doomed wedding, his sister had found her confidence again, supported by her brother, her companion, and her neighbours and friends in Derbyshire.

That evening in February when Georgiana had shared the dinner of lamb stew with his friends, she had taken particular notice of Mr Fielding. He was a good man, a few years younger than Darcy. He had inherited Birchwood Grange after an exhaustive search for a male heir, the ninety-year-old incumbent having been widowed and childless. Although the son of a gentleman, he had been educated to earn his own living. The Cronies had seen to his education in estate management, and he had taken to it readily, showing himself to be a careful manager and thoughtful master.

Lady Anne would never have permitted her only daughter to receive attentions from the owner of a small estate, and especially one who had practised a trade. Most likely she would not have permitted more than a distant nodding acquaintance, and that only locally, certainly not in London. Darcy was unsure whether even his father would have allowed it. It had taken Darcy himself some time to accustom himself to the idea; old habits die hard. But after all that they had been through together, he wanted to let his little sister have every opportunity for happiness in marriage, the happiness from which he had so foolishly distanced himself.

After the horrible experience of his cursed wedding, Darcy was inclined to approve the match. He was certain it was only a matter of time until the younger man

requested his permission. And Fielding, with his intelligent mind, his kindness, ready wit, and smiling eyes, sometimes reminded him of another. No wonder Georgie loved him so.

Mrs Reynolds brought in the express, her face etched with concern. Darcy stood from behind his desk and took it from her. It was written in the earl's hand and sealed with the Matlock crest. A thick black border had been inked around its edges. His heart seized. Richard!

He opened it carefully, skimmed the lines, and sank back into his chair in relief. The deep, fearful breath he had taken rushed out of his body. He noticed Mrs Reynolds still waiting.

"Is all well, sir?" she asked hopefully.

"I am happy to say that Colonel Fitzwilliam is well," he answered. "It is my aunt and my wi—" He stumbled over the word. "And my...my wife who have lost their lives in an accident."

The housekeeper seemed to sag a little in relief herself, but she instantly straightened. "My sincere condolences, sir. Will you be travelling to Rosings?"

"I shall," Darcy said grimly. "At first light tomorrow. I shall notify them by express today."

He arrived at Rosings four days later to find his aunt and uncle Matlock waiting for him. They took him to Sir Lewis' study and closed the door.

"What has happened?" Darcy asked, unnerved at their grim faces.

"It is a bad business, my boy," said the earl gravely. The older man paced a few steps

and turned to face him. “After the wedding, the animosity between Catherine and Anne increased exponentially. Catherine would not leave Anne alone. She refused to remove to the dower house or listen to anything Anne said. She kept raging that Anne must go to Pemberley and take her place as mistress there. Anne would then swear that she would never leave Rosings, and she grew increasingly unchecked in her madness. She refused to honour her marriage vows, insisting that she had never been out in society and that she had a right to experience it. Her idea of what constitutes society was distorted, to say the least. She drank heavily in public and dressed in an immodest, disgraceful manner.

“They fought continuously and bitterly.” The earl heaved a deep sigh. “A week ago, they were quarrelling. Anne turned her back on her mother and was walking up the staircase somewhat unsteadily, likely due to drink. Catherine would not relent and pursued her, and Anne physically attacked her. They both fell down the stairs and sustained grievous injuries, dying within hours.”

Darcy, appalled and grieved, nodded numbly.

“This was of course witnessed by several servants, and they have testified before the magistrate. Anne and Catherine have already been interred in the family crypt.”

Lady Matlock spoke up. “There will of course be further scandal.” She exchanged glances with her husband. “Your uncle and I have chosen not to hide these events. Too many people already know about what went on here, and we have no interest in trying to protect the reputations of either of them. Your name, Darcy, and the Fitzwilliam name will stand, I believe. It is well known in society that Catherine was...” She paused, searching for a word.

“A monster,” put in the earl.

“Difficult and detested,” said his wife.

Darcy realised that his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it. “Poor Anne! What a dreadful end!” He sank into a chair next to his aunt. “She was trying to gain a semblance of control over her own life. It is Lady Catherine who has been insane from the beginning. Only a madwoman would treat her only child as a soulless possession, dosing her with laudanum and Lord knows what else to use her as a pawn in her schemes.”

“Yes,” said Lady Matlock sadly. “Who knows what kind of a happy life Anne might have lived if she had only had the chance.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

October 1814, Jakarta, Java

The Melisande was securely anchored in the harbour off Jakarta. Their adventures, for that was what she had to call them, had been paused temporarily. The ship and its crew needed rest and repairs.

The quartermaster's mate knocked on the door of the captain's quarters, and when Elizabeth bade him enter, he was carrying a large canvas bag.

"What do you have there, Youssef?" she asked as he carried it to the captain's dining table she used as a desk.

"It's the mail, missus," he said as he slung the bag up on the table. "It's your letters."

Elizabeth leant over and pulled the bag closer. "They are mine? All of them?" There must have been at least one hundred in there!

"They're for you and the captain both," he said. "Some of the mail went off to the North American station by mistake, some was accidentally left behind in Madras, and then the packet ship was nearly swamped in a storm, so there was another delay, but the quartermaster says it has all caught up with us at last, ma'am."

Between one thing and another, the Melisande had not received mail in almost ten months. Elizabeth had last received letters in the Cape and Zanzibar on their way east. Although she had continued to write and post letters to each of her sisters, her

aunts and uncles, and her father, she had received none in return. It had been deeply disappointing. If Samuel had not explained that mail to naval ships often got detained or even completely lost, she would have been very worried, even frightened.

As it turned out, she had had little time to think about it. Once they had stopped for supplies at Simonstown, they had continued towards India with stops in Zanzibar and then embarked upon a longer stretch to Bombay. They had exchanged fire for several days in a running battle with a French privateer north of Madagascar before they had captured the ship, put its French crew in the hold, chained and under guard, and with an English prize crew aboard, towed it to Mauritius. They had then again made for Bombay and traced the coast of India on their way east. They had been blown off course by storms and more than once found themselves separated from the rest of the squadron. After the last, they had pushed on to their rendezvous in Penang and regrouped there before making their way farther east to Singapore, where she had said her reluctant goodbyes to the ship's passenger, Alice Channing.

Since boarding the ship, Alice had become her dear and intimate friend, as close as she had ever been to Charlotte. Over paper and canvas, with pencils and paints, Alice had tutored her in art; not just in capturing images but in how artists see in shapes and shadows, light and colour. Elizabeth had enjoyed hearing about her friend's unconventional childhood, spent at her father's diplomatic posts throughout Europe and Asia. Although Elizabeth's duties had taken precedence, and often she had been occupied with caring for the sick and wounded, their bond had grown.

When she had disembarked in Singapore to rejoin her family, Alice had presented gifts to both Elizabeth and Samuel. Somewhere, she had acquired some small pieces of ivory and had painted exquisite miniatures, one of Samuel for Elizabeth and a more intimate lover's eye painting of Elizabeth's eye for Samuel. Rather than being embarrassed, Samuel had chuckled when he opened the small, blue wooden box containing the miniature. "Miss Channing is a romantic, it seems."

Elizabeth opened the mail bag and began pulling out bundles of letters, battered and creased, water stained and ink-smeared. She separated them by whether they were directed to herself or Samuel, then further organised them by their authors, by recognition of their handwriting.

She saw one letter in a hand that she found familiar but did not quite recognise. Curious, she opened that one first.

March 1814

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

My dear Mrs Bancroft,

I do not know how else to begin except to state it plainly. Mr Bennet and I have married. You will read Mr Bennet's account of our decision to wed, but I wished to tell you myself directly, in my own words. Since the day I arrived at Longbourn and was met by a talkative and curious three-year-old who brought me a bright yellow feather and two acorns, you have been precious to me. I still have them.

As you remember, we at Longbourn have been in a peculiar state since Miss Lydia's death resulted in our being cut by our neighbours. The lines between our ranks began to be obscured even before you and your sisters married and moved away, and since then, our informality has only progressed.

After you sailed, your father returned home to discover that he had become an object of interest to the local single ladies. He disabused them of any notion that he would choose a wife from any family who had participated in our shunning. I am sure he has written you an account of that fateful tea party.

Yet the idea of remarrying took root in his mind. He began to see that marrying again

could be of great benefit to himself, his family, and his estate. After a long period of consideration, he broached the subject with me. After much thought, I agreed.

Mr Bennet is not a romantic person, and neither am I. We have a respect for one another and share a wish to bring Longbourn back to life again, to make it prosper and flourish, and to always be a welcoming home to you, your sisters, and your families. Mr Bennet also enjoys the idea of making sport for our neighbours, as you well know.

Your sisters have generously given us their blessings, as have my former colleagues in service to the Longbourn estate. Our household arrangements are most unconventional, but they seem to work nicely for all of us. We are content.

Wishing you safe and happy,

Sarah Hill Bennet

A few hours later, when the captain entered their quarters, Elizabeth was leaning back in her chair, feeling somewhat staggered. Before her, dozens of opened letters were scattered over the surface of the table.

“Have you received bad news, Elizabeth?” he asked, his voice full of concern.

She looked at him and then at the letters. “No, not at all. Rather, I have had such a surfeit of good news. I am a bit overwhelmed by it.” She laughed, shaking her head, then counted on her fingers. “Jane and Alexander have had a son. Their daughter, little Frances, is healthy and happy. Alexander has been knighted for his work on one of the royal properties. Mary and Gerhard have had a daughter. Gerhard has published several of his own compositions to some acclaim and is being invited to perform and conduct. Kitty and Henry are expecting a child. Henry has been officially commended for his work. My uncle has resumed some of his business

connexions on the Continent...and my father has married Mrs Hill, our former housekeeper.” She smiled and gestured to the bundles of unopened mail. “My family has been busy. You will no doubt read their accounts in your own letters.”

Samuel smiled. “I look forward to it. Are you ready to see Jakarta?”

“Oh yes! Only let me put these letters away,” said Elizabeth, rising from her chair and tying the correspondence back into bundles. “I wish to see it very much!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The day could not have been more beautiful. The October air was clear, the sky was cloudless and vibrant blue; the woods surrounding the great house of Pemberley were at the peak of their autumn glory. It was the perfect setting for a wedding in the family, this time a happy, long-awaited one. Georgiana had been radiant in her joy. Darcy's heart swelled with pride, nostalgia, regret, and love. He had given his little sister away to Lionel Fielding, a fine young man.

It had been a simple ceremony, with only family and close friends. No expensive spectacle, only their own chapel. No bishop, only the rector from Kympton parish. No important guests from the first circles, except their Fitzwilliam relatives. Glad for some joy after burying his sister and niece, the earl and countess had been there, along with the viscount and his wife.

Fitzwilliam and his new bride, Lucy, had come all the way from Kent to attend. After sorting out the last wills of Lady Catherine and Anne, Darcy had gifted Rosings to his cousin outright. He never wanted to see the place again. Fitzwilliam had then in astonishingly quick succession resigned his commission, proposed to his commanding officer's daughter, and married her—a gracious, sensible woman named Lucy Maxwell. She had grown up following the drum and had experiences most other ladies could never comprehend. Together, the two shared an excellent understanding. The Cronies were also all there in fine style with their spouses. They had invited the Bingleys, but Mr Grantley was quite ill, and they did not want to be away from home even for a few days.

Now the wedding celebrations were nearly over, though the guests remained

comfortably chatting at their tables. Darcy stood apart from the crowd, pleased beyond measure with how the day had gone, telling himself that his bittersweet sadness would pass. His baby sister had spent her last night as Georgiana Darcy, her last night at Pemberley. She was now Georgiana Fielding, the mistress of Birchwood Grange. It was, he reminded himself for the hundredth time, only seven miles from his home.

“That was a beautiful toast, Darcy,” said a voice at his side. He turned to see his cousin standing next to him, holding two glasses of wine.

“As was yours,” Darcy replied, accepting one of the glasses. As Georgiana’s guardians, both had stood and made toasts to the bride and groom to begin the celebrations. Fitzwilliam’s had been the longer, full of amusing tales from his little cousin’s childhood. Darcy’s had been short but powerfully emotional in its brevity. He had begun with how proud their parents would have been of their daughter and how she had become the beautiful, kind, and strong young lady they would have wished her to be. He had spoken of their bond and how they had found their way together through the years after their father’s death. He had spoken of his respect for Fielding and what a good husband he would be. Mostly, he had spoken of his love for his sister and his happiness for her. When he had finished, Georgiana had risen and run to him, throwing her arms around him in a tight embrace. There had not been a dry eye in the room.

The two men clinked glasses and sipped their wine silently. After several minutes, Fitzwilliam asked, “Do you still think of her?”

Darcy knew exactly whom he meant. “I do.”

He sipped his wine again. Although Elizabeth was never completely out of his thoughts, he did not languish over her like a mooncalf, drinking himself to oblivion every night or weeping into his brandy. It was a greater depth of feeling, of—dare he

say—imagining. She would often come to mind, for example, whenever he found something amusing, or when he read an especially eloquent poem, or when he dispensed charity or assistance in his community. Would she laugh? Would the poem be meaningful to her? Would she think well of his actions?

And sometimes, early in the morning, in that misty, cobwebbed world between sleep and wakefulness, he thought he heard the fading echo of her laughter.

She had changed him profoundly. His friends, his habits, the way he managed his life and affairs, all had changed, both consciously and unconsciously. His view of the world had changed. He hoped she would approve, if she knew, wherever she was.

“I did not find her, but I discovered that the Longbourn estate is still held by her father, so she has a home to return to if need be. That is a comfort. I have come to believe that the former Miss Bingley fabricated the entire story out of whole cloth. Her allegations simply do not add up.”

“And you have no plans to seek a wife?”

“None.” Darcy turned to his cousin. “That is what true love is, I think. When no other woman will do, no matter how exemplary. When it would be worse to try to substitute another lady than to go without. I only want Elizabeth.” After a long moment, he continued, “Do you think me ridiculous?”

Fitzwilliam finished his wine. “No. I should, but I do not. You may choose to do things differently from how I would, but you have always been firmly grounded in reality.” He hesitated, put his hand on Darcy’s shoulder, and continued gently, “Though perhaps do not close yourself off completely to the possibility of meeting another lady someday. I hate to see you alone.”

Darcy, feeling the love and concern from his dear friend and cousin, nodded slightly.

Maybe he would do that. Eventually.

Elizabeth settled back into the captain's quarters after a se'nnight's stay in Bombay. Samuel had given her the gift of a respite from the crowded conditions aboard ship while he saw to needed repairs and supplies for the vessel . A naval officer he had known aboard the *Morwenna* had married a woman from India, and they had settled in Bombay, operating an inn. Agueda had come with her, and their hosts had taken them around the city and surrounding countryside.

Now the *Melisande* was off on the long return voyage back to England. It would take many months, and there would be many stops on the way, but they were going home.

While she had been ashore, they had received mail, but there had not been such a large accumulation as the time before. Nonetheless, dozens of letters awaited her, from her family and even a few from Alice in Singapore.

She read Alice's missives first, then picked up the letters from her family members. The first one she opened, dated December 1814, was from her father.

My dear Lizzy,

You know my history as a negligent correspondent. However, today I am more than happy to write to anyone and everyone. I have such news! Mrs Bennet was delivered of a son last night. Mother and child are well. My dear girl, you have a brother, and the entail is broken. We shall do all we can to ensure that he grows up safely, in good health and happiness.

The entire household, indeed the entire estate, is in a joyous uproar. I have discovered something that my wife and my servants were keeping from me. If Mr Collins had inherited, every single person who worked and lived at Longbourn would have gone elsewhere. Mrs Collins would have had no servants whatsoever; the home farm

would have had no farmhands. Now they will no longer have to worry themselves about that.

I do not know what Sir William and his family will think of this most felicitous event. Lady Lucas will be unhappy, and I may be persona non grata at Lucas Lodge for a long time, if not forever. Mr Collins will be angry, so I shall not open his letters; rather I shall consign them directly to the fire.

I have been unexpectedly sentimental these last months, as my wife grew great with child. I remember your birth as if it were yesterday. You came into the world with a cap of thick, unruly curls and wide, bright eyes that seemed to take in everything about you. You looked like a little owl wrapped tightly in your swaddling clothes. I remember the births of all my daughters and loved you all the first moment I saw you.

It transpired that Mrs Bennet had already chosen a name for the boy. It was a fait accompli. He is Francis Clement Grenville Bennet. Yes, you have it. He is named after your mother. Mrs Bennet was quite adamant about it and barely permitted me to add my father's given name as his third name. I was surprised, to say the least, but there is a peculiar sort of rightness about it. Your mother was terrified of the entail, and this little boy has broken it. She can rest easy.

I was not an attentive father in the past, my failures were many, but I mean to reform myself and raise our little Francis to love Longbourn as we all do, to care for it diligently and keep it safe far into the future.

Come home to us as soon as you may, my dear little voyager, and meet your brother.

Your loving papa,

Thomas Bennet

Elizabeth reread the letter, a lump in her throat, and wiped away a tear. Francis Clement Grenville Bennet. She could almost hear her mother's voice saying How well that sounds! And Sarah had insisted upon it. It was a fitting tribute indeed. She quietly rejoiced at the news. She wondered whether her father would be a more diligent parent because he had learnt his lesson or because the child was a son; but in the end, it did not matter.

She read the letters from her sisters and particularly enjoyed the descriptions of the daily lives of Jane, Kitty, and the Gardiners in London, and Mary in Cambridge. In their most recent letters, they had all written of their little brother and had all been to Longbourn to see him. Jane wrote:

Lizzy, I believe he takes after you the most. His hair is like yours, and he is a bright little thing! Although he is our brother, he will grow up with his nieces and nephews as if he were their cousin.

Elizabeth felt a little pang. In the past, she had never thought much about children of her own, but now she had a strange yearning to raise a child with Samuel. They would not make a baby together, but she knew he would be an excellent father in every other respect. Perhaps they could adopt children who had been orphaned as he had been. When they were back in England, she would broach the subject with him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

July 1815, Pemberley

Darcy had spent most of the day in the saddle. He had begun with the hayfields, simply because he loved the smell of new-mown hay. They were well into their second cutting. If the weather continued as fine into September, there would be a third cutting, and the haylofts would be packed full for the winter. The largest hayfield was also the nearest to Birchwood Grange, and he had dropped in on Georgiana for a leisurely luncheon.

After their repast, his sister had led him through the new rose garden she was happily planning, using cuttings from many of Pemberley's oldest varieties. As they walked, a pleasant breeze had swirled around them, pressing Georgiana's gown against her form, making the swelling of her abdomen more visible.

Only a few weeks earlier, Georgiana and Fielding had joyously announced that they were expecting a baby, waiting to inform him until after she had felt the quickening. Darcy was very happy for them, though he was still getting used to the idea. His baby sister, soon to be a mother! There would be a new generation of Darcys, though not in name. He remembered holding her little hand in his everywhere they went together when she was small. Impulsively, he had taken hers as they strolled through her garden. She had glanced at him curiously but had squeezed his hand and gone back to describing her plans, before he returned to Pemberley.

He had deliberately stayed away from his study. Tomorrow he would attend to any correspondence that might be awaiting him, but the day had been too perfect to stay

indoors. His steward had thoughtfully left out one letter for him. It was from Fitzwilliam.

After sending a message to the kitchen that he would take his tea out of doors, he took the letter to the west terrace, his preferred place to sit on fair afternoons. He knew exactly what this letter was about, and he wanted to make a little celebration of the reading of it.

When the tea and cakes arrived, he opened it. Sure enough, it was the announcement of the birth of Fitzwilliam and Lucy's first child. They had a son, and his name was Maxwell Darcy Richard Fitzwilliam.

My brother has already used my good father's given name for his eldest son, and it is my belief that there are too many confusing names in the Fitzwilliam line as it is. You and I have particular experience of this. Therefore, we have used Maxwell to honour Lucy's father. I most particularly wanted to honour you, my cousin and dearest friend, so I have used your name without asking your permission. Will you also do us the honour of acting as his godfather?

Our little man keeps us up at night. Although we do have a nurse and nursery maids, I reserve for myself the privilege of walking the floor with him in the small hours of the night, his tiny head on my shoulder, his wee body nestled against my chest.

For many years I never thought that I would have a home or a family of my own. It is thanks to you and your generosity that I do now. I shall never take either for granted...

Darcy read the letter again and again, his tea growing cool. He leant back in his chair, his moist eyes staring unseeingly at the green and golden grasses of the distant fields moving gently in the slight breeze. He rejoiced for his cousin and Lucy, as he did for Georgiana and her husband.

He had received yet another birth announcement only weeks before; that one from Bingley, announcing the arrival of their second daughter. Bingley was happy with his daughters and seemed to have no care whether his children were girls or boys.

Bingley had also informed him of the birth of a son to his sister, Lady Caroline Hicks. He had said that her husband, Sir Wilbur, was very happy and attentive with the child, and Lady Hicks was happy and attentive with the money and title she had received from their marriage bargain.

Darcy very much wished for children, but not as the result of a soulless contracted agreement. An heir, a precious little baby in exchange for riches and a title? He wanted children conceived in love. He wanted to be an involved parent, so unlike his own parents had been. Like the Fitzwilliams and the Fieldings would be.

He had recently turned one-and-thirty. At some point, he might have to start looking for another bride. His appetite vanished, and he rang for the tea tray to be taken away.

Elizabeth could not understand what Lieutenant Leonard was telling her. Where was Samuel?

The lieutenant had appeared at the door to the captain's quarters, his eyes wide, his face pale and pinched. "Mrs Bancroft, there has been an accident." He began babbling about lightning and the topgallant mast and sharp, splintered wood. She quickly darted past him and ran to the main deck.

The deck was still wet from the thunderstorm that had passed quickly overhead only a short time before. She could see sharp, shattered pieces of wood, torn sails, and a knot of crewmen clustered around an inert form lying on the deck. She moved towards them but was prevented from going any farther by Agueda's strong arms encircling her from behind.

“Missus, you mustn’t go there,” she said. “If you see him now, you’ll regret it the rest of your days.”

That was when she knew that her husband was dead.

The surgeon and his mate took charge of their captain’s body, and Lieutenant Leonard returned to her. “Ma’am, it will be your decision as to how we prepare the captain’s mortal remains. As you know, we would usually conduct a service and burial at sea. We are only a day or so away from landing in England. Do you wish to bury him ashore?”

Elizabeth agonised over the question all that night.

Only a few days before, Samuel had been chuckling over a letter from Mr Bennet. “Are you reading Papa’s account of their encounter with Lord Upton and how he noticed Sarah’s necklace? It is quite diverting!” she had asked him.

Her husband had looked up from his letter and smiled a wide, relaxed smile. “No, not that letter, though his story was indeed amusing. No, it is just that I have not felt part of a family for many years. Not since my parents died. Your family has made me feel that I belong. I look forward to spending more time with them when our voyage is over.”

At that moment, she wanted to carry him back to Longbourn with her and put him to rest in the family cemetery, so she could sit with him and plant flowers on his grave.

The more she pondered, images of her husband flooded her mind. Samuel, walking the quarter deck, facing into the wind. Samuel, shouting orders over the roar of the guns or in a tropical storm. The expression of contentment and satisfaction on his face when he studied the set of the sails. How he could scurry up the rigging as quickly as any boy. The sea was his home, his true love. With great sadness,

Elizabeth understood that he would wish to rest under the waves. The thought brought on more tears, but then it occurred to her that she could send a bit of herself with him.

The next morning, she took the little ivory miniature, the lover's eye that Alice had made for him. She reckoned it might soon disintegrate in the salt water, so she wrapped it with special care and put it inside the tightly constructed wooden box that the ship's carpenter had made for it. When her husband's body was brought on deck, she could not see his face. The surgeon had covered Samuel's head. He was neatly dressed in full uniform, as she had insisted. Samuel had been a dignified man, and she could see nothing dignified about being bundled naked into a woollen shroud. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she kissed his hands and tucked the tiny box into his inner breast pocket.

When the surgeon made as if to lead her away, she said to Lieutenant Leonard, "I wish to stay." The assembled officers looked at each other, but one by one, they nodded in agreement. Their heads bowed, hundreds of men, almost the entire crew, stood in complete silence on the deck. Only the sounds of the sea and the wind could be heard. The burial service was read, hymns were sung, and Captain Samuel Bancroft, her beloved friend, mentor, and protector, his body wrapped in sailcloth, silently slipped beneath the waves.

CHAPTER THIRTY

June 1817, London

U pon their return from Devonshire, Darcy's intention was to stay in town only as long as necessary to catch up on his business affairs, then he would return to Pemberley alone. Georgiana and Fielding planned to stay in town for a few more weeks, to attend the wedding of his cousin. The couple used Darcy House for prolonged stays two or three times a year, but Darcy came to town only when he had to, even though his relatives assured him repeatedly that he was not and never had been a social pariah or the object of mockery.

Three years earlier, Lady Matlock had skilfully recast the debacle of his marriage as an affair in which he was the victim—a distinguished man trying to honour his deceased mother's wishes but then cruelly misused by his greedy aunt and deranged cousin. Their violent deaths had kicked up some dust, but it had quickly settled again once it became clear that the sources of the outrageous behaviour were no more. Lady Catherine had long had an unfavourable reputation; many among the ton were all too happy to believe ill of her. There was nary a whisper of incriminating letters or blackmail, nor of any disgrace to himself or his sister. Three years on, with Georgiana safely married to a landed gentleman who, though not of the ton , was fully accepted by the earl and countess, and the deaths of Lady Catherine and Anne, Darcy's reputation was completely in the clear. The difference was that he no longer had any interest in the first circles; rather, he had an aversion to them.

After a bath and a change of clothes, he walked to his study and removed a large mahogany box from the safe. Opening it, he lifted out tray after tray of opulent

jewellery—brooches, rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, fobs, all pure gold or silver, studded with precious gems or pearls—until at last he found what he wanted. It was a long, finely wrought gold chain, devoid of any decoration.

Darcy sat in a chair by the window and took the lover's eye pendant out of his breast pocket. He held it up to the light streaming through the window, admiring again the artist's ability to capture the fire and sparkle of Elizabeth's eye on such a tiny piece of ivory. He traced the delicate winged eyebrow with the tip of his finger and marvelled at the thick, dark lashes, so fine and beautiful. He succumbed to impulse and kissed it, glad that no one could see him, then slid the pendant onto the chain. Undoing Talbot's excellent work on his cravat, he opened his shirt and set the chain over his head and around his neck. The pendant came to rest right over his heart. Now he would never lose it; indeed, he would never remove it. He returned the jewellery to the safe, rebuttoned his shirt and tied his cravat, and went to join his family in the blue parlour.

The tea had just been brought in when he entered the room. Georgiana and Fielding were already there, and the three tucked in to the variety of refreshments laid before them. "When is your cousin's wedding?" Darcy asked his brother.

"In nine days. Leonard arrived in town today. He has some business with the Admiralty. He will see to that as well as his part of the final wedding preparations."

"Where is he staying?" asked Georgiana.

"With Mrs Bothwell, an aunt on his father's side. She has a house in Hans Town. I expect we shall see him here as well, if you will extend an invitation, my dear."

So it was that the next afternoon, a pleasant-looking young naval officer was sitting in the blue parlour. Darcy reckoned he had five or six more days, perhaps a week, of attending to business in town before he could escape to Pemberley. He could afford

the time to make a brief appearance.

The newly minted Captain Leonard bore a passing resemblance to Fielding, and he also had the family charm. He was animatedly describing his ship, the *Melisande*, as Darcy entered the room. Georgiana made the introductions. “The *Melisande* is your new command? It is a frigate, I understand?” Darcy asked.

“Yes, a fine third-rater. In fact, I served on her under the late Captain Bancroft. He was my mentor, and he set the high standard I shall hold myself to as I formally take command. He took a new, unfamiliar crew and moulded us into a unified force. We survived a long and eventful cruise to Singapore and back between 1813 and 1815, and every man respected and was loyal to him. Cyclones, pirates, a running skirmish with a rogue French privateer, you name it. We became a fighting force to take pride in under his command.”

“You say the late Captain Bancroft. Did he die on the voyage?” Georgiana asked.

The young captain looked down at his hands, then raised his head, genuine sorrow writ on his face. “Technically, yes. We were in the final stretch of the voyage home, almost within sight of England. There was a sudden squall, and a bolt of lightning struck the main topgallant mast, splintering it. One of the larger splinters pierced him as it fell, and he was killed instantly. He never knew what hit him.”

“And so close to home,” murmured Georgiana.

“It was a terrible, useless tragedy. For a man who had survived so much over the course of his career, to be killed by random chance...” The captain shook his head. “He served under Nelson himself in the West Indies and the Mediterranean and went on to be decorated for bravery at the Nile, Copenhagen, and Trafalgar. His reputation was such that he received a posthumous promotion to Rear Admiral of the Blue. He and his wife were contemplating retirement to some land he owned near Bristol. She

sailed with us, you know.”

Darcy’s interest was piqued. “She sailed with her husband? On a naval vessel? All the way to Singapore and back?”

Captain Leonard nodded. “An officer bringing his wife on a mission is not a common thing, but it is not unheard of. I would go so far as to say that Mrs Bancroft was integral to the success of our mission. She was her husband’s partner and sometimes adviser. They trusted each other implicitly. She took the time to know every member of the crew, from myself down to the cabin boys. Treated them all with kindness and dignity while maintaining the distance her husband’s rank required.”

Darcy found himself enjoying the young officer so much that he stayed until the visit ended. As Captain Leonard took his leave, he invited both gentlemen to a gathering of his colleagues at the Barbary Inn, where a private dining room had been reserved for a late dinner that evening. “It is a fine old inn, and it is known for its excellent fare. Good food and any kind of libations you can imagine.”

“Why, I would enjoy that immensely! What say you, Darcy?” said Fielding.

Darcy reflected. An evening out would not go amiss, so long as it was not spent in the ornate drawing rooms of the ton . “Yes, I believe I would enjoy that. Thank you, Captain Leonard.”

Later that day, Darcy and Fielding took an unmarked carriage to the inn, an ancient but well-kept building with a brick and half-timbered exterior, located in a shabby part of the city. They were shown through the busy public rooms to a large, well-appointed dining room. Captain Leonard was already there, as were what looked like more than twenty other officers. With Leonard providing introductions all round, the gentlemen seated themselves randomly, as the inn’s servants poured ale and wine and took orders. Leonard was correct; the victuals were plain English fare but delicious.

The stories began over dinner. Tales of the war with France and of naval actions in the North American war were matched with others from the Caribbean, of sailing round the Horn, of the endless Pacific and its verdant green islands. These men had not only seen sea battles and pirates, but cyclones and showers of falling stars, whales and enormous schools of dolphins, shoals of luminescent sea creatures, and such things as rogue waves taller than the tallest buildings.

Darcy tasted several exotic beverages and found he enjoyed many of them. He sipped a drink from Lebanon called arak and appreciated the new experience. "I wonder why I have never heard of this inn before," he said to himself.

"If you are not a Navy man, I am not surprised," said an older man next to him. "Ships' officers tend to keep this place to ourselves. Oh, Army fellows stumble on it occasionally, but it is near enough to the docks that Navy and Marine officers make up most of the patrons. The Barbary is well-appointed and well-run. We are safe from fashionable society here, yet it has not the rough-and-tumble aspect of the dockside taverns."

The old man held out his hand. "I am Admiral Langley, at your service, sir. Pray pardon my informality, but I do not believe we were introduced in all the flurry."

"Fitzwilliam Darcy," he said, taking the man's hand. The admiral had a surprisingly strong grip, but like many who had spent their lives on the sea, he likely looked older than his true age. His face was as tanned as old leather, and his hair was wiry and white. His eyes, however, were among the most piercing Darcy had ever seen. "How do you know Captain Leonard? Has he served under your command?"

"I have not had the honour of serving with him directly, but I know him through his former commanding officer, Captain Bancroft, late of the *Melisande* in the East Indies squadron. Bancroft served under Nelson and removed to my command after Trafalgar."

“Captain Leonard said that his death was a terrible loss.”

“It was indeed, and not just to the Melisande but to the Navy. He should have been promoted to rear admiral earlier in his career, not after his death.” The admiral sipped his drink, a dark Jamaican rum, and leant back in his chair. “He was quite a singular man. A gentleman to the bone. Very quiet, very reserved, very closed off. Few ever really knew him. He had a genuine humanity about him though. He was respected by his men, especially those of the lowest ranks. He never pretended to be their friend or any such nonsense, but they esteemed him because he treated them with dignity and respected their work and their importance to his ship. His crews were among the finest, like a well-oiled machine.”

“And his wife travelled with him?”

“Aye, that she did, but only on his last voyage. He married later in life. I believe he was two-and-forty.” The admiral chuckled. “We who had been acquainted with him for many years thought he was a confirmed bachelor. I could not have been more surprised when he reported for duty with a pretty young wife. A country girl, half his age, daughter of an insignificant squire buried deep in the shires somewhere. She had never even clapped eyes on the sea before, much less ever sailed. I do not mind telling you that I was worried he had made a mistake.”

The admiral filled up his glass. His face was slightly flushed, and he seemed a little too talkative, but Darcy was not about to object, so fascinated was he by the story. “Now, mind you, I am not one of those officers who are against women on a ship. My Hannah has sailed with me for years, through good and bad and thick and thin. But it takes a rare breed of woman to endure the hardships and dangers on a naval vessel. It was a great relief to me when Hannah spent time with her and pronounced her fit for duty.

“She was a bright little thing. She found her sea legs quickly and worked hard to

learn her place on board ship. She assisted the surgeon when needed and attended to the sick, as all officers' wives should. Somewhere along the way she had been educated more in the way of a boy than a girl, so she served as school master to the middies. Taught them Latin and Greek, history, and some mathematics, even some music. When she discovered that many of the crew could not read or write, she taught those who wished to learn."

Darcy raised his glass. "Rare indeed. How tragic that the captain died before they could make a home of their own."

A group of younger officers at the next table had turned in their chairs to listen.

"If I may share a story, sir, Mrs Bancroft sang for the whole crew sometimes." He nudged one of his companions. "Remember how she would sing Coast of High Barbary with young Fred playing the fiddle?"

"Aye, and how she sang to fearsome Old Jago when he was dying?" the second young officer turned to explain. "One of the seamen was called Jago. He was a huge old Cornishman, monstrously big, and a real ruffian. He'd been a smuggler and a pirate and Lord knows what else. He had many scars, and his face looked like he'd been fighting his whole life. All the middies were afraid of him, but he liked Captain Bancroft and his missus. He took a few bullets in the gut from the French ship, and he was dying—there was no saving him. He was in agony and very restless, so Mrs Bancroft sat with him and sang. She held his hand and sang some Cornish ballads and a lullaby she knew, and it calmed him right down. Old Jago relaxed and closed his eyes and smiled. She sang him right up to the pearly gates, sir. I have never seen the like."

"She is very kind," agreed the youngest at their table. To Darcy's eyes, this young man, though dressed in a sharp lieutenant's uniform, had not yet achieved his majority. His cheeks were still rounded, and there was little evidence of whiskers.

“Always seeing to the welfare of the crew.” He flushed red and hid his eyes behind one hand. “I accidentally called her ‘Mama’ once.”

The entire table erupted in raucous laughter, and his compatriots pounded him on the back.

The admiral opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by Captain Leonard, who had come up behind Darcy. “I could not help but overhear you speak of Mrs Bancroft. I have news for you. My betrothed has received a letter from her. She will be attending the wedding!”

The company continued far into the night, with Darcy enjoying himself more than he had in months. Later, as he and Fielding rode home, he thought about women who would brave the hardships and dangers to be always with their husbands and wondered how on earth to go about finding one.

“My dear, what think you of planning a dinner party for my cousin Leonard and Miss Warner?” asked Fielding the next morning.

Georgiana looked up from her breakfast. “What a delightful idea!” She narrowed her eyes at him. “You seem to be enjoying the company of naval officers. Should I be worried that you plan to enlist?”

Her husband chuckled. “I like my creature comforts too much for that, never you fear.” He leant forwards. “I wish you had seen your brother last night. I do not know whether I have ever seen him so pleased with his company, except among the Cronies of course. A comfortable dinner party might be just the thing for him as well, especially since he is for Derbyshire at the end of the week. No complicated French delicacies, no artful coquetry, no putting on airs. What do you think?”

Georgiana smiled. “I think it an excellent idea. If you would please ask your cousin

about a date, I shall happily proceed.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The night of the dinner party had arrived. The guests were being ushered into the drawing room, the officers in full-dress uniform. The ladies, though slightly outnumbered, appeared in evening gowns.

Darcy hurried to the drawing room, adjusting his neckcloth, uncomfortable at being late to a dinner in his own home, even though Georgiana and Fielding were the official hosts. His afternoon meetings had run late, and he was so close to completing his business and leaving for Pemberley that he had not wanted to postpone the appointment. He had rushed home, and Talbot had dressed him with celerity, but most of the guests had already arrived.

As he entered the drawing room, he recognised many of the same faces he had seen at the Barbary Inn, along with several ladies. Captain Leonard and Miss Warner, the guests of honour, had their backs to him while they spoke animatedly to another guest whom he could not see. He paused at the door for a moment, and just as he did, Leonard and his intended shifted slightly, and he saw their companion.

Time stilled. His heart stopped. All sound hushed and died away. The Earth itself stopped spinning on its axis. He could not believe his eyes. There, in his house, in his drawing room, only feet away from him, stood Elizabeth Bennet.

Darcy froze, unable even to blink. He could not move; his blood roared and fizzed in his veins. She was alive! She was alive and even more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair, what he could see of it, still fell in lustrous chestnut curls, her skin still glowed, her eyes still sparkled. He felt the lover's eye pendant against his chest. His

feet wanted to move towards her, but his ever-cautious brain would not let them. How would he address her?

Not as Miss Bennet, nor his preferred Miss Elizabeth. She was wearing the merest wisp of a cap, a pert little nod to convention, nothing like those lacy monstrosities that her mother wore. Her plum-coloured silk gown was the height of elegance, simply and beautifully cut. She must be married, but to an officer, not a lowly sailor. Lady Hicks had exaggerated then, not categorically lied.

He moved his eyes about the room. Her husband must be here. Which one was he? Darcy did not want to like him, whoever he was. But enough ruminating. No matter what, he needed to speak to her. He moved towards her, as other people also moved to greet her. She must have just arrived.

Captain Leonard spotted him first. "Sir, do come and permit me to introduce you to one you have heard us speak of."

Darcy moved towards them, his eyes on Elizabeth. She looked up at him, smiling pleasantly, followed by a brief expression of puzzlement, then recognition.

"Why, Mr Darcy!" She curtsied, then held out her hand. "It has been a very long time. I hope you are well, sir?"

"Mrs Bancroft, you are acquainted with Mr Darcy?" asked Captain Leonard in surprise.

"Yes, very briefly, several years ago. I would be surprised if you remember me, sir."

I could never forget you. He bowed over her hand. "Mrs Bancroft, it is very good to see you again. I am well, thank you. Is your family in good health?"

An odd little smile flitted over her face. “We are. I thank you for asking.”

Darcy could feel the press of people around him, all of whom presumably wished to see Elizabeth, or rather, Mrs Bancroft. She was Mrs Bancroft , widow of the revered captain, much admired herself. Of course she would be.

“You have many friends who wish to greet you, Mrs Bancroft. I shall give way to them, and I hope we may be able to speak later on.” She smiled her thanks as another officer stepped forwards.

Darcy hoped he would be seated next to her at dinner, but alas, he was not. He was near enough to see her and counted himself fortunate for that. She is here! He wondered belatedly whether Elizabeth knew that she was in his house and that her hostess was his sister.

After their meal, Georgiana led the ladies out. He should have taken great pleasure in the company of these men and the stories they shared. instead, he chafed at the bit, anxious to speak to Elizabeth.

He was perturbed by the momentary confusion on her face when she saw him, the lack of immediate recognition. Darcy felt a twinge of wounded pride. He remembered in detail his time in Hertfordshire those many years ago and everything she had said when he had assumed she was flirting with him, seeking his attentions. He had not been able to forget her.

But why would he believe she had thought of him at all? Their connexion was perhaps entirely in his own mind. He and his party had left Hertfordshire abruptly, with no proper farewells, and Bingley’s sisters had rudely disposed of Miss Bennet in London. Shortly after that, Elizabeth would have been preoccupied with the disgraceful death of her sister and the ruin of her family. Then her uncle had somehow married the surviving sisters off? When had that happened? What was the

sequence of events? He had so many questions, and he wondered whether he could ever bring himself to ask them, or whether she would not wish to speak of it to someone who was perhaps, to her, merely a former acquaintance from long ago.

Still, the evening was designed to honour Captain Leonard and Miss Warner, and Elizabeth was there because she was their friend, not his. Another time, if he could arrange it, would be better to see her.

When the gentlemen rejoined the ladies in the drawing room, Darcy stood a little apart from the others, watching Elizabeth as she spoke to her friends. She smiled and laughed, her affection and respect for those around her apparent.

He started a little to feel a gentle touch on his arm and looked down to see his sister looking at him quizzically.

“Mrs Bancroft is a pleasant lady, is she not, Brother?” Her tone was questioning. Georgiana had undoubtedly noticed him staring at Elizabeth.

He looked down at his little sister, biting his lip to prevent himself from breaking into a wide grin. “It is she, Georgiana. The widow Mrs Bancroft is the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet.”

She gave a little gasp then squeezed his arm tightly. “Oh, Brother!”

The evening drew to a close, and Elizabeth offered her thanks and farewells to her hostess. As they stood chatting in the hall, Mr Darcy appeared next to Mrs Fielding with Elizabeth’s own gossamer-light summer wrap over his arm. She looked at him with a question in her eyes.

“Mrs Bancroft, you have been introduced to Mrs Fielding, but will you allow me to add to the introduction?” Although one was dark and the other fair, the tall, blue-eyed

pair stood next to each other and exchanged matching smiles.

Elizabeth gasped. “Mrs Fielding, you are Mr Darcy’s sister?”

They all laughed. “Yes, Mrs Bancroft. I am Georgiana.”

When Mrs Fielding turned to bid some of her other guests good night, Mr Darcy deftly set the wrap on her shoulders. “Mrs Bancroft, I am happy to have met you again after so long, even though we were not able to speak. Will you allow me, or do I ask too much, to call on you where you are staying?”

“I...yes, that would be very pleasant. I am staying at the home of my aunt and uncle on Gracechurch Street.” She gave him the direction, and he escorted her through the front door, bowed over her hand in farewell, and handed her into the carriage, his eyes meeting hers

In her uncle’s carriage on the way back to Gracechurch Street, Elizabeth reflected on the evening. After almost two years in Somerset, settling into her house, grieving both her husband and her life aboard the *Melisande*, it was a great joy to see her friends again, especially Hannah and Molly. To have found Mr Darcy of all people in the midst of her seafaring companions had been jarring. Yet impossibly, he had seemed at ease among this company of naval men and their wives. Certainly more so than he had ever been among the inhabitants of Meryton.

It had been disconcerting, to say the least. She had felt the curiously familiar weight of his eyes at dinner, and then again when the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing room. His gaze had the same intensity she remembered but was somehow different. Softer and more open, perhaps. More likely it was the fact that she herself was different now; wiser, less critical, less naively cocksure of her own impressions.

Elizabeth smiled to herself. Six years before, she had believed his staring was

directed at finding fault with her. Yet it was she who had been constantly finding fault with him because her girlish feelings had been stung by his careless remark at that silly little assembly, not the other way round. She had refused even to admit to herself what a handsome man he was.

Her eyes had most definitely been opened that evening. Handsome was perhaps not even the word. Beautiful. He was a beautiful man. When the gentlemen had joined the ladies in the drawing room, she was surprised at how quickly her eyes were drawn to him. Although a very tall man, he possessed a quickness and economy of movement that rendered him graceful. As soon as he had entered the room, his eyes had immediately found hers. He had made two attempts to draw near her but had been outmanoeuvred both times. She had been unaccountably disappointed.

As the carriage rolled along the quiet streets, Elizabeth mused upon how Mr Darcy had only moments before pressed her hand and looked deeply into her eyes. Though the carriage windows were open to the warm June evening, she shivered.

Darcy, dressed in a nightshirt and banyan, sat in a deep armchair in his bedchamber, his feet up and his windows open to the evening breeze; the picture of repose, though he was anything but relaxed. Rather, he was in turns giddy and agitated. He repeatedly rose and walked to the mantel, or to the cheval glass, or to the window, and back to the chair.

He fingered the pendant on the chain around his neck, then closed his hand tightly around it. Elizabeth had been here in his house. She had supped at his table and played the instrument in his drawing room. How many times had he imagined just such a scene?

She was still beautiful; indeed, her beauty had only grown. Unlike so many ladies who thought themselves more alluring when they overflowed their bodices, Elizabeth's gown had not revealed, only tantalised. He had wanted to set his hand on

her shoulder and run his thumb along her delicate collarbones; to press his lips next to her ear. She awoke sensations in his body that he had almost forgotten.

Could it be that fate had brought them together? Less than a fortnight ago, he had found her image washed up on the shingle in Devonshire, and now here she was.

He had last seen her on November 26, 1811, more than five years ago. He had many questions about her life since. Lady Hicks's allegations about the Bennet family had tortured him. They had been shunned and ruined because of Wickham. Had there indeed been forced marriages? He remembered that his investigator had determined that Longbourn estate was still held by Mr Bennet. Why then would they have been forced to marry? Surely, if the sisters were living in penury, they would be allowed to return to their home? Elizabeth's appearance in his house this evening surely put the lie to Lady Hicks's assertions!

And now Elizabeth was here—respected and admired and more beautiful than ever. She had been challenged and tested and had passed with flying colours; not only in whatever tribulations had forced her from her home, but in the hard life at sea.

His need to know all was almost overpowering, yet he understood that he must tread delicately. What little that he did know of Elizabeth's life over the past few years had come from the mouth of an angry, conceited woman who had despised her from almost their first introduction. She might be angry or embarrassed to find that he had been listening to gossip about her. No, he had to hear it from Elizabeth herself, but she likely would not wish to speak of past humiliations and sorrows.

Most of all he desired knowledge of her present circumstances. Where was she living? Did she have a sufficient income? Who were her friends? She was held in esteem, even affection, by many naval officers, and had recently come out of mourning. Could there be another man biding his time, waiting to pursue her?

Her failure to instantly recognise him still rankled. She had seemed pleased to see him, though. Mildly pleased. Once she recognised you, you great fool. Six years before, he had been too conscious of his superior rank to care what her opinion of him was, simply assuming that she found his company appealing.

He should not be surprised. Their respective lives had changed greatly since then. One might even say their roles had been reversed. Ladies usually stayed at home, their lives quiet and confined. Gentlemen always had a profession, pursuits, or business of some sort or other to keep them out in the world.

In his case, Darcy had kept close to his home since the end of 1811, and especially after his marriage, choosing to step back from the wider world. Elizabeth had been catapulted out into it, where continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions. He barked a laugh. He had just found her again, and already she humbled him anew without even knowing it.

A new thought warmed him, thrilled him with possibility. He could court her, truly get to know her, and she him, as he should have done when he had the chance. He could open himself to her, show her that he had shed his armour of superiority and pride.

One thing was certain: he would not return to Pemberley as planned. In the morning, he would write to Mrs Reynolds and to his steward, notifying them of his intent to prolong his stay in London indefinitely. For as long as it would take.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The children had eaten breakfast and set to their morning lessons with their governess. At last, Elizabeth could chat with her aunt about the dinner party she had attended the night before.

“The officers of the *Melisande* were given a long shore leave after their last voyage, and they are gathered for Lieutenant...oh bother, I mean Captain Leonard’s wedding. Mr Fielding, our host, is Captain Leonard’s cousin. Apparently, they were close as boys. Their home was very elegant, but not ostentatious as I had thought it might be, located where it is. Mrs Fielding was rather young but a graceful and warm hostess. Admiral and Mrs Langley were there, as was Lieutenant Middleton and Captain Dunbar and their wives. Oh, Aunt,” she sighed. “I do miss them so.”

“Friendships forged in difficult circumstances are often the strongest bonds,” remarked Mrs Gardiner.

“Yet I missed you all terribly while I was at sea. There, I am fickle, and there is no pleasing me.”

“Perhaps you should count yourself fortunate that you have so many excellent friends, both here in England and also far away. I am sure that with the friends you found in the Navy, you will always be missing someone, scattered all over the world as they are. It is a good thing that you are a prolific correspondent.”

“There was another present at the dinner whom I never expected to see again in my life. Do you remember several years ago when Mr Bingley leased the Netherfield

estate, and his party made such a stir in our sleepy, inconsequential little town?"

"Mr Bingley was there?" gasped Mrs Gardiner, her hand flying to her chest.

Elizabeth laughed heartily. "No, thank goodness! No, his friend Mr Darcy was there! It turns out that Mrs Fielding is his sister, and she and her husband use his home when in London. Can you imagine my surprise?"

"I can indeed! I remember how you disliked him, and I could not make sense of your description of him, as it was at such odds with what I knew of his family."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. "Ah yes, the opinions of an ignorant country girl who believed herself to have superior powers of discernment." She returned her aunt's gaze and said in a voice tinged with remorse, "I was wrong about so many things! Mr Bingley proved to be a spineless jilt, and Mr Wickham proved to be a vile reprobate. Mr Darcy was indeed above his company, and too awkward in conversation to be pleasing, but in retrospect, a decent man. A gentleman. Much too late, I realised he had tried to warn me about Mr Wickham's depravity. I was too decided against him to hear it.

"I think he would have liked to speak to me last night, but he was very thoughtful regarding my time with my friends from the Melisande . He did ask if he could call while I was in town. I gave him your direction, Aunt. I hope you do not mind."

Aunt Gardiner looked at her curiously. "I do not mind at all, but why do you think he wishes to visit you? You were not friends."

"No, we were not," sighed Elizabeth. "I wasted a chance to make a friend of an intelligent, educated man, which were in very short supply in Meryton. I shall admit to curiosity about his life over the past several years. He should have married some wealthy, titled, diamond of the first water by now, but there was no mention of a Mrs

Darcy.”

Mrs Gardiner settled back against the cushions and stared absently, seeming to search her memory. “I believe my friend in Lambton said he is widowed. I plead ignorance of anything further. You know how your uncle feels about society gossip rags. We do not read them.”

Their butler appeared at the door. “There is a Mr Darcy here to see Mrs Bancroft, madam.”

Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner sat bolt upright and stared at each other open-mouthed for a moment, then both ladies leapt up and began patting their hair and shaking out their skirts. Mrs Gardiner answered somewhat breathlessly, “We shall receive him in the yellow parlour, Jackson. Goodness this is early for a visit! Pray send in a tea tray with some toast, fruit, cheese, and breakfast pastries. And coffee as well.”

The two ladies managed to settle themselves in the parlour seconds before Mr Darcy was shown in. Elizabeth inhaled sharply. He was just as handsome and stately as she remembered, but as she had seen the previous evening, his countenance was no longer marred by a frosty hauteur. He wore a small smile, and his eyes seemed unusually bright. Heavens, he was almost animated!

Curtseys and bows were exchanged, and Elizabeth presented her aunt to their guest.

“Mr Darcy, my aunt shares a controversial opinion with you. She believes Derbyshire to be the finest of counties.”

One corner of Mr Darcy’s mouth twitched, but he answered with solemnity. “Obviously, Mrs Gardiner, you are a lady of great discernment. Though I am curious as to why you have formed that opinion. Are you from Derbyshire?”

“I am, sir. I spent much of my youth in Lambton. My father, Mr Ellis, was rector of that parish until his health began to fail, then we removed to the south of England to be closer to my mother’s family.”

“I do not remember ever meeting your father, but my own father spoke of him with respect. We attended services in Kympton, though I believe he and my parents collaborated on the Lambton parish school, which is still in operation.”

Mr Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “Have you visited Derbyshire, Mrs Bancroft?”

“I have not. I was supposed to travel north with my aunt and uncle five years ago but...” Elizabeth faltered, heat rising in her cheeks. She was skirting perilously close to her family’s fraught history of that year. Mrs Gardiner smoothly finished her sentence.

“Yes, Mr Gardiner and I had hoped to take Elizabeth with us to Derbyshire and the Lakes, but other circumstances interfered, and we had to cancel our plans. When we were again at liberty to travel, we only had time to go as far as Lambton, and our niece was already at sea. Poor soul, she has only seen two oceans and three continents, with islands and ports of call too numerous to mention, but not the north of England,” Aunt Gardiner said breezily, with a surreptitious wink.

“I still wish to see the Lakes, Aunt. Perhaps we can make the journey next summer?”

Before Mrs Gardiner could voice her reply, Mr Darcy spoke. “If you are able to travel to the Lakes, you must visit Pemberley on your way. Mr and Mrs Fielding also live nearby and would enjoy your company.”

Elizabeth blinked at the familiarity implied by Mr Darcy’s invitation. “That would be pleasant indeed. I remember Mr and Miss Bingley’s praise of your home, and I am sure it would be lovely to see.”

Her aunt was clearly enthused. “When I was a child, I had the honour of visiting Pemberley, sir. Your mother planned a little celebration of May Day for the village children. There was a maypole and Morris dancers. We sang and danced around the maypole, and your housekeeper gave us each a little posy. We had a picnic on the lawn, and we were permitted to walk in the orchard where the trees were covered in blossom. I still remember how beautiful they were.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “My mother greatly enjoyed planning events that would benefit the people of our community. Especially the children.”

Noting his wistful expression, Elizabeth said, “I expect you are well travelled, Mr Darcy.”

He smiled ruefully. “Not like you are, Mrs Bancroft. I did not have a grand tour, due in part to the situation on the Continent but mostly to my father’s declining health. After his death, there was no question of travel while I assumed my responsibilities as my sister’s guardian and master of Pemberley. Since she married almost three years ago, I have reacquainted myself with a small estate in Scotland that is part of my family’s holdings, and I recently accompanied Mr and Mrs Fielding to Devonshire to inspect a property he inherited there. Otherwise, I have been content to remain at Pemberley, managing the farm and other interests, with occasional short visits to London.”

Elizabeth wondered. Managing the farm? He does not spend most of the year in town? He does not spend the Season there? Her former impressions of Mr Darcy had again been proved wrong. She had thought him to live mostly in London, mingling with the wealthy and titled, a proud pillar of fashionable society. That was the portrait Miss Bingley had painted of him.

“You prefer the country,” said Elizabeth with a soft smile, a little question in her voice.

“Yes, by far. I do enjoy availing myself of the great variety of entertainments of the city—concerts or plays or lectures, and patronising the booksellers and Tattersall’s—but that is not enough to keep me here for long. I miss my home too much.”

“You speak of your home with great pleasure, sir. It must mean a great deal to you.”

He nodded. “Mrs Bancroft, you were also quite attached to Longbourn, I believe. Do your parents still reside there? Did you remove there upon returning to our shores?”

“My mother died of a fever several years ago, but my father remains. He has in fact remarried.”

Mr Darcy’s eyes widened in surprise. “I am grieved to hear that you lost your mother. It hardly seems possible. Mrs Bennet was a...” He stumbled over his words, clearly searching for the right ones. “A spirited personality. You must miss her very much.”

Elizabeth managed not to chuckle, but her eyes twinkled at his careful choice of words. “We all do.”

“So you did not go home to Longbourn to live? Does your stepmother not welcome you?”

Elizabeth smiled. “No, I am welcome there whenever I choose, and I visit often. I have my own home, Windward House, overlooking the Bristol Channel in Somerset. And of course, I enjoy visiting family in London. Beside my aunt and uncle, two of my sisters, Jane and Catherine, reside in town with their families. Like you, I also find the entertainments of the city an attraction.”

“You have a house by the sea? That must be lovely.”

“Yes, Captain Bancroft and I had planned to retire there.”

Mr Darcy, looking chagrined, closed his eyes briefly. “I am sorry for your loss, Mrs Bancroft.”

“I thank you, sir, that is very kind. And have you found your partner in life, Mr Darcy?”

“I am widowed, madam.”

Elizabeth felt a wave of sympathy. “Now it is my turn to offer condolences. So, you know what it is to miss someone deeply.”

His hand rose briefly to his chest. “I married my cousin Anne de Bourgh, as my family wished. She had never enjoyed good health and died less than a year later.”

“I do remember that my cousin Mr Collins said your marriage to Miss de Bourgh was planned. Do you have any children?”

“No, no children. I have no need of an heir. Pemberley is not entailed. Georgiana or her children can inherit.”

“Does your sister have any children?” Mrs Gardiner asked.

Her aunt’s voice seemed to take him by surprise, and Elizabeth herself startled. Apparently both of them had forgotten she was still in the room.

“She has a son who is not yet two years old.”

The visit continued for a short time longer, though they were already well over the usual quarter hour. Mr Darcy looked at his watch and stood. “I fear I must take my

leave.”

Elizabeth smiled as she also stood, and the trio moved towards the door.

Mr Darcy bowed to the ladies and thanked Mrs Gardiner for her hospitality. “Mrs Gardiner, Mrs Bancroft, will you have time while you are in town to attend a performance of some kind? I have heard that Herr Gerhard Heidemann will be in town to conduct a series of concerts soon. Would you and your family wish to attend?”

Elizabeth stifled a grin and exchanged a glance with her aunt. “We would enjoy that very much, sir, and shall wait to hear more details from you.” Curtseys and bows were exchanged. Elizabeth, on impulse, held her hand out to Mr Darcy and was taken aback when he took it and gave it a little squeeze.

After the gentleman had been escorted out, Aunt Gardiner stared at the closed door and turned a discerning eye on her niece, one brow arched high. “Lizzy, I believe you have a suitor.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I would be surprised if that were the case.” She moved to the window overlooking the road to watch him depart. “Although he is certainly more amiable now, if he were to seek a second wife, it would be from among his own set.” She watched Mr Darcy speak to the boy who had been walking his horse and give the lad a coin.

The man was impeccably dressed as always. His coat accentuated his broad shoulders, stretching slightly as he moved. His breeches clung to his long, perfectly formed legs. She sighed, forgetting that her aunt was in the room. As he swung easily into the saddle, she could see the muscles of his thighs work and glimpsed the shape of his lower back and perfect derriere as his coattails flew up slightly. Her mouth went dry, and she felt a wave of heat and the strangest flop of her stomach.

“Lizzy?”

Elizabeth started and tried to reply, but only a wheezy croak emerged from her mouth.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

O n the day that Darcy would have embarked on his solitary journey north to Pemberley, he instead had found himself calling on Elizabeth and was now in the carriage with Georgiana and Fielding on their way to an appointment with an architect. He was barely attending to the conversation, his mind replaying his call on Elizabeth and her aunt. She had asked him if he had found his partner in life, not knowing that he had been imagining her in that office for several years. And to find that he had something in common with her beloved aunt! Surely that boded well for his relationship with her family. Realising how little he was contributing to the conversation, he tore his thoughts away from his morning call and attended to the topic at hand.

The Devonshire property included a medieval cottage well on its way to becoming an unliveable shell, but Fielding had taken the notion to see whether it could be saved. He had heard high praise of a man who was not only a talented architect but a historic preservationist. Buoyed by his visit to Elizabeth, Darcy was of a mood to indulge his own curiosity. Some hidden features of the old chapel at Pemberley had recently come to light after some repairs were begun. Some long-dead Darcy had hidden richly coloured paintings, a baptismal font, and an extravagantly carved rood screen behind a brick wall during the early years of the Reformation. He himself would enjoy consulting an architectural preservationist.

“I feel we are fortunate to have been granted a meeting with Sir Alexander. Apparently, Lady Hicks has been trying to entice him to design a manor house for her and Sir Wilbur. She has been put off more than once,” said Georgiana.

Darcy nodded. “Bingley wrote quite an entertaining account of it in a letter several months ago. It seems she is recreating Pemberley, only with more embellishment. It has become an obsession with her. Sir Alexander has turned her down several times. He wrote that he is committed to other projects for the foreseeable future, and he even suggested other architects, but his services are quite in vogue now, and she will not take no for an answer.”

Fielding shook his head. “So Lady Hicks expects him to design her own version of Pemberley as an opulent palace.”

Georgiana gave a wry smile. “That would indeed be just like her. Whatever it is she wants, I do not understand why she cannot get an appointment. She and Sir Wilbur can afford anything she can dream up. She will not be happy if she finds out that we just sent him a note requesting an appointment and received one almost immediately.”

“Perhaps Sir Alexander does not choose his commissions merely for money. He did donate his time on the plans for the restoration of an ancient Saxon church in Gloucestershire and has done other pro bono work.”

The carriage took them to the outskirts of the city, and they soon pulled up in front of a spacious and well-preserved early Georgian house with a large garden and beautifully laid out small park. Within minutes, a groom appeared and showed the coachman to the stables while the butler conducted them to Sir Alexander’s showroom on the first floor.

Shown through wide double doors, they entered a large, high-ceilinged room that was recognisable as a former ballroom. It was populated with large tables covered with architectural plans, and pedestals displaying intricate models of spiral staircases, arches, and buttresses. Bookcases and architectural drawings covered the walls. Several drafting tables in a smaller room just off the larger space were occupied by

young draftsmen hard at work.

“Mr and Mrs Fielding and Mr Darcy, sir,” intoned the butler, who then bowed and left the room.

A lanky, sandy-haired man rose from behind a desk and walked towards them. He bowed and smiled at the trio, his eyes moving from face to face. “Good afternoon. I am Alexander Magnussen. I welcome you to my workshop.”

Fielding made further introductions, and Sir Alexander gestured them to a corner of the room near a tiled hearth, where sofas and armchairs were placed around a low table. Georgiana had used her drawing expertise to make several sketches of the cottage from different angles. As his brother-in-law described the property, Darcy let his eyes move about the room. It was a fascinating place, and he hoped to have a chance to look more closely at some of the beautiful and detailed models and drawings. A workshop, Sir Alexander had called it, not a salon. He had also not used his title. Although by all accounts a tradesman in demand by fashionable society, it appeared he was not affected by his title. Was he perhaps also a gentleman?

Sir Alexander continued to speak to the Fieldings, making notes and small diagrams on a sketch-pad as he perused the drawings and listened to them describe the cottage and its setting. All four of them were absorbed by the discussion until Sir Alexander rose and excused himself briefly to order refreshments.

Upon his return, he took his seat and announced, “My wife will bring our tea shortly. Mr Darcy, she claims a prior acquaintance with you, though she says it was long ago.”

He and the Fieldings picked up their conversation where they had left off while Darcy wondered who Lady Magnussen could be. A short time later, at the sound of the door opening behind them, the architect raised his head. His face instantly lit up with a

smile. "Ah, here she is now."

Darcy turned to look and immediately understood why Lady Caroline Hicks would never, ever have a Magnussen-designed home.

Elizabeth was escorted to Captain Leonard's wedding by Admiral and Hannah Langley. The service was to be held at a small parish church in Kensington. Officers and mates attended the ceremony and the meal afterwards, though Captain Leonard had devised a way to celebrate with his entire crew, right down to the lowliest cabin boy. He would host a feast at a waterfront tavern frequented by sailors later in the week.

Naval shipmates were not sticklers for orders of precedence or odd numbers at table, so Elizabeth enjoyed her meal with her friends: the Langleys, the Dunbars, and now the Fieldings. How surprised she had been to enjoy Mr Darcy's visit so much. It would be nice to become better acquainted with his sister. Mrs Fielding asked the ladies many questions about their lives at sea, fascinated yet also obviously shocked at the privations they had endured.

"Will you be attending the celebration at the Swan, Lizzy?" Hannah asked.

"I shall." Elizabeth nodded. "An opportunity to see my shipmates cannot be missed."

"Where is the Swan?" asked Mrs Fielding.

"It is near the Wapping dock stairs, by the river," said Elizabeth, concealing her smile at her new friend's shocked expression.

"Is that not dangerous for a lady?" she cried, her hands fluttering to her chest.

Elizabeth laughed. "It is not the Pulteney, but I shall be perfectly safe. I shall be

escorted by Captain and Mrs Leonard and other officers. I also believe I can count on the entire crew of the *Melisande* to defend me should I need it.” She took a sip of her tea. “I believe you recently met my eldest sister, Lady Magnussen,” she said, steering the conversation away from dockside taverns, which so clearly horrified Mrs Fielding.

“We did have that pleasure just two days ago,” said Mr Fielding. “Your brother Sir Alexander is a skilled architect, but he quite boldly stated that he would not have achieved such success without his wife’s intelligence and support.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Jane has always been quiet, and when we were younger was quite reticent. She was often underestimated because of it. Sir Alexander has always valued her sensible counsel, treating her as an equal partner. As a result, she has bloomed. One could never say she is loquacious, but she has learnt not to hide her light under a bushel.”

“My brother says you own a house near the sea?” asked Mrs Fielding.

“I do. In Somersetshire, south of Bristol. My late husband purchased some land to settle on after retirement, and before we sailed for Singapore, we commissioned Sir Alexander to design and build a home on it. It was almost completed when I returned to England. It is not a large house as it was only built for two. I feel very much at home there.”

“How are Agueda and Youssef?” asked Hannah.

“They are well.” Elizabeth explained to Mr and Mrs Fielding, “Agueda sailed with her husband Youssef, who was the quartermaster’s mate on the *Melisande* . He was grievously wounded in battle, and at the conclusion of our voyage, I brought them into service for me at Windward House.”

It was time, she felt, to direct the conversation away from herself.

“You must tell me more about your house in Devonshire.”

Mr Fielding was only too happy to oblige with the story of how he inherited the land not knowing there was a house and outbuildings on it, while his wife enjoyed imagining a cosy little home overlooking the sea.

“She is going where?” Darcy asked, his morning cup of coffee suspended halfway between his lips and the table.

“To a tavern by the docks!” cried Georgiana. “Mrs Bancroft is not at all concerned, but it does not seem a place for a lady to me.”

Fielding took his wife’s hand. “She did say she would be escorted by the ship’s officers, not to mention that the entire crew will be in attendance. Mrs Leonard will be there as well. I see no cause for alarm, my dear.”

Darcy finished his breakfast and made his way to his study, frowning. He told himself that Elizabeth would be well protected, that as the wife of a naval officer, she might already be familiar with the area. She would be surrounded by loyal men who knew how to fight. She would be safe.

But it bothered him, just the same.

He could not focus on his work. He found himself staring out of the window, halfway through writing a letter or reading a contract. He could not settle. Extra protection for Elizabeth would not go amiss, he told himself. He rose from his desk and went in search of his valet.

Talbot’s countenance remained impassive, though his eyebrows inched ever so

slightly higher and higher. "Very good, sir. I shall do my best." Bowing, he left his master and set about his mission.

Three days later, Fitzwilliam Darcy, master of Pemberley, descendant of multiple noble lines, grandson and nephew of an earl, sipped a tankard of ale at The Swan, sporting an ill-fitting outfit of rough, none-too-clean clothing and a day's stubble. His valet had come through, as he always did, with the proper accoutrements required.

Darcy did not know how or where Talbot had found the clothing he needed; he did not want to know, but they suited both the neighbourhood and the tavern's patrons. He had added a few details: a knife in his boot, a pistol tucked in an inner pocket, and a set of brass knuckles in an outer pocket.

Although the tavern was an aged and dilapidated building, he could see that there had been recent attempts to scrub it down and spruce it up.

He arrived before Elizabeth, though the servants at The Swan had already set up extra tables in a large space just off the public rooms. Men were arriving, singly and in small groups; by their dress, they were clearly seamen and obviously in their very best, some complaining loudly about having to wear shoes. Darcy was seated in the farthest corner, partially concealed by a post. He pulled his wide-brimmed hat a little lower over his eyes and settled in to watch.

A crowd had already gathered when the officers arrived, escorting Elizabeth and the newly minted Mrs Leonard. A cheer erupted, and within minutes a toast was drunk to the couple. Captain Leonard made a speech. Servants swarmed from the kitchens hoisting large trays laden with food and drink.

He observed the group for over an hour. Such a motley collection of men he had never seen before. Elizabeth took Mrs Leonard's arm and walked her slowly through the men, introducing them one at a time, pausing so the new captain's wife could

exchange a few words with each. The respect the men had for her was readily apparent. When she finally settled in a chair, she was immediately surrounded by seamen and boys who wanted to speak to her individually.

Elizabeth was smiling and laughing, yet there was a quality he had never seen in her before. It was that of authority. A quiet confidence unlike the impudent self-assurance he remembered from his stay at Netherfield so long ago. Unlike the distant, arrogant authority he had been raised to display, she had a natural, easy authority with kindness and respect, a common touch.

What an excellent mistress of Pemberley she would be! How his servants and tenants would respect and admire her! He let his mind wander, imagining them together at Pemberley, as partners and lovers.

As the victuals were consumed, a voice called for a song, and one of the men grinningly produced a fiddle. Young Fred, I presume. Elizabeth laughed again and agreed. "What will it be, gentlemen?" she asked, and a chorus of shouted song titles was returned. She was hoisted up to stand on a chair, and after exchanging a glance with Fred, Elizabeth began to sing. Unfortunately her crew sang with her, making it hard for him to pick out her voice.

Darcy relaxed into his chair and sipped his ale, enjoying the music and trying to hide his smile as Elizabeth and Fred moved easily from one song to another. His presence at The Swan was obviously unnecessary, but he was glad he had come to get a glimpse of Elizabeth's life at sea.

Gradually, he sensed a presence behind him, heard a man muttering and restlessly moving about. He could not quite make out what he was saying; it was so low, but the malevolent anger in the voice was obvious. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up as some of the vulgar monologue became clear.

“...cherry that’s never been plucked ... old fool ... take what is mine...”

He heard heavy footsteps moving away and turned to glare at the vulgar miscreant, but all he saw was the retreating back of a grey-haired man in a brown coat. He was shaken enough that he stayed until the singing was over, goodbyes were made, and he could witness Captain Leonard escort his wife and Elizabeth to a waiting carriage.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“He was perfectly amiable,” Jane said as she held a tiny gown up to the light, inspecting it for needed repairs. She arched a brow at her sister. “I never believed him to be as bad as you did, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth and Jane were seated in the Newfields’ cosy parlour, a large wicker basket of baby clothes at their feet. With the birth of Kitty’s second child imminent, the sisters were inspecting and mending the clothing that two-year-old Lydia had outgrown.

Kitty waddled into the room and slowly lowered her swollen body onto a chair with an audible ‘oof’. “So why did Mr Darcy go to see Alex?” she asked, picking up a needle and thread and reaching for a partially embroidered gown.

“He came with his sister and her husband, Mr and Mrs Fielding. They have commissioned Alex to restore and rebuild what looks to be a fourteenth-century house on a property Mr Fielding owns in Devonshire,” Jane explained. “Mr Darcy was very attentive and interested in the discussion. He seemed to share his brother’s interest in architecture. Mr Fielding, it turns out, was an engineer before he inherited his estate in Derbyshire. He is something of an expert in building structures such as bridges. He expressed a wish to see the chapterhouse. Of course, we shall open it up for Gerhard to use when he and Mary arrive.”

Elizabeth inwardly marvelled. The Mr Darcy she had known years before would have never allowed his sister to marry a man who had worked at a trade, even if he had subsequently inherited an estate. And he had been so amiable to Aunt Gardiner,

implying that he would like to further their acquaintance. “He truly has changed,” she said quietly to herself, surprised at how much that pleased her.

Just then a small whirlwind with blonde curls ran into the room and hurled herself at Elizabeth. “Yizzy!” she shrieked, wrapping herself around her aunt’s knees. The girl was almost a small replica of her namesake, energetic, boisterous, and big for her age.

The elder Mrs Newfield hurried in after the child. “Lyddie, it is time for your nap. Make your curtsy to your aunties and come with me. You may play with them another time.”

The pretty little girl thrust out her lower lip, folded her chubby arms against her chest, and did not move.

“Lyddie,” Kitty said, a hint of warning in her voice. “It is time for your nap. Grandmama will tuck you in and read you a story.”

The Newfields would never allow her to be spoilt as their sister had been; they were raising her with love and gentle, firm, persistent discipline. Lyddie relented and made a shaky curtsy, and with a quiet bye-bye took her grandmother’s hand and allowed herself to be led upstairs.

Elizabeth felt Jane and Kitty observing her wistful expression as her eyes followed her niece out of the room and up the stairs. The two young mothers exchanged a sympathetic glance. Elizabeth knew their thoughts: they had inherited their mother’s fecundity, but it seemed that she had not. She was well-aware her three sisters grieved that she had not at least had the comfort of a child after Samuel’s untimely death, but to none of them could she confide the truth of her marriage.

After a slight pause, Kitty picked up the thread of the conversation. “Is Mr Darcy still as handsome?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“He is,” Elizabeth answered with more feeling than she had intended. She felt her cheeks heat as her sisters fell into gales of laughter.

Darcy was the last one out of the carriage, having waited for Fielding to first hand down Georgiana. He stood on the street and took in the scene. They were near the river, in a part of London unfamiliar to him, it having been given over to commerce. A rectangular stone building, obviously ancient, stood alone on a plot between two large warehouses. It was built of richly carved stone, interrupted by rows of tall stained-glass windows with pointed arches in the Gothic style. There was a remnant of a cloister walk that terminated next to one of the warehouses, and other rows of broken stone indicated where it had once been attached to other buildings.

Sir Alexander had mentioned the medieval building to Fielding when they had met to discuss the house in Devonshire. His interest piqued, an appointment had been made for them all to see the rare find.

He entered the building to find his sister and her husband in a vestibule listening to Sir Alexander’s explanation of how the building was rediscovered.

“It was my wife’s uncle Mr Gardiner who quite literally uncovered the chapterhouse six years ago, when he purchased this piece of land covered in derelict buildings. He owns several warehouses nearby and needed to expand. As the old wooden walls and timbers were dismantled, the damaged walls of the chapterhouse came to light...”

As he spoke, the sound of voices raised in song emanated from the inside. Darcy straightened, not quite believing his ears. It was Elizabeth—he would know her voice anywhere. Her rich, sweet tone rose in harmony with several others. He took an involuntary step towards the main chamber, but a sharp look from his brother-in-law restrained him from bolting through the doorway.

Sir Alexander smiled. “An added delight. We shall hear music on our tour today. One

of the most interesting discoveries about the chapterhouse is its superb acoustic properties. My brother Herr Heidemann is a professor of music and will be directing a series of performances of his own compositions here in the coming weeks.”

“Herr Gerhard Heidemann?” gasped Georgiana, her hand moving up to her chest in surprise. “I am a great admirer of his compositions! I always purchase copies as soon as they are published. We shall meet him?”

Sir Alexander bowed slightly. “Yes, let us go now. It will be my pleasure to introduce you.”

Their little group proceeded through to the main chamber of the chapterhouse—a large, high-ceilinged room with carved stone benches built into the walls and illuminated by coloured light streaming through the reconstructed windows. As they entered, the people already in the room looked up.

There were three ladies moving about the centre of the open space, working with a measuring tape and gesturing to each other.

Among the faces pointed in their direction, Darcy recognised Lady Magnussen and Mrs Gardiner, and to his surprise another Bennet sister, Miss Mary. But she is married, he remembered. Lady Hicks had insinuated to a music master?

Of course, according to that distorted information, Elizabeth had married a sailor and Miss Jane Bennet had married a carpenter. So, by extension Miss Mary must be...

Lady Magnussen and Mrs Gardiner had moved to greet them and were soon making introductions. “Mr Darcy, do you remember my niece, Mrs Heidemann?” Mrs Gardiner asked in a low voice so as not to disturb the choir.

He bowed. “I do indeed. How pleasant it is to see you again, Mrs Heidemann. I hope

you are well?" Wide of the mark again, Lady Hicks .

"I am well, sir, I thank you," she answered. He would almost not have recognised her, she was so altered, though she had not magically transformed into a beauty. He realised for the first time how humourless and stilted her demeanour had been amongst the society in Meryton. She was still of a serious disposition, he would guess, but she appeared more at ease.

The singers began their practice once more. They were clustered in a tight circle, some attending to Herr Heidemann's direction, others focused on the pages of their music. Elizabeth sang, her eyes closed and her head tilted to one side, listening carefully to the harmonies their voices made. She had that faraway expression he had seen before on the few occasions she had exhibited in Meryton, lost in the music.

Reluctantly, Darcy turned back to his company. "Mrs Heidemann, may I present my sister and her husband, Mr and Mrs Fielding. Mrs Fielding enjoys the pianoforte and is a great admirer of your husband's work." He could see that Georgiana was fairly bursting with the pleasure of meeting the composer's wife.

The conversation of the small group took on a life of its own, enough that after a few moments of listening silently, Darcy was able to slip away and walk towards the singers. Unfortunately, as he turned in their direction, the choristers ended their song. After a few words with Herr Heidemann, they began preparing to leave.

Darcy moved to Elizabeth's side. She had gathered up the music and was putting it in order, her head bent over the pages.

"Mrs Bancroft," he said, and she startled and turned quickly.

"Why, Mr Darcy, what a surprise!" She looked at him blankly. "What brings you here of all places?"

“My sister and brother and I came to learn about the chapterhouse, but we seem to have stumbled into a family gathering. I hope we are not intruding,” he said as he bowed.

She bestowed upon him a wide, genuine smile that had him basking in the warmth of it as she performed her curtsy. “It did not begin as a family event, but I suppose since one of my brothers is the composer and another restored the building, it has turned into one. It was supposed to be a short rehearsal and a test of how the sound and blend of the voices will carry here.” She gestured to Herr Heidemann, standing nearby. “Mr Darcy, may I present my brother-in-law, Herr Gerhard Heidemann? Gerhard, this is Mr Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire.”

Darcy bowed and held out his hand. “It is an honour to make your acquaintance, Herr Heidemann. My sister is a devotee of your work.”

Elizabeth held up the printed music. “If you will excuse me, I shall take these to Mary.” She stepped away.

Darcy’s eyes followed her. “Does Mrs Bancroft perform with the ensemble, Herr Heidemann?”

“No, to my regret. I do not understand the English insistence that a lady cannot perform in public without the loss of her status in society.” He shook his head slightly. “Lizzy has a warmth and clarity in her voice, a natural quality to her singing that enhances any performance, but today she is merely standing in for our mezzo-soprano. If I could teach that elusive quality to my students, I would be a wealthy man.”

The two men made their way to the others as a fashionable-looking older gentleman entered the building, his eyes widening in surprise as he took in the number of people before him. Alexander made the introductions.

Elizabeth laughed at her uncle's expression. "Uncle, you knew that Gerhard and Mary would be here, and Alexander's presence would imply Jane's. Mr and Mrs Fielding and Mr Darcy came with Alexander to learn about the chapterhouse."

As Elizabeth made further introductions, Darcy was astonished to discover the well-spoken, intelligent man was the brother of Mrs Bennet.

"Have you set the dates for the performances, Herr Heidemann?" asked Georgiana.

"I have," the composer said and rattled off a series of dates and what compositions would be performed on each one. "They are composed for soloists and small groups rather than a full orchestra. This venue suits the music very well."

"Mr Gardiner, if I may ask, when you purchased this property, did you have any idea of the ruins concealed within the building?" asked Fielding.

"No, I did not, though I had been told that a monastery was once located in the vicinity but had been destroyed centuries ago," he replied, beginning a long and interesting tale of the building's history and excavation.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Darcy half-listened as the story of the ancient building was told. Fascinating as it was, his attention had drifted to Elizabeth.

“...that is when I abandoned my plans to build a new warehouse on the property and instead decided to restore the chapterhouse. It was an unequalled opportunity to reconstruct a piece of history.”

“We thought it would be unseemly to turn it into any kind of business enterprise or earn a profit from it, yet it seems a shame to have it sit idle. Gerhard’s concerts are an experiment of sorts, to see if it would serve as a venue for music or lectures,” Sir Alexander explained. “And of course it is always open to those who have an interest in its history.”

“My wife and nieces are planning a reception after the first concert, so the audience can learn more about the building,” Mr Gardiner added.

Darcy quietly manoeuvred himself to Elizabeth’s side. He leant close to her ear and said softly, “I wondered at your response when I mentioned this concert series to you. Now I find that you are very much a part of it all.”

Elizabeth blushed and turned slightly towards him, angling her head so she could speak quietly into his ear. “I beg your pardon. At the time it seemed easier to agree than to explain how this all came about. It is rather a long story.”

Lady Magnussen was making her farewells. “Mary and I have been away from the

children for too long, I fear.” She curtsied to Georgiana, Fielding, and Darcy. “It has been a pleasure to see you again. I hope to see you at the concerts.”

Mrs Gardiner announced her imminent departure as well, and her husband needed to return to his offices, but Fielding and Georgiana had yet to view the chapterhouse. They would stay a little longer with Sir Alexander and Herr Heidemann.

“Gracechurch Street is but half a mile away, and it is a fine day. May I walk you to your uncle’s house, Mrs Bancroft?” Darcy asked Elizabeth.

She studied him for moment and then agreed, smiling. “I shall inform my aunt.” Darcy did the same with his sister, and the two set off, her arm in his.

Elizabeth found herself a bit breathless. Not because she was walking quickly; Mr Darcy had adjusted his stride to compensate for her smaller stature. Indeed, he seemed to be deliberately slowing their pace and taking a longer, more indirect route.

No, it seemed she was in such a state simply being by the side of an intelligent, amiable, handsome man. She almost giggled aloud at the thought of describing Mr Darcy as amiable. Had she been so mistaken about him all those years ago, or had he changed in some fundamental way? She knew she had changed, so perhaps that was the answer. Was his current cordiality who he truly was, or would he revert to the proud sort of man she had thought him in the past? Her instincts argued that he would not.

He was asking her about her family. Tread carefully, Lizzy , she told herself. She did not want to allude to her family’s disgraceful past. She was enjoying his company far too much to risk his censure.

“Jane and Alexander have three children, two sons and a daughter. Mary and Gerhard have one of each, a son and a daughter. When they are in town, they stay at Jane’s

home, where there is more space for the children, and their nurse can accompany them. My sister Catherine, you may remember we call her Kitty among family, was not with us today as she has recently entered her second confinement. She is married to a Mr Henry Newfield, who is a barrister with offices in the Inner Temple, and they already have a daughter. My youngest sister, sadly, perished in an accident a few years ago.”

“My condolences, Mrs Bancroft. I am very sorry for your family’s loss.” He did not enquire further, much to her relief. “And your father has remarried, I believe you said?”

She smiled. “Yes, and has, later in life, two small sons to care for. The elder, Francis, is two years old, and the younger, Hugh, is six months old. The entail has been broken at last.”

“I am sure that is a great relief for your family.” Mr Darcy then changed the subject. “What are your favourite things to do while in London? I know you spend a great deal of time with your family, as I do with my family on my visits.”

“Usually, I attend the opera and see as many performances, whether plays or concerts, as I am able. Now that it is summer and Parliament is soon to go into recess, I expect there will be fewer diversions of that sort, but I always enjoy museums and lectures as well. Yet before you get the impression of me as a cultivated, serious person, I must inform you that I also take great delight in shopping for silly things like hats and parasols, and eating ices and confectionaries whenever I can.”

“And walking?”

Elizabeth savoured the comfortable, teasing note in his voice. It made her feel pleasantly warm, soft, and sweet, like a blancmange. “Yes, and walking. Not as well as I enjoy a country walk, but yes indeed.”

They strolled along in silence for a while. Elizabeth knew they were shortly to round the corner onto Gracechurch Street and wanted to turn in the opposite direction, to prolong their walk.

Mr Darcy spoke again. "Might I accompany you on one of your silly expeditions?"

Elizabeth laughed, more freely than was her wont, surprised at the relief she felt. "Yes, that would be a pleasure, sir. I shall try not to frighten you with my capacity for silliness or sweetmeats."

They had reached the door of the Gardiners' home. "Since I have just seen your family, I shall say my farewells here."

She held out her hand. He took it and stood there for a long moment, gazing down at her with a slight smile playing about his lips. "Until later, then, Mrs Bancroft." He bowed over her hand and gave it a slight squeeze before he released it, then turned to make his way back to the chapterhouse.

Elizabeth stood and watched him walk away, turn the corner, and disappear from her sight.

"Lizzy, why are you standing there on the doorstep with your hand hanging in mid-air?"

Elizabeth jumped, and her hand, which had been suspended exactly where Mr Darcy released it, fell to her side.

Her aunt, standing on the threshold, chuckled. "Come inside, my dear girl. Let us have something cooling to drink, and you may tell me about your walk."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

“G ood heavens, I almost forgot! Aunt, may I take Flora with me?”

It was two days later, and as Elizabeth was preparing for her outing with Mr Darcy, it occurred to her that she was without a chaperon. She had never walked out alone in London with a single man before, not even before they had been shunned.

Aunt Gardiner looked up from her writing desk in the parlour. “Yes, of course, Lizzy, though I do not know whether it is strictly necessary to take a maid with you.”

“It is not?” Elizabeth was puzzled.

“You are widowed, my dear,” her aunt explained gently. “You were married and are no longer a maiden. Also, you have been acquainted with Mr Darcy for several years, and he is known to your entire family. Though now that you mention it, it is probably just as well to have Flora accompany you as a chaperon. Mr Darcy seems to be careful about observing proprieties.”

Elizabeth had averted her face, lest her aunt see the flush that she felt covering her cheeks. How stupid! I should have known that. It was important to her to protect her husband’s reputation, even after his death. She would never reveal Samuel’s secret, so the world would have to believe she was an experienced woman, familiar with the connubial act. She was an oddity: a maiden still, but a maiden who had a firsthand familiarity with the unclothed male form, as she had whenever necessary assisted the Melisande’s surgeon in the sickbay. When exigencies demanded it of her, she had stitched up torn flesh, helped set broken bones, wiped fevered crew members with

cool water, and had even assisted in wrapping a few shattered male bodies in shrouds and sailcloth for their final journey into deep water. Once she had become used to it, men's bodies had not offended or affected her sensibilities. She had become rather numb to them all.

Except one. She was not unaffected by one particular male form: Mr Darcy cut a fine figure indeed. Sometimes he made her feel like a green girl, awkward and bashful and tongue-tied. She could not understand it; never had that happened with any other man. She sometimes had to affect a nonchalance she did not completely feel. Conversely, he could also make her feel completely at home with him, as if she were in exactly the right place in the world.

Shortly after Flora had made herself ready, the elegant Darcy carriage rolled to a stop in front of the door. Within minutes, Mr Darcy handed them in, Flora at first a little flustered at riding in so fine an equipage.

They had a marvellous afternoon—sniffing perfumes at Floris's, standing in the quiet aisles of Hatchard's hotly debating who was the worst of all fictional villains, and examining goods at the Pantheon Bazaar. Flora stayed at a distance where she could see but not hear them. As Elizabeth looked over a display of hats, she clearly surprised Mr Darcy when she admitted that she did not like bonnets.

"My sister loves them and owns many. I thought all ladies were wild about bonnets. You wore bonnets when I stayed at Netherfield," he pointed out.

Elizabeth pulled a face. "My mother liked bonnets very well, especially heavily decorated ones. I had to wear them then. I did not like them because they greatly reduce one's field of vision. I do still own a bonnet or two, but I prefer hats."

Minutes later, Elizabeth was absorbed in inspecting a shawl when she caught a glimpse of Flora hurrying towards her, one hand waving, distress on her face. The

next thing she knew, she was rudely pushed against the table from behind by a body pressing deliberately against her. Then, almost immediately, the person was gone.

Elizabeth stood perfectly still, shocked and shaken, clutching the shawl against her chest. Mr Darcy was instantly at her side, his arm protectively around her shoulders. Blinking, she stared at the doorway where the man had escaped.

“What happened? Who...who was that?” she finally managed to say.

“I have no idea. You did not recognise him?”

“No, I...” She took a breath to compose herself but could not repress a shudder. “I did not see his face.” She took another breath. “I do not think I know anyone who would do such a thing.”

“Flora, did you see that man?” Mr Darcy asked the young maid, who had come to Elizabeth’s other side.

“Not his face, sir, he had a hat pulled down over his eyes. I saw him coming towards Mrs Bancroft, but I was too far away.”

Elizabeth was shaken. She knew such things and worse happened to women all the time, but she had never experienced anyone, much less a man, inappropriately touching her or asserting unwanted control over her person.

Mr Darcy was distressed; it was obvious. “I did not get a good look at him either. I should have stayed by your side, Eliza—Mrs Bancroft. I must?—”

Elizabeth could see he was reproaching himself needlessly. “Mr Darcy, there was nothing you or anyone could have done. You are here with me now. That is what is important.” She became conscious that his arm was still around her, and he must have

done too as he carefully lowered it and stepped back.

“Perhaps we should leave and find some refreshments, sir. It would help us both collect ourselves.”

They ended the afternoon at Gunter’s. Flora was settled at a small table near them, marvelling at her first taste of ice cream. Her nerves still jangled, Elizabeth could not decide between a lemon or a raspberry ice, finally settling on the raspberry. Mr Darcy quietly ordered both, and when the waiter brought her one of each, she chuckled and ate them with great enjoyment.

“I hope you are not disgusted by my sweet tooth,” she said playfully as she licked the spoon.

Mr Darcy scraped the last of his peach-flavoured ice out of the glass dish. “I have always found it ridiculous to watch my female dinner partners slowly chewing to death one pea at a time, or denying themselves the pleasure of a well-cooked meal because they wish to show how little food they consume.”

Elizabeth sighed and set down her spoon. “Mr Darcy, even though we had a scare, I thank you for an otherwise delightful afternoon. I do not remember when I have had such a pleasant time.”

“Neither do I. You will trust me enough to plan other outings in future?”

“I shall, sir.”

Elizabeth arrived back on Gracechurch Street to discover that Mrs Fielding had earlier sent a footman round to Jane, Mary, and Aunt Gardiner, with notes begging for the privilege of hosting a dinner party to introduce Gerhard and his concert series to such of her musical friends who might still be in town. She had invited the ladies to

tea in two days' time to discuss the matter.

"How was your outing with Mr Darcy?" Mrs Gardiner asked. She had a strangely knowing smile on her face—a smug expression that Elizabeth could not account for.

"It was most pleasant. Truly delightful," Elizabeth began, but paused. Then she laughed. "And amusing. Never would I have expected to use the word 'amusing' in the same sentence as 'Darcy'."

She went on to mention the shops they had entered, but then she stopped. "It all went very well until there was a strange incident at the Bazaar. There was a man who seemed to go out of his way to walk by me. He deliberately brushed against me and pushed me against the table. Then he ran away. None of us caught even a glimpse of his face. Mr Darcy was standing several feet from me, and that did not deter him."

Just then Mr Gardiner entered the room.

"Edward! What brings you home so early?"

"I have just heard the most outrageous tale from Mr Darcy!" He turned towards his niece. "Lizzy, he tells me a man, a complete stranger to you both, deliberately pushed you in the Bazaar! He seemed rather distressed that he had not prevented it."

"Mr Darcy went to your office?" cried Elizabeth.

"As any gentleman would! He is concerned for your safety, my dear."

They called Flora in, and she described what she had seen. "He went straight for her, like he knew who she was! Mrs Bancroft, I mean. Then he ran away so fast Mr Darcy couldn't catch him! And he was standing right there!"

Mr and Mrs Gardiner stared at each other, then at Elizabeth. “Lizzy, you have no idea who it might have been?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I do not. Even if he were someone I knew, which he could not have been since I know no one who would do such a thing, how did he know I would be there shopping?”

After a moment, she continued, “Mr Darcy was quite upset that he could not stop the man, but he tried.”

Her uncle shook his head in perplexity. “The random act of a madman, perhaps? I am inclined to keep you close to home, Lizzy, but you are not a child any longer. Still, you will take a footman with you from now on when you go out, even for a walk.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Two days later, the ladies gathered at the Gardiners' home, then they all—Mrs Gardiner, Elizabeth, Mary, and Jane—took the Magnussen carriage to Darcy House.

“In her note, Mrs Fielding said she owns all of Gerhard's published compositions,” said Mary. “I do remember Miss Bingley's praise of her musical talent. How kind of her to help us with the concerts.”

“She and her husband gave a lovely dinner party for Captain and Mrs Leonard just before their wedding. She is very generous with her time and with her home, though their townhouse actually belongs to Mr Darcy,” Elizabeth said.

Mrs Gardiner exchanged a mischievous glance with Jane. “Darcys here, Darcys there, Darcys, Darcys everywhere,” she said in a singsong voice. “Suddenly we seem to be meeting them very often, and they seem predisposed to like us. How has that come about do you think, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth felt the heat in her cheeks and looked down at her gloved hands. “I have no idea.” She raised her head and looked at her aunt. “Did I ever tell you about my last encounter with Mr Darcy when he was in Hertfordshire? He asked me to dance at the Netherfield ball. I had sworn never to dance with him, but he caught me by surprise, and I accepted.” She shook her head and made a face. “And do you know what I did during that dance? I rudely pestered the poor man with impertinent questions about Mr Wickham.”

“Oh, Lizzy, you did not!” exclaimed Mrs Gardiner.

“I did. He was angry with me but still unfailingly polite.” She shuddered. “It embarrasses me to even think of it now. Since we have renewed our acquaintance, he has been all kindness and affability. I know we have both changed in the intervening years, but I still cannot explain it.”

“Did not Charlotte say that Mr Darcy was paying close attention to you even then?” Mary reminded her. “You assumed he did not like you, but perhaps he did. Perhaps he is happy to be in your company again.”

“She did say that,” Elizabeth admitted. She thought of her former friend, still married to Mr Collins. Sir William had told her father that Mr Collins had taken the news of her little brother’s birth badly, threatening to sue for breach of promise and implying that the little boy was not Mr Bennet’s child. Sir William had sternly talked him out of it, telling him that he would only embarrass himself. Poor Charlotte, married to such a man!

“Do you like him?” her aunt asked gently.

“I do. I like him very much, but pray do not read too much into it,” said Elizabeth. “Most likely it is friendship he intends, nothing more.”

Standing in front of the Darcys’ townhouse was another revelation. On her prior visit there, she had not known it was his. Now she viewed it in a different way. Although it was the most imposing townhouse she had seen, there was no useless decoration. It conveyed wealth and status by its perfect proportions and understated elegance. In that, it suited him.

Will he be at home? Perhaps he would step into the drawing room and greet them.

They were met by Mrs Sanders, the housekeeper, and shown into a cosy parlour that Elizabeth had not seen previously; a cheerful room with sky-blue wallpaper patterned

with tiny primroses and comfortable furniture upholstered in pale-yellow silk. Not the drawing room more usual for an afternoon tea, but a more intimate setting. The room looked like it was often occupied. Along with paintings and priceless objets d'art, there were homely touches like an embroidery frame and books lying open. Mrs Fielding rose and curtsied, then held out her hands.

“Welcome, ladies, I am so glad you have come!” she said, gesturing to a sofa and chairs grouped near a low table. “Pray, do be seated. I am expecting one more guest, but our tea will arrive shortly.”

The ladies settled themselves. “We are so pleased that you wish to assist us with the concerts, Mrs Fielding,” said Mrs Gardiner. “It is most gracious of you to open your home for a dinner party and invite your friends to support our little venture.”

“What Mr Gardiner and Sir Alexander have done with the chapterhouse is exceptional. Many other gentlemen might have moved the stones away and not bothered to even notice it, much less reconstruct it. And to offer it up as a community resource! My husband and I wish to do all we can to tell our friends about the concerts and the chapterhouse.”

“Lady Matlock, madam,” intoned the butler from the doorway. Surprised, Elizabeth and her sisters and aunt rose and curtsied deeply. Mrs Fielding’s guest was from the nobility.

Mrs Fielding curtsied quickly and then went to embrace the elegant older lady with great affection. She brought the lady forwards and made the introductions.

“Lady Matlock, may I present Lady Magnussen, Mrs Gardiner, Mrs Bancroft, and Mrs Heidemann,” she said, turning from her aunt to her guests. “Ladies, my aunt, Lady Matlock. She has also taken an interest in the concert series.”

Ah yes, their uncle is an earl. Elizabeth remembered an offhand remark of Miss Bingley's, something about Mr Darcy's noble relations.

The countess was silver-haired, stately, and stylish, though she did not seem to affect the ennui that others in the highest circles did. Her countenance showed intelligence and amiable interest in her niece's guests. Her eyes moved from face to face as the introductions proceeded, lingering briefly on Elizabeth. The ladies seated themselves, and a maid brought in the tea.

After a round of further pleasantries and enquiries about their children, Mrs Fielding called them to order. "The first item, I think, is the guest list." She rose and moved to a small rosewood desk placed along the wall, taking paper and a pencil from a drawer. "Mrs Heidemann, perhaps we should begin with your husband's connexions in town. Can you think of any who should be included or perhaps might be useful in spreading the word about the concerts?"

"Lord and Lady Findlay are my husband's patrons and should be included, though I believe they are currently in Berkshire."

"That is not far away. Do you think they might be prevailed upon to come to town?"

Mary thought for a moment. "Perhaps they might. They have been instrumental in supporting my husband's career, enabling him to come to England and take up his post at Cambridge." She smiled. "They may enjoy taking some of the credit themselves."

After an initial reserve, the discussion flowed easily. Elizabeth could not keep her eyes from moving in the direction of the door once or twice but made herself attend to the discussion. While polishing off tea and a large tray of sandwiches and cakes, the ladies managed to come up with a list of a dozen couples, noted patrons of the arts who were either in town or within a day's drive. Elizabeth did not know many people

in London beyond her own family, but she knew the Langleys remained and was able to add them to the list. The admiral could not tell a soprano from a sonata, but Hannah greatly appreciated musical performances. She was pleased with her ladyship's cordiality to them all but especially to her aunt, the wife of a tradesman. A well-to-do, educated tradesman, but a tradesman just the same.

Mrs Fielding even called a nursery maid to bring in her son, Robert—a chubby, bright-eyed boy just under two years of age. The ladies all cooed over and cosseted him; it almost felt like family.

She had the strangest feeling at times that she was being scrutinised, but every time she furtively peeked, Lady Matlock's eyes were elsewhere. Although the gathering was pleasurable, she was relieved and slightly cast down when it was over. They had seen nothing of Mr Darcy, so he must have gone out. If he had been at home, he would have at least greeted them, would he not?

On their way back to Gracechurch Street, they discussed the plans for the concerts and spoke of what duties the rest of their day included. It was not until Elizabeth and her aunt were alone that Mrs Gardiner commented on the visit.

“I noticed a heightened interest in your direction on the part of Lady Matlock,” agreed Mrs Gardiner. “Perhaps she was observing you as a future member of her family.”

Elizabeth had not allowed herself to consider the notion that Mr Darcy had any designs on her other than friendship, though the idea increasingly danced around the edges of her mind. He was the last man in the world she would have ever imagined seeking her out in that way. Her aunt's comment made her feel a little breathless. Had he told his family about her? Would they like her? Mrs Fielding seemed to approve of her, at least.

Did Mr Darcy wish for more than a friendship? Could this truly go anywhere? Did she wish it to? Elizabeth had never even had a flirtation, much less a romance. Is this what romance was like, this feeling of exhilaration and agitation? This desire for his company and the elation of provoking one of his rare smiles?

She nearly had not recognised him when she had first seen him again. Not only had his presence been surprising and strange amongst her shipmates, his expression had been sanguine, hopeful, even eager. His comportment towards her family, even the Gardiners, had been respectful and cordial.

She felt a small, tender smile spread across her face. She did wish it. But did he?

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

A nother lady was deep in thought as she left Darcy House. After his disastrous wedding three years prior, Lady Matlock had pieced together enough scraps of information to know that her nephew Darcy had been deeply attached to a young lady some years before but had somehow lost her. When Georgiana had invited her to meet the former Bennet sisters and their aunt, she had explained the entire story. Mrs Bancroft, the former Miss Elizabeth Bennet, was Darcy's lost love.

Over the past days, she had seen the improvement in her nephew's disposition, how years seemed to have fallen away from him. She liked Mrs Bancroft and her family and found them more interesting than many of her fashionable acquaintances. She would not only attend Georgiana's dinner party, but she would also assist her in the preparations.

In truth, Lady Matlock had been feeling rather abandoned. London in high summer was hot, smelly, and dull. Most of her friends were already enjoying the fresh air of their country estates, but she had stayed with her husband, who was working hard to conclude the long session of Parliament.

She wondered whether Darcy and Mrs Bancroft were courting yet. They were not engaged; she would have heard about it. Still, she began to think of having a party of her own. A dinner, perhaps, with some dancing. Oh, if Mrs Bancroft had only come to London in April, the height of the Season! She could have put on a grand ball! But dinner and dancing with a smaller guest list would have to do. They could celebrate the conclusion of Parliament, and perhaps also an engagement.

“She was here?” Darcy blurted in response to Georgiana’s description of her day over dinner that evening. “And you did not see fit to tell me? I would have stayed at home. I did not need to go out at all.”

Darcy and Fielding had spent the afternoon at Angelo’s. Fielding, though the son of a gentleman, had not learnt the gentlemanly pursuits of the first circles, and the brothers by marriage were enjoying his training in the art of fencing.

Fielding affected affront. “You would prefer to drink tea with the lovely Mrs Bancroft rather than spend a hot afternoon sweating over foils at Angelo’s?”

“Yes,” was Darcy’s succinct reply as he sipped his wine.

Georgiana smiled fondly at him. “I think she had hopes of seeing you as well, Brother. She looked at the door often, as if she was hoping another person would step in and greet us.”

“She did? Well...” Darcy smiled as his cheeks heated slightly. “Well,” he repeated, his heart careening about in his chest. As usual, he was at a loss for words, and so he tucked into his dinner with a renewed appetite.

Later that week, Elizabeth was pleased to receive an invitation from Mrs Fielding to spend an afternoon shopping together. Moreover, it was not time spent at milliners and dressmakers that was planned, but a tour of her favourite book shops, the kind of invitation that Elizabeth was unable to decline.

The ladies had already visited several shops when they arrived at Hatchard’s, which had a great quantity of printed music. Both ladies were completely absorbed in sifting through the stacks, setting aside pieces for purchase, when Mr Gardiner’s footman suddenly moved to Elizabeth’s side and spoke in a low voice.

“Mrs Bancroft, I see a man standing outside who was also looking in the window at the shop on Albemarle Street.”

Elizabeth looked at the shop window. There was indeed a man standing on the street looking in. He was not wearing the same coat or hat, and his head was down, but there was something familiar about him. Or was she imagining it? She suddenly felt vulnerable.

She spoke quietly to her companion. “Mrs Fielding, I believe I should return to my uncle’s house.”

Elizabeth did not know how to explain, but she did not have to. Mrs Fielding had noticed the change in her demeanour. “Has something happened? You seem fretful.” Then her eyes widened. “Do you see that man again? Fitzwilliam told me about him.”

“I do not know that he is the same man, but our footman saw him earlier, standing outside Earle’s on Albemarle Street. Perhaps he is merely looking at books, yet I do not feel safe. I am sorry to end our outing, Mrs Fielding. I have been having such a wonderful time.”

“Then let us not end it. Come with me to my home. We shall order refreshments, and I shall show you my music library. Perhaps you may find some pieces you would like to borrow. And pray do call me Georgiana, so that I might call you Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth wanted only to leave, though part of her was amused to see that Mrs Fielding, now Georgiana, could be as officious as her brother. Before she knew it, Georgiana had had their purchases charged to her account, and with the help of their footmen had whisked them into the carriage and set off.

“The waltz is danced in London now?” Elizabeth asked incredulously.

They had played with little Robert in the nursery and were sitting down to lemonade and biscuits in the cosy blue and yellow parlour at Darcy House, stacks of music on the table next to the refreshments. Elizabeth had relaxed somewhat as they sampled Georgiana's extensive music library, and she had chosen several pieces to copy out. Georgiana had been describing Lady Matlock's plans for a small party with dancing to celebrate the end of the Parliamentary session, and that she and her family were invited.

"Yes, it has been for over three years," answered Georgiana. "Since the patronesses of Almack's approved it for their assemblies."

Elizabeth smiled ruefully. "I shall have to sit out the waltz, then. I have never learnt it. I have not danced at all in..." She raised her eyes to a point near the ceiling, counting back in her mind. "Almost six years."

"I am saddened to hear that, Mrs Bancroft," came a familiar voice from behind her. Elizabeth could not hide her smile as she turned to see Mr Darcy standing at the threshold of the parlour.

He continued as he moved towards the settee and sat down next to her. "As would any gentleman be who has had the pleasure of dancing with you. You were at sea for almost two years, which explains part of it, but for so long?"

Elizabeth bit back an unladylike snort. She was tempted to answer that some gentlemen found her tolerable but not handsome enough to dance with, but Mr Darcy was being so attentive, it seemed unkind to do so.

"I believe the last time I danced at all was with you at Netherfield. After that, the next assembly in Meryton was a Twelfth Night ball. My mother did not permit me to attend because she was still very angry with me for refusing Mr Collins's offer of marriage in November." She paused before continuing. "Only a few weeks after that

we were a house of mourning, first for my sister and then for my mother. My sisters and I stayed at home until my aunt and uncle brought us to stay in London. I was the last to leave Longbourn and sailed on the *Melisande* immediately after that. After my return to England, I was once again in mourning.”

Elizabeth realised that her brief account of the last several years was conspicuously lacking in detail and might prompt further questioning, but she hoped her companions would leave it at that. Georgiana, at least, appeared to be curious.

Mr Darcy on the other hand appeared to be flabbergasted, even a little revolted. Finally, he managed a cough and rasped, “Mrs Bennet tried to force you to marry your cousin?”

“Oh, so you remember him?” Elizabeth said with a smirk, both amused and taken aback by his response. “Yes, she did, but my father took my part in the matter. My cousin Collins proposed to Miss Charlotte Lucas three days later, and they removed to Hunsford after their marriage. Have you happened to meet them there when you visit Rosings?”

“I have not had that pleasure,” Mr Darcy replied, having recovered his voice. He was staring at her again, just as he had done all those years ago. “I am truly the last person you danced with?” he asked quietly as his sister busied herself pouring tea for him.

She raised her eyes to his and nodded. “You are.”

“Elizabeth!” Georgiana exclaimed. “You must not sit out any of the dances. My brother and I shall teach you how to waltz.”

Elizabeth and Mr Darcy both startled, staring at Georgiana and then at each other. Mr Darcy, his face suddenly wreathed in smiles, stood. “I agree. We cannot let Mrs Bancroft sit out for lack of instruction. Shall we proceed to the ballroom?”

Surprised by the rapid turn of events, Elizabeth felt a little nervous but did not know how to refuse politely. She quickly donned her gloves and took the gentleman's proffered arm while Georgiana took the other.

They made their way to a ballroom, the largest Elizabeth had ever seen in a townhouse. A pianoforte stood in one corner next to a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows and glass doors that led out to a terrace and garden. The room was flooded with sunlight. She wondered what it looked like on a moonlit evening with chandeliers lit by dozens of tapers.

"Let me show you the steps and count them out for you," Georgiana offered. She performed the box steps alone, counting all the while. She turned and offered her hand to her friend. "Let us walk through them together."

The two ladies stood opposite each other and clasped hands. Georgiana took the man's part and steered Elizabeth backwards. Elizabeth judged the steps to be straightforward and not terribly difficult. She had certainly never had trouble learning any dance before. She took her place next to Georgiana and walked through them several times.

Georgiana gestured towards her brother. "Fitzwilliam, let us demonstrate the waltz together." Mr Darcy stepped forwards, and the pair moved gracefully through the steps, counting together. They laughed as they counted, looking graceful and self-assured, obviously enjoying each other's company. They were kind, thoughtful, and intelligent people, well-educated and accomplished, and Elizabeth felt a twinge of regret. She loved her family dearly but could understand how, six years before, Mr Darcy had found them wanting.

They stopped, and Georgiana gestured to Elizabeth. "Come, Elizabeth, try dancing with Fitzwilliam. I shall play for you."

Oh dear. He smiled and held out his gloved hand. With a deep breath, she took it. Georgiana sat down at the instrument and began to play a slow, simple melody in three-quarter time. Mr Darcy stood directly in front of her; they were face to face. He was still holding her hand. “You must place your other hand on my shoulder, Mrs Bancroft.”

She complied, but the difference in their heights forced her to step closer to him—much closer than his tall sister had been. She gingerly laid her hand on his shoulder and found herself staring directly at the onyx stickpin nestled in the folds of his starched white cravat, jumping a little as his other hand settled on her waist. She could feel the warmth radiating from his body. She felt heat in her cheeks and knew she must be blushing furiously.

“Shall we count two measures and then begin?” Mr Darcy raised their clasped hands out to the side.

They slowly counted one, two, three twice over and began the steps. Elizabeth had never felt so self-conscious in her life, but she forced herself to count to the music, and the first few turns went well.

She raised her head and was rewarded with the sight of the most handsome man she had ever beheld, smiling to himself and humming slightly off-key, his eyes closed in apparent contentment.

She tripped over her own feet and would have fallen to the floor if Mr Darcy had not caught her, wrapping his arm around her waist. Off in the corner, Georgiana stopped playing. “Are you well, madam?” he asked quietly, almost in her ear.

Elizabeth summoned her courage and determination. “I am.” She turned her head to meet Georgiana’s eyes. “Will you begin again, please?”

They took their positions, and the music began. Elizabeth consciously relaxed her taut muscles, breathing quietly and deeply, no longer counting the beats but allowing the music to flow through her. They moved through the waltz in tandem, and the tempo quickened slightly. After a time, the music seemed to take on a life of its own, swirling through the ballroom but also in their hearts and minds and bodies. Good gracious, how were there violins? She closed her eyes and was seized by a compulsion to laugh out loud.

Elizabeth had the sense that Mr Darcy was bending towards her, his face inching nearer her own, when the sudden sound of a door slamming somewhere in the house broke the spell. Instantly, they sprung apart.

Georgiana was nowhere to be seen. The doors to the ballroom were open. They stood there, blinking at each other, his shock seemingly equal to hers, until Elizabeth dropped her eyes and said quietly, looking at the floor, "I have overstayed my visit."

"I would say not, but perhaps your aunt expects you?"

"Indeed, she does. Will you be so good as to call for my carriage?"

They left the ballroom and walked through the house; Darcy sent the first footman he saw for the Gardiners' carriage.

"Has your first set been spoken for, Mrs Bancroft?" he asked as they made their way to the door.

Elizabeth's heart leapt. "It has not."

"May I claim it?"

"You may."

“And the supper set?”

She looked up at him. He was watching her, his dark eyes earnest. “My aunt permits but one waltz, and it is the supper set,” he said quietly.

Elizabeth’s head tilted to one side slightly, her eyes not leaving his. After several seconds, she nodded and smiled tentatively. “Yes, I would be honoured.”

As they stood by the door waiting for the carriage, he put his hand over hers, resting at his elbow. Within minutes, Georgiana appeared again as if by magic, Elizabeth’s chosen music in her hand, grinning quite ridiculously as they made their farewells.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The preparations for the concert series continued apace. Mrs Fielding had sent out the dinner party invitations immediately after their meeting, and due in part to the relative scarcity of parties and social occasions in the summer months, all were quickly answered in the affirmative.

Notices for the Heidemann concert series appeared in the newspapers, and signs were posted at other performance venues. Gerhard spent every day rehearsing his glee singers and instrumentalists at the chapterhouse. Mary and Jane finished directing their uncle's workmen in the arrangement of the chairs and the preparation of the stage. Mrs Fielding, now Georgiana to all the ladies, planned her dishes and conferred with her chef; her aunt assisted her with the seating arrangements. The dinner party would be held several days prior to the first concert.

In the midst of all this, Kitty was delivered of a son, Samuel Henry Bennet Newfield. Mother and child were healthy. All rejoiced at the news, though it appeared little Lydia had some reservations about the squalling bundle in her mother's arms.

Darcy House shone with light, from the torches set outside the entrance to the dozens of candles in the drawing room and the dining room. The company gathered in the drawing room for drinks and introductions, though some, as leading patrons of the arts, were already acquainted. Lord and Lady Findlay had welcomed the opportunity to introduce the recipient of their patronage to like-minded people in London.

The drawing room had been opened to the garden, where the perfume of summer flowers enticed many of the guests out into the cooler air. Mr Bennet sat on a

wrought iron bench, where Elizabeth joined him. They sat together, father and daughter.

“Sarah did not wish to join us, Papa?” Elizabeth asked.

“Our little Hugh is teething. It is painful for him, and he has developed a slight fever, poor little mite. When he is feeling poorly, he wants only for his mama. Francis never had this much trouble. Mrs Bennet did not want to leave him, but she urged me to come to town and support Gerhard’s music and Alexander’s restoration work.” He made a rueful face. “Even though she is the lady of the manor and Lord Upton has recognised her as family, she does not feel comfortable in the company of the gentry. We are both happiest at home with our little family.”

“I would most likely not have been comfortable either, but Mr Darcy and Mr and Mrs Fielding have been so kind and generous, and so interested in both the music and the chapterhouse.”

Her father arched a brow. “I must admit to some surprise when the invitation from Mr Darcy and Mr and Mrs Fielding arrived. Then your aunt and uncle informed me that he has been not only a frequent guest in their home but also your frequent escort,” he said drily.

Elizabeth knew her father had changed greatly since their family’s tragedy and scandal years before, but this conversation was becoming too similar to his former satirical tone. In her heart of hearts, she had worried about this.

“I was wrong about Mr Darcy, Papa. Indeed, he has no improper pride. He is perfectly amiable. I hope you will take the time to get to know him as he really is,” she replied, trying to sound calm and keep any imploring quality out of her voice.

Her father eyed her. “Well, well. This is important to you, I see. You esteem him.”

“I do, greatly. He has changed and I have changed. He is my friend now.”

He nodded. “I always thought he had a preference for your company, as you may recall. I trust your instincts, my child.”

The subject of their conversation stepped out into the garden and moved in their direction. “Mr Bennet.” Mr Darcy bowed. “We are pleased and grateful that you were able to join us. If I remember correctly, you do not care for London.”

“With my daughters and their families here, it holds far more appeal than it did in previous years. Though you are correct, sir, I do prefer to stay in the country.”

Elizabeth smiled at their host. “Your garden is lovely, Mr Darcy. How pleasant to sit here on such a beautiful evening, enjoying the scent of the flowers. It is almost a pity that we must go in to dinner at some point. How lovely it would be to remain here and see the sunset colour the sky, then watch the stars appear.” She looked up at her host. “Do you ever look at the stars?”

“Not as much in town, but I do frequently at Pemberley. The best we can do in town, even on a clear evening, is to see only the brightest stars, not the Milky Way as one would in the country.”

“My Lizzy was my partner in stargazing as she travelled the world,” said Mr Bennet. “In our correspondence, she sent me her observations along with the time, latitude, and longitude of her sightings. We kept track of the same stars and constellations and later compared notes of our observations.”

Mr Darcy smiled at this and gave Elizabeth a warm glance. “That sounds fascinating.”

Her eyes on the sky, Elizabeth sighed. “The night sky at sea was darker than on land,

and the stars seemed so close you could touch them. Even the moon seemed larger.”

Over the buzz of conversation, Bridges’s voice could be heard announcing dinner. Those few who were still in the garden moved towards the doors.

Mr Darcy offered his arm to Elizabeth as she rose from the bench. “May I escort you in, Mrs Bancroft?”

She glanced at her father, who waved them forwards. “Go on, you two. I am not young, but I do not require assistance making my way to the dining room.”

Georgiana had made every effort to impress their guests. Their very best porcelain and crystal were set on damask silk tablecloths. The long table was lit with many candles in silver candlesticks, interspersed with low crystal bowls of fragrant roses. With several titled persons in attendance, the seating plan had been difficult but had been completed to the satisfaction of all. Or almost all.

Fielding had yielded his status as host to his brother-in-law, which may have been proper but had disappointed Darcy. He had hoped to be seated closer to Elizabeth, but she was farther down the table near her aunt and uncle. The high spirits among the guests let him know that he was the only one to wish he was seated elsewhere; everyone else was happy where they were.

Before the first course was brought in, Lord Matlock raised his glass in a toast to the evening, the select company, and the music to come. All glasses were raised in response.

There was great curiosity about both the music and the venue, though they could not be generally discussed at the dinner table. The Magnussens and Heidemanns were besieged with questions from dinner partners on either side, as were the Gardiners.

Darcy's eyes found Elizabeth. She was observing her relatives carry the discussion, an expression of ease and contentment on her face. As if she could feel his eyes on her, her relaxed posture stiffened, and she turned and smiled at him. He smiled back, picked up his glass, and subtly raised it slightly in her direction. To his amusement, she returned his gesture, meeting his eyes once more before turning to her dinner partner. Even from his distant vantage point, he could see a faint blush rise on the back of her neck. It thrilled him to know he affected her; his discontent faded away. Perhaps they would look at the stars over Pemberley together.

Since there was to be an exhibition of music, the gentlemen forewent their cigars and port. The entire company returned to the drawing room, where extra chairs had been brought in and arranged facing the end of the room where the pianoforte had been placed. Georgiana rose and introduced Gerhard, who took over as master of ceremonies. He made a short speech about the concert series at the chapterhouse being a collaboration between himself, Sir Alexander, and Mr Gardiner.

The composer had arranged a programme mixing the works of other composers with a few of his own. He had brought in some professional singers and a string quartet which, to Darcy's great surprise, included Mrs Heidemann playing the viola.

The string quartet began, and Darcy settled back and let the music wash over him. Mrs Heidemann played very well indeed. She had lost the pedantic style that she had had before; she seemed to immerse herself in the harmony. She was smiling to herself and moving to the music as she played. If this was any indication of the quality of the music on display, they were in for a delightful evening.

After the string quartet and a solo harpist, one of the female singers stepped forwards. A soloist? But no, Elizabeth rose from her seat and moved to stand next to the singer. At a nod from Herr Heidemann, they began the duet from Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* ; Sull'aria... *Che soave zeffiretto*. The trained singer was superb, but to Darcy's ear the dulcet, natural tone of Elizabeth's voice had a richness and warmth

that could never be matched by another.

The sound of her voice was a siren's song to him. He was enthralled by it; he had been from the first time he had ever heard her sing years before at Sir William Lucas's home. No other woman could capture him, soothe him, and weave a spell around him like Elizabeth. None ever had.

The duet was disappointingly short. The audience applauded appreciatively, and the two ladies curtsied. Elizabeth returned to her seat as several other choristers joined the soprano. Soon it was Georgiana's turn, and she made her way to the pianoforte to play a sonata composed by Herr Heidemann. Only a few years before, she had been too reserved to play for anyone other than her brother. He marvelled at her skill but also at her self-assurance.

To Darcy's delight, Elizabeth rose again and moved to the front of the room. She retrieved a guitar that had been leaning unnoticed against the wall behind the pianoforte. Her song was a German lieder, a sweet, simple song with her guitar providing the counterpoint to her voice.

Shortly afterwards, the programme ended with the string quartet. The audience applauded enthusiastically amidst a babble of animated conversation. Tea, coffee, and desserts were served, and soon afterwards the company began to break up.

Elizabeth was standing with her aunt and uncle, her father with them. Darcy moved to her side, speaking in a low voice. "Why did you never play the guitar when you exhibited in Hertfordshire?"

"I had not learnt it then. My husband saw it in a shop in Trincomalee, a naval port in Ceylon. He knew I missed the pianoforte and bought it for me so I could make music. I taught myself to play."

Darcy complimented her on her playing and praised the late Captain Bancroft for his gift. Inside, however, he was of mixed emotions. The captain had been, from all accounts, good and decent and had respected and cared for Elizabeth, but the fact was he was jealous of the man who had won Elizabeth's hand and heart.

Fitzwilliam Darcy—rich and handsome, master of one of the grandest estates in the land, hounded by beautiful women ever since he came out in society—was jealous of an older man, one said not to be handsome nor wealthy, respected but not of the highest naval ranks. A man who had been dead for almost two years.

He was jealous of Elizabeth's late husband for caring for her when she needed it, for being her first lover, and for showing her the world. Would that he had been able to do that himself! He knew she was warming to him and enjoyed his company. He hoped more than anything that he could take the captain's place in Elizabeth's heart and in her life. He wanted her to be his and his alone.

He would keep up his pursuit. "Mrs Bancroft, will you be busy with preparations for the concerts this week? Would you have time to accompany me to the Royal Academy for the art exhibition?"

"It would be a pleasure, sir! I have heard of it, but I have never been to see it." She glanced over at her aunt and uncle, who were being introduced to Lord and Lady Findlay by Gerhard. "I shall need to see whether my aunt and uncle can spare a footman. My uncle has said I must have one with me if I leave the house without any of my family."

"Yes, I concur. I heard about the man at Hatchard's." He looked at her worriedly. "You are well?" At her nod, he said, "Perhaps I shall bring a footman, and you may bring a maid."

She looked up at him, gracing him with a soft smile. "Thank you for understanding. I

know you will keep me safe.”

CHAPTER FORTY

“Thank you for suggesting this outing, Mr Darcy. I have enjoyed it immensely.”

The Royal Academy’s summer exhibition was in place. After a few hours viewing the paintings, Darcy and Elizabeth stepped out into the sunshine of a hot July day.

“As have I. If I may enquire, how did you learn so much about artistic techniques? Were you under the tutelage of a drawing master growing up?”

Elizabeth smiled wryly. “I had the good fortune to receive instruction from an expert, but not while I lived at Longbourn. My mother would have considered it a waste of money that would be better spent on fabric and trim. It was on the *Melisande*. Naval vessels do not usually carry passengers, only in special circumstances. In our case, we carried Miss Alice Channing, the daughter of Sir Arthur Channing, who was serving as a diplomat in Singapore, along with her aunt and their servants. Alice is a brilliant artist and has been studying under drawing masters since she was old enough to hold a pencil.

“She began my lessons as a way to alleviate some of the tedium she endured at sea. I had never imagined myself as an artist in any way, but with her instruction she shared with me the great joy she finds in creating beautiful images. I could not help but learn to love it too, and in time it became an excellent way to relax, and to record some of the sights I had seen. When we parted company, she left most of her art materials for me, as it was easier for her to purchase more in Singapore.”

“I would like very much to see your work,” Darcy said.

“I have a few sketchbooks amongst my things at the Gardiners. I shall share them with you if you promise not to be too critical,” she teased.

Darcy put his hand over his heart and bowed slightly to her. “I do solemnly swear.” He looked at the sky. “Are you fatigued? Do you wish to return to your uncle’s house, or would you care to stroll with me through the park? I am certain we can find a shaded walk.”

Elizabeth looked about her, at the blue sky with its perfect white puffy clouds, and beamed at him. “I think you can likely guess my answer. Lead on, sir.”

Darcy silently held out his arm, and she took it, seemingly unaware of the effect her smile was having on him. His carriage pulled up and took them the short distance to St James’s Park, where they sauntered past flower beds and shrubs, speaking little. Darcy led her off the path to a secluded bench surrounded by trees.

“What did you draw in your sketchbooks?” Darcy asked.

Elizabeth chuckled. “I think a simpler question is what did I not draw. There were constantly new sights to be seen. I wanted to remember it all—the sights, the sounds, even the feel of the sea breezes on my face. I sketched and painted the ship, the officers and seamen at work, sights from various ports of call, the sea in all its colours and moods... Even the sky, at any hour of the day or night, presented quite a test of my skills with pencil or paints. I made a visual record of the clouds and even the constellations.”

“You painted the sky?”

Elizabeth looked up at him and laughed. “How comical that sounds! Yes, I painted the sky and hung the moon.”

It had been a glorious day. Now they were so close on their little bench, together in the sun-dappled shade, speaking so intimately, her laughing face so close to his, Darcy could not help himself. He took her face in both hands and kissed her, gently, fully, searchingly. She startled slightly but did not pull away. Her lips were soft, and she smelt wonderful. After a few seconds, he stopped and leant back slightly, her face still held gently in his hands.

Her eyes were closed, her mouth slightly open, her cheeks covered by a deep blush. One hand went up as if to touch her own lips, but then it fell back to her lap. Opening her eyes, seemingly speechless, she stared into his eyes wonderingly, then blinked repeatedly, blushing and seemingly trying to recover her equilibrium. Breathless, she smiled shyly up at him.

Not for the first time, he wondered about her responses to him. Sometimes Elizabeth seemed so young and innocent, more like a green girl than a widowed woman of five and twenty who had spent two years on a naval vessel. Darcy reminded himself of his long history of mistaken judgments about her, but he was thrilled that he had flustered her. It was only fair; she had flustered him from almost the earliest days of their acquaintance.

“Are we courting by any chance, Mr Darcy?” she said softly.

“I would like that above all things, Mrs Bancroft.” Darcy released her face and took her hands in his. “I apologise to you for taking liberties, but for myself, I am not sorry. I am a selfish being, and I have wanted to kiss you for almost six years.”

Elizabeth gasped. “You have?”

He nodded solemnly. “I have. I have many regrets from my time in Hertfordshire. My deepest regret was my failure to open myself up to you, to get to know you better and deepen our acquaintance. I was an angry, prideful man then, clutching my

consequence as if it were a suit of armour.” He sighed, and then, in an earnest voice, said, “Now, Elizabeth, is there any hope at all that my suit might be pleasing to you? Or even if it is not, might there still be a place for me in your life as a friend?”

She was still staring at him in bemusement, her eyes wide and her lips parted. Again, he glimpsed a certain innocence.

“I...I accept your offer with great pleasure.” Then strangely, an expression of sorrow crossed her features. She quickly looked down at her hands, then up into his eyes. She took a deep breath. “Before we go forwards, I must inform you that my family is still considered by some to exist under a cloud of shame. An old scandal but one that had severe consequences. Upon reflection, you may not wish to create any connexion between our families.”

This was it, Darcy understood. He would discover the truth of what Elizabeth and her family had endured. “I should like to hear it, only because whatever happened has had an effect on you. It will not change my heart or my mind.”

So Elizabeth began her story, the tale of Lydia’s elopement and the accident resulting in the deaths of both her sister and Wickham. How it had led to her family’s complete expulsion from local society and by extension to her mother’s melancholia and death. How the Gardiners had given them reason to hope and helped each sister, one by one, begin a new life away from their home. Although it had been several years and Mr Bennet had resumed a few old friendships, the relationship between Longbourn and its environs had never been fully restored, and some neighbours still did not accept them.

“So you see,” Elizabeth continued, “any association with me still has the potential to embarrass you or cause harm to your good name if it is linked to mine.”

Darcy took Elizabeth’s hand. “I am grieved for all that you suffered, all that you lost.

You were happy in your former life. Anyone could see the pleasure you took in the society of your friends and neighbours. To lose your place in such a way, to be abandoned when you needed support and condolences, must have caused you great pain. When I see you here before me, I do not see dishonour or disgrace. I see a remarkable woman who has triumphed over adversity with grace and strength and beauty. I am proud to know you, to have you in my life, and I could never give you up.”

He smiled sadly. “In fact, your scandal is one I might have prevented, had only I exposed Wickham’s character to the people of Meryton—to your father, specifically. I knew it too well, as his debauched actions have consumed much of my attention over the years. I am so sorry I remained silent when first we met and you asked of him. I am so sorry about your sister.”

“I was unlikely to have believed you at the time. I was too full of mistaken self-righteousness.”

Darcy took a breath. “I also have dealt with personal embarrassments in my own family in recent years. The experience has taught me to feel sympathy and compassion for others who have suffered from society’s censure.”

Elizabeth’s hand clutched his. “Something happened to you,” she breathed, her eyes serious.

He nodded. “My sister and I suffered a succession of scandals imposed upon us by persons I had known all my life and once trusted. In the summer of the year eleven, George Wickham attempted to elope with Georgiana,” he began.

Elizabeth gasped, gripping his hand tightly as the tale unfolded.

“I was able to hush it up, but Georgiana suffered from the hurt and betrayal for many

months afterwards.”

“That was shortly before you came to Netherfield,” said Elizabeth.

“Indeed, it was. My aunt Lady Matlock insisted I leave Georgiana with her in London and take up Mr Bingley’s invitation to visit Netherfield and advise him as to whether to make a purchase. I preferred to stay with my sister, but apparently I was hovering too much and impeding her recovery.”

“That explains a good deal about your demeanour at the time. You were angry and distressed! How strange that Mr Wickham should arrive only a few weeks after you did! Was that a coincidence?” Elizabeth laid her hand on his arm. “I was watching you, that day on the high street in Meryton, when you rode in with Mr Bingley and recognised him. I saw your expression and understood that you had a connexion to him. Your ire was plain.”

Darcy nodded. “I was shocked, and terrified that he had followed me in order to ruin Georgiana. It was indeed a horrible coincidence. What I did not know at the time was that, while in Ramsgate, he had also beguiled Georgiana into writing several exceedingly personal love letters to him, which he could use as insurance if he could not get his hands on the dowry. Sometime early the next winter, he sold the letters for three thousand pounds. When he was decamping to London that stormy night, he was in fact leaving because he had money enough to desert the militia.

“I did not hear of Wickham’s death and the existence of the letters until the summer of 1813, but it was several months later when I discovered who had paid him for the letters. It was my mother’s only sister, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She purchased them to use in an extortion scheme to force me into marriage with her daughter, my cousin Anne.

“She threatened to give the letters to the newspapers if I did not marry Anne. She

vowed to have me publicly declared an unfit guardian of my sister. She would have taken Georgiana from me and forced her to marry a man of her own choosing. Our ruin would have been broadcast all over England.”

He gave her a pained look. “I went through with it. What else could I do? Lady Catherine had already used her influence and money to purchase a licence and to place a wedding announcement in the newspapers, knowing that I could not fight it.

“What I did not understand at the time was that Anne had, some years before, started behaving erratically, swinging wildly between violent anger and complete unresponsiveness. Lady Catherine had for some time successfully concealed her daughter’s derangement with laudanum, but Anne was becoming increasingly difficult to control.”

Elizabeth’s jaw dropped, and her eyes grew wider and wider as she listened to Darcy grimly describe the wedding, Anne’s bizarre eruption at the breakfast, and the brawl that ensued.

At length, he concluded. “Georgiana and I retreated to Pemberley and managed to avoid the worst of the firestorm. Lord and Lady Matlock had to use all their influence and call in a few favours to quell the flames. They did not hesitate to malign Lady Catherine for concealing Anne’s condition.”

Elizabeth continued wearing an expression of shock as he told of the spiral of angry quarrels between the two women, alone at Rosings, that resulted in their deaths several months later.

“Oh, my Lord,” breathed Elizabeth, her eyes fixed on his. “The poor girl was kept isolated and under her mother’s thumb, and it drove her to insanity. How unbearably sad.”

Darcy nodded. "It is Anne that we all mourned, not her mother. My cousin never had a chance."

"Mr Collins spoke of Lady Catherine often. She was his patroness, if you recall. He believed she could do no wrong. The scandal must have been a severe shock to him," Elizabeth said.

"I am surprised that you did not hear of it from him at the time," remarked Darcy.

"You remember that Mr Collins married my friend Miss Charlotte Lucas. After Lydia's death and the resulting scandal, Mrs Collins thought it best that any relationship between our families come to an end. She cut our acquaintance. We have heard nothing of them since they wed more than five years ago."

"Your friend abandoned you?"

"She had no choice. The Bennet family had become outcasts, you see. I understood at the time, and she did promise that she would never speak of our disgrace to anyone, not even her husband. Although I bear her no ill will, I doubt that our friendship can ever be repaired. We sisters have all found new acquaintances and made new friendships, and I hope that Charlotte has as well."

They sat in heavy silence for a long while, Elizabeth holding his hand in both of hers. At length, Darcy cleared his throat.

"I believe I win, Elizabeth," he said solemnly.

She stared at him blankly. "You win?"

"My scandal is greater than yours."

Elizabeth gasped, then understood that he was attempting a jest to lighten the mood. She feigned affront. “Is that so, Mr Darcy? Well! What if I told you that after my father lived alone at Longbourn for a time, he remarried.”

“You have already told me as much. It is completely unexceptionable. You will have to try harder.”

“He married our housekeeper, Mrs Hill.”

Darcy’s brows went up. “Mr Bennet married your housekeeper?”

“Yes. I believe I win.”

“You believe that your father’s marriage is scandalous? I think not...”

“And the new Mrs Sarah Bennet, born in a workhouse, was since discovered to be the natural daughter of Lord Upton’s eldest sister, who was banished from his family when he was a small boy. He has had it investigated and has since recognised her as family.”

“You are not serious!” exclaimed Darcy.

“I win.”

He chuckled, then grew quiet again. “I have a further confession to make. Only days before my wedding, I heard some gossip, a highly exaggerated version of your family’s difficulties, from none other than Miss Caroline Bingley. It seemed that she had a chance encounter with someone from Meryton who told her of it. She flung it at me in a bitter argument because she knew it would hurt me. You may not have noticed how attracted to you I was then, but she did, and it caused her to be jealous and disdain anything to do with your family.”

“Why did you quarrel?”

“She saw the announcement of my marriage to Anne and was furious. She had convinced herself that she would eventually be Mrs Darcy. I was heartbroken with what she revealed, twisted though her words were, truly I was. I felt that your family was suffering for my shortcomings and pride. If I had let your father know about Wickham’s character then, it might have spared your family from scandal and?—”

“No, none of it was your fault.” Elizabeth shook her head. “Miss Bingley was still depending upon your offer? Even I knew that she was waiting in vain when you were at Netherfield Park. What has become of the Bingley family since?”

“Mr and Mrs Hurst choose to live at their estate in Northamptonshire most of the time. They have two children now. They lease their house on Grosvenor Square. Miss Bingley married shortly after I did, accepting the proposal of a Mr Wilbur Hicks.”

“The industrialist? He is exceedingly wealthy, is he not?”

“Richer than Croesus. He had apparently put off any thoughts of marriage and family in favour of the pursuit of fortune. At the beginning of his career, he was acquainted with the elder Mr Bingley and remembered that his daughters had been educated and trained to move in fashionable society. He sought her out, and she accepted his offer on the condition that he buy her a title and an estate. He purchased a baronetcy for her. She is Lady Hicks now, and her brother tells me that she is having a replica of Pemberley built for herself somewhere near Manchester.”

Elizabeth laughed in disbelief. “One can purchase a title? She is building a replica of your home? Now I think I have heard everything,” she said.

Darcy shrugged. “Her object was not to be married to me as much as it was to be married to my wealth, position, and estate.”

“It cannot be possible that I shall hear any more such ridiculous news today, but do let us give it a try,” she said lightly. “How fares Mr Bingley? My father told me that he married fairly quickly after he left Netherfield.”

Darcy stiffened at her side and took a deep breath. He had known this was coming. He had some very unpleasant explaining to do. “If events had been allowed to play out as they should, he had planned to return to Netherfield and court your sister. His sisters wished him to marry a woman of the first circles, and they told him that Miss Bennet, Lady Magnussen now, did not return his affections and was only looking for an advantageous marriage to appease your mother.”

Abruptly, he stood and took a few steps away. After a moment’s silence, he turned to face Elizabeth and continued. “When Bingley applied to me for my opinion, I concurred with his sisters. I justified it by telling myself that your sister had not displayed a marked preference for my friend.”

He looked at the ground, unable to face her. “It was, in retrospect, the worst thing I have ever done in my life. You see, I had my own selfish reasons for deterring Bingley from returning.”

He raised his eyes to hers. “I had fallen deeply in love with you, much to my distress. I would not allow myself the possibility of pursuing you, no matter how much I yearned to do so. I could think only of how my family would disapprove, how you would never be accepted among the first circles, how the relative situation of our families was such that any alliance between us must be regarded as a highly reprehensible connexion.

“I conquered my desires, but it was a hollow victory and a short-lived one. My thoughts never ceased returning to you, and I began, quite without any aim, to change my ways and live in a way that I thought you could approve of. I foreswore those beliefs elevating rank, connexions, and fortune over regard. I altered my habits and

even where I spent my time. And now I most humbly beg your forgiveness.”

He ran a hand over his face in his agitation. “My greatest fear is that you will reject me now, but disguise of any kind is my abhorrence, and I owe you and your family the truth.” He took another deep, trembling breath. “My parents, particularly my mother, taught me to be selfish and overbearing, to care for none beyond my own family circle, to think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own. Thus I was until I met you.”

Darcy stood close to Elizabeth, though not touching her, as she sat unmoving and silent. Her head was bowed, her face turned away from him, her hands clutched tightly in her lap. When she answered, her voice trembled slightly.

“There was a time when I would have been furiously angry with you. You did not know us, and yet you judged us. You deemed it your right to interfere in one of the most personal choices a man can make,” she said slowly. “Though I do understand. I was and still am well aware that my family’s behaviour at the time was appalling. That uncorrected conduct led to our ruination.

“After Lydia’s and my mother’s deaths, those of us remaining learnt some lessons in comportment as well. Jane even said that if Mr Bingley had returned and courted her, she would have been obliged to release him in light of our family’s disgrace.” She raised her eyes to his. “I forgive you. I now know what a good man you are. You have been honest, and I trust you. A wise woman once counselled me to remember only what brings us pleasure. I try to practise that philosophy. Everything worked out for the best.” One delicate brow arched, and she added pointedly, “Though in truth, I do not know how forgiving I would be if things had not gone so well for us.”

She let out a breath. “So, how is Mr Bingley?”

“Bingley was devastated at the time and chose to marry for practicality, not love,

though he did marry a kind, excellent woman. He has been married for several years now to the former Miss Rose Grantley, and they have an estate in Lincolnshire.”

Elizabeth tilted her head slightly, thoughtfully silent for several minutes. “Miss Grantley of the inferior table designs?” she queried, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

Darcy, with a laugh that sounded more like a groan, collapsed on the bench in relief. “Elizabeth, you astonish me! I cannot believe you remember that. Yes, the very same. They have three daughters, and they are happy.”

“I am glad, truly. Jane holds no grudge. We wish him well. At the time he left, she was heartbroken and suffered greatly, but our subsequent troubles made a simple jilting seem insignificant in comparison. Through our trials, Jane developed a core of steel and greater confidence in herself. She found a husband who cherishes and respects her and considers her his equal partner. It is for the best.”

“If it makes any difference at all, Bingley has grown rather stout, and his hairline has receded. Lady Magnussen has grown more beautiful than ever.”

Elizabeth laughed but then sobered and spoke softly. “So, here we are now. We can take stock of what happened, both in my family and yours. So much suffering, so much heartbreak and sadness and death. In my family, we mourned and moved on to build new lives. We were forced to grow, to overcome our differences and be strong. We refused to be ‘ruined’. We made the best of it. Has it been so for you?”

Darcy nodded. “Upon Anne’s death, Rosings Park came into my possession. I immediately gifted it to my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was then able to resign his commission in the Army and marry. His parents, Lord and Lady Matlock, were pleased and relieved. They had feared for him for some time.

“By my own choice, I spend as little time in London as possible. My closest friends

are not of the first circles. They are mostly local landowners and farmers from the area around Pemberley. I have also become personally acquainted with local merchants and professional men. My mother would have strenuously disapproved, but they are my true friends, undeterred by scandal.”

They sat quietly for a time. Then Elizabeth looked up into his eyes, almost shyly. “I have never actually had a suitor before,” she said quietly.

But how can that be if you were married? he thought. Swallowing his painful curiosity about Captain Bancroft, Darcy said, “I have never actually been a suitor, so we are equal.”

Tentatively, he put his arm around her shoulders, and she leant into him. “Both our lives, our families’ lives, were changed forever by George Wickham and Lady Catherine de Bourgh. We were violently wrenched from the destinies we had expected for ourselves. We changed and adapted to our circumstances and have found fulfilment, even joy. We share a history together, Elizabeth. I am happy and relieved that we can trust each other and speak of it honestly.”

Elizabeth shook her head in wonder and bemusement. “Banishments, elopements, fatal accidents, fighting, insanity, bribery, extortion, shunning, addiction...” she said, shaking her head and running out of words. “If this were a novel, I should think it too far-fetched to read.”

“It seems that real life can be stranger than fiction.”

A cool breeze alerted them to the fact that the sun had lowered in the sky. Darcy rose and held his hand out. She put her hand in his and came to his side. “Come, Elizabeth, it grows late. Let me take you home.”

She smiled and asked, “Would you kiss me again, Mr Darcy?”

In unspoken answer, he pulled her close, and when he kissed her, she kissed him back. Darcy called for his footman and the maid, who been strolling nearby but out of earshot. They all returned to the waiting conveyance, which was soon pulling away from the park.

Neither noticed, from beyond a row of shrubs, an angry man in a brown suit watching them leave, clenching his fists as the carriage disappeared round a corner.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The concert series began at last; four concerts over the course of two weeks. They were well received and critically acclaimed. Georgiana's dinner party had succeeded in spreading the word. In truth, attendance would have never been a problem, even if every person of rank and fashion had stayed away. There were as many 'cits' in the audience as aristocrats. The chapterhouse itself also garnered its share of admiration and interest, to the point where Mr Gardiner found he needed to hire a manager for it.

The day after the last concert, Elizabeth's family met at Jane's home as much to celebrate the success of the concerts as to celebrate their being over and done with. For all their success, it had involved a great deal of work, especially for the Heidemanns. The Darcy family were given a special invitation, as Georgiana had been so helpful and Darcy was, as Uncle Gardiner put it, 'underfoot all the time'.

At the gathering, the Fieldings announced their departure from London. They had delayed their return to Birchwood Grange in part due to the concerts but mostly to become better acquainted with Elizabeth, who they quietly anticipated would be one of the family before long. Even the prospect of attending Lady Matlock's party could not keep them. They had obligations to their estate, and they wanted to get little Robert out of the city air.

The event also marked the public debut of young Samuel Newfield. Kitty had been churched and was now making her way back into society. Her sisters and aunt had been with her at the birth and visited frequently afterwards, but the gentlemen, aside from Henry, had not been introduced to the child. Darcy would never have guessed that this pleasant, intelligent young woman was the same girl he had last seen

careening wildly about the ballroom at Netherfield.

He was standing on the terrace with the other men, ostensibly listening to Henry Newfield describe his latest trial. His eyes were on Elizabeth. She was standing in the garden with her sisters, holding the tiny baby in her arms, cooing softly and swaying gently back and forth as the other children ran and played near them.

It struck him then. Elizabeth had been married almost two years yet had no child of her own. He watched her hold the baby as the other children frolicked around her, calling her name. "Aunt Lizzy, Aunt Lizzy, look at me! Look what I can do!" they called. "Cousin Lizzy, watch this!"

She was their beloved aunt and cousin, obviously wonderful with children. What if she is barren? He wondered whether her childlessness was a great sorrow for her. Elizabeth had great depth of feeling, he knew, but she did not put her emotions on display. Neither of them performed to strangers. He himself might mourn the children they might not make together, but they could adopt children to raise, and Georgiana's son could inherit Pemberley. Nothing would keep him from taking her to wife.

Lady Matlock had created a party as extravagant and dazzling as any more formal ball Darcy had seen. Indeed, it was a ball in exquisite miniature, with a smaller guest list and a shorter duration. Besides Mr and Mrs Gardiner and the Magnussens, there were perhaps twenty or so couples. A few of Lord Matlock's political colleagues had stayed to attend, but most had hurried home to their families and estates. It had been a long session, and they could not get out of the city fast enough. Darcy felt much the same; he ached for the rolling peaks of Derbyshire, but he would not leave town without Elizabeth.

He hovered near the receiving line, eager to see her. She entered the house on her uncle's arm, Mrs Gardiner on his other. She was wearing a russet silk gown that shimmered into copper wherever it caught the light. It brought out the auburn

highlights in her hair and the amber and gold flecks in her dark eyes. It was also more revealing than any other gown he had seen her wear.

He took a sharp breath. Lord, she was beautiful. He made to step towards her when a hand on his shoulder stopped him short.

“Down, boy,” said his cousin.

“You have never been more annoying than you are at this moment,” grumbled Darcy.

“Lucy and I merely want an introduction to Mrs Bancroft,” his cousin retorted, “before you take her away to some dark corner and keep her to yourself.”

“If you promise not to monopolise her,” Darcy admonished. “That is my privilege.”

He was not surprised when Elizabeth took to Fitzwilliam and Lucy as if she were meeting old friends. Their style of conversation was similar: intelligent, sparkling, with a bit of raillery just bordering on the undignified. His impatience grew as the Magnussens, followed by the Langleys, joined their conversation. At last, he heard the musicians strike up an introduction to the first set.

“I believe this set is ours, Elizabeth,” he said, tucking her hand in his arm and leading her to the floor. “Let us take our places.”

They had little conversation; indeed, they did not need any. They danced through the steps as if they danced every day, their eyes on each other, their hands clasping and unclasping, aware only of each other, ignoring others in the dance. But was not incivility the very essence of love?

Soon enough, Darcy was watching Elizabeth dance with Fitzwilliam, then Mr Gardiner, then, to his surprise, Lord Matlock. His uncle rarely danced. The earl’s

attention to Elizabeth told society that she had the imprimatur of the Fitzwilliam family. Sir Alexander danced with her as Darcy danced with Lady Magnussen, then they switched partners for the supper set and all went into the dining room together.

“I must claim another dance with you tonight, Elizabeth, since my aunt has put the waltz off until after supper. It will be the final dance of the evening.”

“Three dances, Darcy! Whatever will people say?” She laughed.

“Does that matter?” he asked as he set a glass of Champagne before her.

Darcy marvelled at the ease he felt. He wished every ball was like this. Perhaps in future, with Elizabeth by his side, they would be. He came to a decision. He would ask Elizabeth for her hand that very night, while they danced the waltz.

The music began soon after they returned to the drawing room. From the instant he turned to her and held out his hand, from the moment she met his eye, took his hand, and smiled, they seemed enveloped in a world of their own. He saw and heard no others, even though they were surrounded by other dancers. He only saw Elizabeth and heard the music. And this time, there were real violins.

Soon, every guest was dancing; dancing their joy in their partner, their delight in the music, and some their relief at being finally able to go home to their cool, verdant estates.

Darcy manoeuvred them to the edge of the room, near the windows. He was silent, searching for the words he needed. How could he express how he felt? He took a breath. “Elizabeth, I fell in love with you almost six years ago. Since then, I have changed profoundly, but my affections and wishes have not.” He pulled her closer, and they stopped dancing. “Would you do me the honour, the great joy of giving me your hand in marriage?”

Elizabeth gazed up at him as her smile grew wider and wider. “I will. I will marry you, and I will bore you ceaselessly by repeating how ardently I admire and love you.”

“What a great trial that will be. I take it all back.”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes at him. “Oh, wonderful. Now you develop a sense of humour.”

They were laughing when screams rent the air, and the music came to a ragged stop. Darcy quickly turned to see what had happened only to see the other guests staring at the window behind them.

There was a man standing up against the window, his fists against the glass, his face contorted with rage. Elizabeth gasped and stepped back, just as Darcy stepped in front of her. Lord Matlock shoved his way forwards, shouting for footmen to catch the intruder. Almost as one, the men in the room surged forwards, but it was too late. The invader vanished into the darkness.

Darcy hurried back to Elizabeth, who seemed frozen in place, her face suddenly pale and drawn. “It was he,” she said, pointing a slightly trembling finger to the window. “That was the man who was following me.”

Admiral Langley came towards them as she was speaking. “That man,” he said, “was Roger Maltravers.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Elizabeth seemed frozen, her eyes wide and dark, her pallor alarming. Darcy drew her close to him as Lady Matlock's shaken guests called for their carriages and left as quickly as they could. Only Darcy, Elizabeth, the Gardiners, the Langleys, the Magnussens, and all the Fitzwilliams remained.

Mr Gardiner wanted to take his wife and niece back to their home immediately, but the admiral cautioned them. "It is my belief that Maltravers has gone mad. He has a history of violence as well. It is to your credit, Mr and Mrs Gardiner, that you wish to take your niece home and protect her, but at this point, I cannot believe he will simply give up and go away. You have young children to consider, as do you, Sir Alexander," he said, turning to Jane and her husband.

"Elizabeth will come to my house," Darcy announced. All heads turned his way. "There are no children there, and beyond my servants already in residence, I shall hire extra guards to protect the house." He took Elizabeth's hand and kissed it. "And, as of this evening, we are betrothed."

"Oh, Lizzy!" Lady Magnussen came forwards and embraced her sister.

"With your permission, Mr Darcy, I would stay at your home as well," said the admiral, clearing his throat. "I have trusted men I can put at your disposal to guard Elizabeth."

"As do I," said Fitzwilliam, stepping forwards.

“You have children,” said Darcy.

“My husband is more than capable of handling himself in a fight, should it come to that,” insisted the redoubtable Lucy. “You might need his assistance.”

In the end, Elizabeth and her family agreed that she would be safest with Darcy. Along with the two military men, Mrs Langley insisted that she would attend her friend, and her husband agreed.

In an attempt to better understand how Maltravers had found Elizabeth’s location, Fitzwilliam suggested they send expresses to Windward House and Longbourn, as well as messages to the Gardiners’ home and the homes of Elizabeth’s sisters in Cambridge and London, to see if he had been noticed there by servants or neighbours. It could be useful to discover how long, and from where, he had followed her path.

Over the course of the night, Darcy House became a sort of fortress. Both the admiral and the former colonel called in men, former soldiers and sailors, to guard the house on all sides. The service doors, the garden, and the mews were all watched and patrolled. The housekeeper and butler were informed and in turn gave strict orders to the lower servants to stay within the confines of the property. Lord Matlock had determined to speak to Lord Akers in an attempt to convince him to rein in his brother.

Darcy himself composed the messages, describing Maltravers and asking whether he had been seen by anyone near any of the family’s residences. Fitzwilliam took the messages to prepare them for the express riders and then to get a bite to eat.

Darcy and the admiral were left alone in the study. They sat in silence for a while before Darcy spoke.

“I am trying to understand how this all came about,” said Darcy. “It makes no sense.

This man Maltravers was a naval officer who had some sort of grudge against Captain Bancroft? The captain has been dead these two years, yet you imply that Maltravers is yet driven to achieve some sort of triumph over him, to show himself to be the superior man. How does Elizabeth come into this? Why is she his target?"

The older man sighed and wearily laid his head back against the chair he sat in. "This story goes back a long way, and part of it is conjecture on my part. I never served directly with Maltravers, thankfully, but I have met him on several occasions and heard a great deal about him over the years, none of it good.

"The Maltraverses are a distinguished family, with an old and venerable title. No doubt you are aware of that. Younger sons of the family have served the Navy with distinction for several generations now, just as your cousins the Fitzwilliams have served the Army."

Darcy nodded thoughtfully.

"From what I understand," the admiral continued, "Roger Maltravers showed signs of instability even as a child. His father would hear none of that. He filled the boy with tales of the heroism of his ancestors who served, most of whom achieved high rank. When he arrived at the naval academy, the young man was completely certain of his own predestined greatness.

"Among the other boys he learnt and served with was Samuel Bancroft, an orphan with no money or family yet who was already earning the notice of his instructors. Maltravers may have fixed on Bancroft as an enemy because he was his complete opposite. Quiet, modest, thoughtful, focused, diligent. As an officer, he put his mission before his ship and crew, and his ship and crew before himself. Maltravers could not understand the idea of someone who had no money or connexions achieving success on his own merits, by his own labours. When confronted with a young man with true abilities and the proper temperament to command, he may have

felt that as an affront to himself. It interfered with his belief in his own superiority. People like Maltravers also often need to choose an enemy, a nemesis, someone whom they can blame their failures on.”

Bancroft was indeed an impressive man , Darcy thought. He earned his success, the respect of his peers, yet remained modest. He was a man worthy of Elizabeth.

“Upon leaving the academy, the two served their earliest years under Nelson. Maltravers was already showing signs of volatility, while Bancroft was quietly earning the trust and respect of his superiors. Maltravers did receive promotions, but he was kept on a short leash. Patrols and blockade duty, not the more plum assignments. He could not be trusted. Then Bancroft was promoted before Maltravers, and I believe that was when the real hostility began. Maltravers sought ways to harm Bancroft’s career, and after some years discovered a rumour that he could threaten him with.” The admiral paused and took a long sip of his brandy.

“What was it? What was his secret? Or is it something that you cannot say?” Darcy asked.

Admiral Langley looked Darcy in the eye and shook his white head. “I can say it because it will not hurt anyone now. Samuel Bancroft was a molly.”

Stunned, Darcy’s jaw dropped. He was speechless. The implications were staggering. Could it be? Was Elizabeth aware of this when she married him? Was it possible that she was untouched even after her marriage? Was that why she had no children? He felt a primitive, possessive beast rise in his breast. Mine, it howled. But how had their marriage come about?

The admiral cleared his throat and continued. “He was one of the finest men I ever had the honour to serve with. Bancroft lived an exemplary life and was simply too valuable an officer to let go. There have been others like him, good officers who have

been quietly protected by the Admiralty due to their exceptional talents.

“Unfortunately, there are others who are vulnerable to money and power. Four years ago, Maltravers tried through his father’s influence to harm Bancroft with his allegations. He wanted him court-martialled and hanged so that he himself could have command of the *Melisande* and take part in the mission with the East Indian squadron. Ultimately he failed, though I believe Bancroft felt he had to contract a *mariage blanc* to protect himself. He could not have chosen better than our Lizzy.”

Darcy nodded. So that is how it was.

“Shortly after, when the elder Lord Akers died and his brother let it be known there would be no more money or favours from the family to those who protected him, Maltravers was court-martialled and sent home.”

“Why has he come after Elizabeth now?”

“Hannah and I have an idea about that. Bancroft was promoted to Rear Admiral of the Blue posthumously. That information was recently published in *The Naval Chronicle*. Maltravers may have only lately heard of it since he was removed from the Navy and sent in disgrace to his brother’s estate. Given his history, it might have angered him enough to seek some sort of twisted vengeance.”

Admiral Langley leant forwards and put his hand on Darcy’s arm, saying urgently, “It may be that he is after Elizabeth to sort of... own her, own her person, in the way that Bancroft did not. That would be his revenge.”

Darcy suddenly remembered the man he had overheard at the Swan as he watched Elizabeth with the men of the *Melisande*. The voice that had shaken him with its vitriol. The vulgar words. ‘A cherry that’s never been plucked...’

He stared at the older man in horror. “He wants to...” He could not bring himself to say it. He was out of his chair, stalking about the room, his fists clenched in rage. “Over my dead body!”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Elizabeth could hardly take it all in. The evening had begun so splendidly. She had been wearing the loveliest gown she had ever owned. She had felt beautiful, even standing next to Jane. The warmth and admiration in Darcy's eyes when he had greeted her had made her belly tighten and her toes curl. For the first time in her life, she had fallen in love, and her love was returned. He had loved her for all those years so steadfastly, it was almost inconceivable.

He had proposed, a sweet, simple, heartfelt proposal, and then all hell had broken loose. The monster had shown himself, and she was the object of his madness.

She had passed a wakeful night, although Hannah slept soundly at her side. She had arrived at Darcy House with nothing but her reticule. Now she and Hannah wore borrowed night-clothes, and maids were hastily altering some of Georgiana's gowns for their use.

They would assume the house was being watched, that Maltravers would not give up his quest for revenge given how far he had already come. Apparently, the man wanted to frighten her, to demonstrate that he had power over her as he had never had over Samuel. That was when he had begun acting out, pushing her at the Bazaar and standing where she could see him, taunting her with his presence. But why does he continue? Samuel is dead.

Elizabeth could see early morning light even through the drawn bed curtains. She rose quietly and, slipping through the curtains, took her first real look at the room she and Hannah had been placed in. It was enormous, and besides the entry door had

three doors leading to other rooms. Even in the pale light she could see that it was exquisitely and expensively decorated. Her bare feet were on a thick carpet, not a cold floor. Although the furnishings were perhaps out of fashion, the walls were covered in a pale green silk that matched the bed linens. Antique Chinese porcelain graced the mantel shelf. A long-case ormolu clock ticked along quietly.

Her natural curiosity came to the fore. On tiptoe, she moved about the room. She stepped towards the windows but then remembered the admiral's instructions: do not stand at windows. Moving instead to the nearest door, she opened it. It swung silently on well-oiled hinges, opening into a large dressing room. The next door revealed a snug sitting room fitted with bookcases.

She crept quietly to the third door. It opened to a short passage with another door at the end. Reaching for that doorknob, she quickly withdrew her hand when she heard masculine voices on the other side. It was Darcy, talking to another man, perhaps a servant.

Her eyes widened at the realisation that she had been quartered in the mistress's chambers. Good Lord, what if she had not stopped to listen and had walked in on him? What if he were not even dressed? Elizabeth quickly tiptoed back out of the passage and into the bedchamber, disbelieving her own wanton thoughts. She was in terrible danger, Fitzwilliam was sheltering her at his own risk, and her foolish mind was busily picturing his unclothed body.

Her silent self-recriminations were interrupted by Hannah's voice calling her name.

"I am here, Hannah. I am exploring our quarters."

The older woman climbed out of the enormous bed. "Well, it is a bit larger than what we are used to, is it not?" She stepped into the centre of the room and looked about. "Well, I reckon Mr Darcy has put you in the mistress's room. Right where he wants

you to be.”

Elizabeth raised her arms in bewilderment. “So here we are in borrowed night-clothes, in Mr Darcy’s house, because a man whom I have never met wants to harm me in order to avenge imagined wrongs committed by my husband—who has been dead these two years. Not only did Samuel not do anything to hurt him, he went out of his way to avoid him! And why avenge himself on me?”

“Lizzy, do let us sit down,” Hannah said, and she gestured to the sitting room. Elizabeth followed her. Hannah settled on an upholstered settee and patted the cushion next to her. She sat.

“When you accepted Samuel’s proposal, did he tell you about Maltravers?”

Elizabeth stared at her. What could she say without giving away Samuel’s most personal secrets? “He said he had an enemy who wanted to ruin his career and possibly see him hanged.”

“And he told you why?”

Elizabeth searched her friend’s direct unflinching gaze. There would be no prevaricating. She took a breath. “Yes, he did.”

“I thought so. Samuel was unaware that my husband and others of high rank knew there were rumours and did not care whether they were true or not. Your husband was a modest man and certainly never knew that there were those in power at the Admiralty who would have protected him as one of their best captains. Maltravers tried to destroy your husband time and again, and he failed. Instead, his own career ended in disgrace.”

Hannah paused, then reached for Elizabeth, cupping her chin and meeting her eyes.

“Maltravers knew about Samuel. Langley believes that his intent is to...possess you, in the way that Samuel...I assume never did.”

Elizabeth stared at her friend, blinking, when with horror, she suddenly understood what Hannah was saying. “He...wants to...?” He wanted to use her body to exact revenge on Samuel? Was that why he had brushed against her at the Bazaar?

“It is possible,” said Hannah.

Elizabeth shivered. The thought was terrifying, but she was being protected, was she not? Darcy, his cousin, Admiral Langley—all were there to keep her safe. What had they done after she had gone to bed?

A maid entered quietly with several gowns draped over her arm and seemed surprised to see the two ladies up and out of bed. “Beg pardon, Mrs Bancroft, Mrs Langley, here are a selection of gowns for you ladies to wear. They’re Mrs Fielding’s, and she’s quite tall, so they’ve been hemmed up a bit. Of course, you’ll need to be measured so we can alter them more to your size.”

“I thank you,” Elizabeth said. “What is your name?”

“I’m Helen, ma’am.”

“These will suffice, Helen. I shall speak to Mrs Sanders, for surely we shall not need so many. It is my hope that we shall be able to return to our homes in a day or two.”

“Aye, ma’am. Can I bring you anything from the kitchen?”

Elizabeth looked at Hannah, who shook her head. “We can wait until breakfast is served, thank you. Is anyone else up and about?”

“Mr Darcy and Mr Fitzwilliam are awake and dressed. They have gone to the stables.”

Elizabeth gasped. “They are not leaving?”

“I don’t think so, ma’am. They’re talking to some riders.”

“Oh.” She looked at Hannah. “Perhaps we had better dress and learn what has transpired while we were asleep.”

They did not see the gentlemen until they entered the breakfast room, where food had been laid out on the sideboard. Elizabeth and Hannah sat with the men and listened to their plans.

“We sent expresses out in an attempt to discover where the villain has been. It may help us determine what he will do next,” Mr Fitzwilliam assured them. “We should receive some answers today.”

Nonplussed, she stared at Darcy. “Truly, is all this necessary?”

He rose and extended his hand to her. “Come with me, and I shall explain all.”

He tucked her hand in his arm and led her to the gallery, a part of the house she had not seen. They walked silently before a long row of portraits. She presumed they were all Darceys, for not one of them was smiling. At last, he stopped and turned to face her.

“You are tired,” they both said simultaneously, then after a surprised moment laughed at each other and quickly sobered.

“Did you sleep, my dear girl?” he enquired gently.

She shook her head. "Not well. Although I have always thought of myself as a courageous sort of person, I have never had a personal enemy before. It is frightening to think that someone wishes me ill and wants to hurt me just because I am myself." She put her hand to his face and stroked his cheekbone with her thumb. "You did not sleep either."

"We discussed our adversary late into the night. We are fortunate to have two military men to assist us. Admiral Langley and my cousin have resources that I could never command in terms of strategic planning and experienced fighting men to call into service to protect the house. To protect you." He paused for several moments, holding her hands to his chest.

"Admiral Langley explained to me about this Maltravers and his obsessive competition with your husband." He bent his head closer to her ear and murmured. "He told me about the captain."

Elizabeth felt her heart sink and her skin flush hot. She had never imagined that Darcy or anyone else would find out. Did he find it distasteful? Would he cast her aside for having married a man like Samuel?

She dared to look at him. "Do you despise me now?"

"What? No! No, never! Elizabeth, how could you think that of me? Though I am curious as to why you married him if you knew? Did, um, you know?"

Elizabeth wondered whether she could ever explain. "It is rather complicated. Over the course of a year, after we came out of full mourning, my sisters had all happily married, and it was presumed I would go next to town and seek a husband. My feelings were so tangled... I did not wish to leave my father all alone, and I did not wish to leave Longbourn, but I was isolated and languishing there. I was not ready to settle for marriage and a conventional life in town. I wished for an adventure,

something to test my mettle. Then Samuel rode all the way to Longbourn from London and told me everything and proposed. He was completely honest, even though I might have repudiated him and sent him away. He honoured me with his trust.”

She sighed, still looking away from Darcy as she searched for words to explain. “Our family met him at Kitty’s wedding. He had served with Henry’s father and had been present when he perished during a naval action. He assisted Mrs Newfield when she needed it and paid for young Henry’s education. We found him to be a good man.

“He was asking for my help, you see, and he offered me a chance for adventure, to see the world. He told me it would be a harder life than I had ever experienced, but I found I wanted, nay, needed a true test of my abilities. I knew I could trust him, and he trusted me. So, I accepted him.”

Elizabeth raised her eyes to Darcy’s, wary but resolute. “I am aware that many would find my decision to be repellent, even immoral. But I am a better, stronger person than I would have been. I have no regrets.”

Darcy pulled her close, his arms encircling her as she wrapped hers around his waist. “Nay, Elizabeth, I know I have no right to be, but I am proud of you. I admired you when we first met, but now... Your strength, your intelligence, your courage, your confidence...” He searched for the words. “You humble me. I shall spend my life proving myself worthy of you.”

She sighed against him, feeling stronger within his grasp.

“I find myself envious of Captain Bancroft, yet profoundly grateful,” he said softly. “Whereas I was a prideful fool, he recognised your worth immediately. He cared for you and showed you the world. He protected you and fostered your growth.”

Elizabeth nodded. “In a way, he raised me, almost as much as my parents did.”

“And now I shall protect you, along with our friends. We will deal with this scoundrel once and for all.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

By late morning, replies were received from Elizabeth's relations. No man had been seen by anyone in the Magnussen or the Newfield households. Her aunt and uncle had been shocked to learn that a man of similar description been noticed several times by their observant youngest son in the busy park near their home, while neither his parents nor his nursemaid had been aware of it.

In the afternoon, the rider returned from Longbourn. Elizabeth recognised her father's handwriting on the note.

I have enquired of all my servants and tenants. A man similar to the one you describe was seen at the inn in Meryton, and Caleb Whitson swears he ran him off the farmyard on one occasion five or six weeks ago, believing him to be a vagrant. This is most distressing. I trust you will do everything in your power to keep my daughter safe. I beg you to keep me informed.

That evening, they heard from Gerhard, who reported that he had not been seen in Cambridge, but late on the second day, they received a note from Agueda, informing them that Youssef had spotted the man circling the outbuildings of Windward House a mere two days after Elizabeth had departed for London.

"That lends credence to your theory connecting this vile business to his discovery of Bancroft's promotion," Fitzwilliam said to the admiral.

Darcy ran a hand over his face and leant back in his chair. "By the Almighty, he almost had her before she even left her home." I might have lost her, this time

forever, and never would have known of her fate. “How did he know where to go in the first place?”

“I do not think it would have been difficult for him to find her. He likely still had a few contacts in the Navy who knew of the house Bancroft was having built. Once he had a place to start, he merely had to listen for local gossip or make a few seemingly innocent enquiries,” the admiral reflected.

“So he found his way to Gracechurch Street and was watching for an opportunity to take her away from the Gardiners’ home,” Fitzwilliam added.

“I walked Elizabeth home from the chapterhouse!” Darcy exclaimed. The other men stared at him.

“And?” Fitzwilliam asked, seemingly amused, one brow raised.

Darcy took a steadying breath. “We visited the chapterhouse with Sir Alexander. I walked Elizabeth home, and we walked by the park. The incident at the Bazaar occurred only a few days later. That was when we first became aware of Maltravers, though we did not know it at the time.”

“And you had visited the Gardiners’ home before that,” his cousin reminded him. “He saw you, Darcy. He saw your interest in Elizabeth. You were unknowingly interfering with his plans, and it further inflamed him.”

“Has Lord Matlock had any luck with Lord Akers?” asked the admiral.

“My father has spoken to Lord Akers, who insists that his brother is living at the family seat in Norfolk. He is rather stubborn but has been convinced to at least send a message to the estate to verify that he is there.”

Another thing to sit and wait for, thought Darcy. He wanted to do something.

To Elizabeth, the days seemed interminable. Darcy had shown her the responses to the expresses. Maltravers had been pursuing her, hunting her really. He was the hunter, and she was the prey.

Darcy spent hours with her, touring the house, telling her family stories, putting names and histories to the gloomy faces in the portrait gallery. He could not, however, be with her all the time.

She sat in the library most often. It was a beautiful room that held a magnificent collection and had the advantage of being close to Darcy's study where the gentlemen spent much of their time. Hannah was quite satisfied with it and stayed by her side. Elizabeth restlessly perused the shelves and had accumulated an impressive stack of books to read but was having trouble concentrating. She could not go out into the garden, could not look out of the window to admire it. She could not even look at the sky.

Lord Akers discovered that his brother had indeed left the estate and set his own men to seek Maltravers in London. He and Lord Matlock began sharing what little information they had with Darcy, Fitzwilliam, and the Admiral.

On the third day, she paced the library in silence. Hannah had gone to request refreshments, and Elizabeth was wearing a track in her betrothed's magnificent carpet. How long must we wait? As she rounded a corner between two armchairs and the wall, she stopped suddenly. What was that? It came again, almost inaudible, a quiet scraping sound, the slightest brush inside the walls. Mice, it had to be. She sighed and tried to relax her shoulders. Get a grip on yourself, Lizzy!

Hannah entered the room followed by a maid with a rattling tea tray. The sound stopped.

Late in the afternoon on the fourth day, the gentlemen were in the study awaiting a visit from Lord Matlock and Lord Akers, and Hannah was napping. Elizabeth wandered into a pretty upstairs parlour, done up in shades of pink and green. She had seen it on her endless perambulations around the house but had not spent any time in it. It had large windows, and she reckoned it had a lovely view of the tiny grotto of climbing roses and wisteria in the garden below, though the curtains were drawn.

She sat. She would enjoy her own company for a short time. She was almost never alone, and most likely Hannah or Darcy or a servant would find her in moments. She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, and prepared to enjoy a few quiet moments.

An arm came suddenly around her shoulders, gripping her tightly. She felt something cold against her temple. "You have no protectors now," a voice rasped in her ear.

She screamed and was immediately cuffed on the head. She felt herself being dragged sideways out of the chair. She screamed again.

"Shut it!" he roared and struck her again, quickly shifting his arm from her shoulders to her neck, his hand clamped over her mouth. Elizabeth fought back, twisting in his grip and grabbing at furniture, anything to slow him down. She needed to make noise. He began dragging her to the wall near the fireplace, where a hidden door stood ajar. She hooked her foot round the curved leg of a table of porcelain ornaments and kicked it. It came down with a loud crash.

Was that a scream? Elizabeth!

Darcy jumped up from his desk and ran into the hall. A footman stood looking up the staircase. Another desperate scream rent the air.

"Go!" He shouted at the servant, racing towards the stairs. A loud crash sounded from the parlour, and he hurtled towards the terrifying noise. The footman flung himself

through the door just ahead of him, Fitzwilliam and Langley on his heels.

All stopped just inside the room, brought up short by the sight of a man, unshaven, filthy with soil and coal dust, holding a pistol to Elizabeth's head. Her frightened eyes met his. He stepped forwards and growled, "Let go of her!"

"Do not come any closer! She is mine!" screamed Maltravers, wrenching Elizabeth backwards. She bit down hard on his hand, and he fought to hang on to her, just as Lord Matlock and Lord Akers came pelting through the doorway.

"Stop it, you fool!" shouted Lord Akers as his younger brother swung the pistol in his direction.

The presence of his brother shocked and further inflamed him; his face purpled in rage. "Get out of here, Akers, I will kill you first! You ruined me!"

The brothers shouted at each other. Darcy, seeing the man distracted, moved slightly towards Elizabeth, but Maltravers saw him. "Bancroft used this whore to take my ship!" he shrieked, swinging the pistol in Darcy's direction and losing his grip on the struggling Elizabeth, who fell to the floor.

"You had no career to ruin, Roger. You are a failure, always were. Father's money was the only thing protecting you," sneered Lord Akers. "Now I will see you hanged."

Maltravers bellowed in wordless fury and pointed the gun at his brother, pulling the trigger just as Fitzwilliam edged behind him and made a grab for his shoulder. The shot went awry, but Lord Akers was struck in the leg and slid to the floor. Maltravers struggled but was able to extend his arm again. Darcy stared, then understood that he had a repeating pistol. He ran at him once more, on a low trajectory, aiming to pull his arm down, but the gun went off.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Darcy fell. Elizabeth screamed. No, no! Her heart in her throat, she crawled quickly to his side as the other men lunged again at Maltravers, who lost his balance and fell, the pistol clattering to the floor. His head struck first the rack of iron fireplace tools, toppling them, then the hard corner of the marble hearth. He lay motionless, blood beginning to pool under his head, and the room silenced.

Fitzwilliam looked at the footman. “You, get the constable.” The young man bolted from the room, shoving his way through the onlookers gathering in the doorway. Mr Bridges hurried up, ordering the servants back to their posts, and dispatched another footman to fetch a physician. Within minutes, Hannah and Mrs Sanders hurried in, followed by maids carrying pitchers of water, basins, rags, and bandages.

Elizabeth knelt over her beloved, scrabbling at the buttons of his coat and waistcoat, fighting panic. After a few clumsy attempts, she managed to untie his neckcloth. You have treated bullet wounds like this dozens of times, she reminded herself. This is not a mortal wound, she told herself. Calm yourself! But this was her Darcy, and he was her life.

Darcy opened his eyes. “It is just my arm, Elizabeth,” he murmured. “See to Lord Akers.”

“Hannah, Mrs Sanders, and Langley are with him. Can we move you from the floor?”

“With some assistance, yes.”

Fitzwilliam and his father knelt beside him. "Take care with his arm," cautioned the military veteran. "Let us get him to his chambers."

She pressed the folded neckcloth against his right arm to slow the bleeding, and the men supported Darcy to his feet. He leant heavily on them as Elizabeth and a maid hurried ahead with a basin and rags. The maid threw sheets over a large armchair just before the men sat him down and carefully eased him out of his coat and waistcoat. Darcy was clearly biting his lip so he would not cry out.

"Will you be all right, Elizabeth? We shall see to the constable and Lord Akers."

She had regained her composure. "We shall, Richard. There is a lot of blood, but I do not believe the bullet damaged any bone or sinew."

"I expect you have treated wounds like this before." The men left them, and Elizabeth, desiring to be alone with her betrothed, sent the maid for some tea and broth.

"Oh, Fitzwilliam." She shook her head. "I was so frightened. I have never been so afraid in my life."

Darcy laid his head against the back of the chair as she loosened his shirt. "Of course you were terrified! That monster had you in his grip!" He lifted his left arm and touched her face.

Elizabeth shuddered. "Yes, but I meant when I saw you fall!" She did not want him to see her cry, so she turned away, sorting through the rags until she found some scissors. "I shall cut away your shirt. Do not move your arm."

She set to work, carefully cutting up the length of the sleeve and shoulder on the injured arm, moving the fine lawn, now soaked in blood, to one side. Dipping a rag in

the water, she cleaned it with as light a touch as she could. “Do you have any brandy or other strong drink in your chamber?”

“Have I driven you to drink?” His face was ashen and strained, but he was attempting a jest.

“Yes, you have, but let us save that for later. We need to pour some liquor on your wound to protect against infection.” She met his eye. “It will sting badly, adding to the pain, but it will help keep the wound clean.”

Darcy pointed to a small cabinet, and Elizabeth found brandy, port, and a fine Scottish whisky within. The Melisande’s surgeon had had a marked preference for using whisky, so that is what she took. Returning to his side, she poured some on the wound, then soaked a clean rag with whisky and applied it carefully to the torn flesh. The shot had torn the skin and injured the muscle but not deeply, for all the blood. He would have to refrain from writing those endless letters for a time, but it would heal. “This will need a few stitches.”

Darcy sucked in a breath as the alcohol stung while she sorted through the rags. “Stitches? You can stitch a wound, Elizabeth?” he asked, clearly trying to distract himself.

Elizabeth set to work, talking to deflect his attention from the pain. “Yes, as all officers’ wives are expected to learn. I also acted as surgeon’s assistant on occasion. We shall not stitch it now. I do not have the proper supplies to work with. It is clean, and we shall bandage it until your physician can attend to it.” She rambled on until at last she wound clean linen strips around the wound and tied it off.

“Let us dispose of this shirt. Where is your man?”

“My valet is conveniently away, visiting his sister’s family. They live in town, and he

does not often see them. Since we were to be confined to the house, I gave him leave to stay with his relatives.”

“He will be unhappy that he was not here to care for you.” Elizabeth seemed at a loss for a moment. “Dearest, I think I shall need to cut away your shirt completely. We do not want to injure your arm further by pulling it over your head. Where can I find a clean one for you?”

Darcy indicated a large clothing chest in his dressing room. She left to retrieve a shirt, and when she returned, she again took up the scissors. “Shall I offend you if I admit to wanting to see you without your shirt?” she asked.

He barked a laugh and let both arms relax at his sides, his desire almost overwhelming the pain. She would touch him. Would she let him touch her? Smiling a little shyly at him, Elizabeth cut the fabric up the middle and pushed it aside, exposing his chest. And stopped.

She froze, shaken to her core, all colour draining from her face, looking as if she had seen a ghost. In a way, she had. Unblinking, she stared at him for several long moments, then slowly extended one trembling finger to touch the pendant. “How...how have you this?” she whispered, abruptly pulling back from him.

Darcy had forgotten about the lover’s eye. He panicked. “Elizabeth, my heart, do not go, let me explain!” Ignoring the pain in his right arm, he grasped both her hands in his. “Please, let me tell you how I came to have it.”

She stared at him for several long moments but then nodded jerkily.

Darcy gathered his wits about him, took a deep breath, and began the story of events more than two months earlier in Devonshire.

“...and what I took for a small, broken piece of driftwood washed up right at my feet. I did not pick it up but stepped over it. At that point, it seemed to follow me, bobbing along next to me for nearly the entire length of the shore, as if insisting that I pick it up. I did so and discovered it was a small wooden box that had once been painted blue. It was terribly warped. I determined to open it, but I had to pry it slowly. Inside was this tiny miniature wrapped?—”

“In layers of oilcloth. I wrapped it myself,” interjected Elizabeth. She looked away from him, blinking back tears. “Samuel was killed by a lightning strike, only miles out from Devonshire. He was buried at sea, and I sent it to the bottom with him.”

“I knew...I recognised your eye immediately. I told myself it was fate or the act of some mysterious force.” He swallowed. “Elizabeth, you had lived in my mind for years, since the autumn of the year eleven. We returned to London, and I put the pendant on a chain so I would have it next to my heart always. I was to return to Pemberley alone within a few days, but then, incredibly, there you were—in my house! I could not let you get away again.”

He continued, earnest and beseeching. “Elizabeth, you know me. You know what a dull, unimaginative old stick I am.”

At this, she laughed a little.

“But even so, I felt that some sort of magic had happened, that somehow we had been led to each other again. Please believe me,” he said gently.

She raised her lovely, exhausted, bruised, tearstained face, her beautiful eyes meeting his for several long moments. “I do. I...it is perhaps just the shock of seeing it again, and on your person.”

He exhaled heavily, then held out his uninjured arm, and she came willingly, nestling

against him. He pulled her in tight and revelled in the feel of her against his skin. "Let us marry immediately. Or do you want a wedding?"

She shook her head against his chest. "I already had a wedding."

Darcy closed his eyes, the pleasure outweighing the pain. "As did I. Let us marry without fuss, then. I shall purchase a common licence."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The constable arrived immediately, and all witnesses gave their accounts of the calamity. Bruises and bullet wounds also told the story. Darcy's physician examined all the wounded and approved Elizabeth's work, though Lord Akers's wounds proved to be more serious. He would not be returning to Norfolk any time soon. His brother's bullet had torn ligaments and nicked a bone just below his left knee. Still, he insisted on being transported to his own townhouse.

Maltravers never regained consciousness and died the following day. It was determined that he had found his way into Darcy's house through a disused coal hole that had been thought sealed. He had hidden in the wine cellar and servants' passages for one or perhaps two days, biding his time. Once the constable had gone, Darcy's servants worked diligently to remove all traces of the incident and inspect every possible opening to the house and seal those in disuse.

Elizabeth a little reluctantly returned to the Gardiners' home. Their families' relief was beyond measure. Elizabeth was safe; Darcy's wounds were minor. Their loved ones expressed their joy by surrounding them constantly: embracing, talking, and laughing, barely letting them out of their sight. Neither she nor Darcy were able to find a moment's privacy. Even their servants hovered. Quite often they found themselves at opposite ends of a crowded room gazing longingly at each other.

She took him aside as they stood in the small garden behind her aunt and uncle's house. "I should return to Windward House. I have been gone far too long."

Darcy lowered his head to speak in her ear. "You wish to leave London? Should I be

disappointed?”

She cast a quick glance around her to see if anyone was listening. “My home is quiet and very private, if you take my meaning. However, I am not averse to some company.” She raised her eyes to his. “To one particular person’s company, I mean.”

“Ah, I see.” He nodded slightly, eyeing their assembled relatives. “I also miss the country. I rarely stay in town this long. Although I have been longing to carry you off to Pemberley, it would be difficult to be completely private there. Some time spent by the sea would be quite beneficial.”

She smiled. “I should like to see Pemberley. I shall inform my family of my plans.”

“Let me make the travel arrangements for you. When would be convenient? Will two or three days be enough to make your farewells and notify your housekeeper?”

“I do believe it would.”

Lowering his voice, he said, “Let us marry there. I shall bring the licence.”

“You do understand, Aunt? We wish to be alone. Our courtship has been rather too eventful, and we have not enjoyed much in the way of privacy.”

“While we shall miss you very much, we do understand. You are both old enough to know what you want and do as you wish. You want to begin your life together. And after this hectic summer, we could all use a return to a familiar routine.” Mrs Gardiner opened her arms, and Elizabeth embraced her tightly, then her uncle. “Write to me, my dear, and we shall see you for Christmas at Pemberley.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I also look forward to the Festive season, my first as mistress of a grand estate! We shall see if I have my sea legs under me by then,” she said with a

rueful smile.

Darcy accompanied the carriage to Gracechurch Street, riding alongside it. He would be a day behind her, staying in town long enough to get the licence.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner had greeted him and then entered their house, leaving them to themselves. As her trunks were loaded, they stood partially hidden by the side of the carriage. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly, his lips leaving a trail from her mouth to her neck. His hands slid to her hips, pulling her flush against his body. She could feel his desire and knew it matched hers. They exchanged a burning glance, and without another word, he handed her into his carriage and watched as it drove away.

Her journey, complete with maids, guards, and postilions, changed horses several times along the way. She had never travelled with such fuss and rapidity before, and now, after two days' journey, she was home at Windward House. The weather had held, and a fresh breeze was coming off the channel. The postilions and maids were settled at an inn in the nearby village and would set off on their return trip the next morning, crossing paths with Darcy's carriage.

They would marry at the parish church in two days, the rector presiding, with Agueda and Youssef as witnesses. There would be no giving away the bride. They would give themselves to each other, standing side by side.

Elizabeth spent the day restlessly preparing for his arrival, freshening linens that did not need freshening, examining food stocks in the pantry and wine in the cellar that had already been inventoried. Agueda had moved easily into her role as housekeeper years before and had all preparations well in hand. She and the maid they had hired from the village had the house immaculate. She had also hired a cook, and delicious aromas drifted from the kitchen. Youssef and the part-time gardener had prepared the park, gardens, and small stable equally well.

Tomorrow they would marry, but tonight they would be together at last. She was not nervous. Her state of disquiet was caused by her agitated impatience. She was wild to have Darcy in her arms, in her bed, his large hands roving over her, his weight pressing against her, his skin against hers. She was tired of being a maiden, of being a spinster disguised as a wife.

After picking fitfully at a small luncheon, she stood by the windows facing the sea. She noticed some clouds forming far to the west. She stepped out onto the balcony with her grandfather's telescope in hand. They were only a thin line on the horizon, though they were dark, darker than the sea. The breeze had shifted; it was stiffer, coming from the west, though not unpleasant. The sun had passed its zenith. Darcy should arrive any time now.

Elizabeth went inside and forced herself to play the small pianoforte she had purchased when she had moved in. The music soothed and drew her in, she knew not for how long, when she was interrupted by the sound of a loose shutter hitting the side of the house. The breeze had gained in strength, with heavier gusts of wind. The sun had disappeared behind heavy roiling clouds, but the mantel clock told her it was time for dinner. Where is he? Had he been delayed in London?

After a time, she heard the first heavy drops of rain strike the windows, then the clouds opened up. Rain pelted the roof, increasing in intensity till it became a roar. The gusts of wind became a gale. Constantly checking her watch was not helping; it had gone past eight. She took it off and put it away. He would be safe. He was a sensible man. He was her sensible man. Where is he? Had he been forced to take shelter from the storm?

Hours later, Elizabeth conceded that their reunion would not happen that night. She changed from the revealing silk gown she had wanted him to see her in and put on a night-rail and robe.

Not that she would sleep. Agueda appeared in the doorway to the sitting room as she paced back and forth. “I built up the fire in your chamber, missus,” she said. “Youssef has put out extra lanterns.”

“Thank you. You and Youssef may as well retire. I expect Mr Darcy has taken shelter and will not arrive this night.” Somewhat dejectedly, Elizabeth sank into a chair and stared at the fire.

“Oh, we shall wait a while longer, ma’am.” Agueda was of the opinion that if this man’s feelings ran as high as her mistress’s, he would not let a little rain stop him.

Elizabeth had fallen into a doze when the outer doors burst open. She jumped to her feet and ran out into the hall, calling his name. Darcy hastened through the entry and into the hall, dropping a bag, shrugging off his wet greatcoat and jacket as he came through, letting them all fall forgotten to the floor. Then she was in his arms, and he was devouring her. Between kisses, she rasped, “My room,” flapping her arm towards the stairs.

He grunted, threw her over his shoulder, and took the stairs at a gallop.

Agueda was picking up the wet coats as Youssef came through the front door, which still stood wide open. “I put his horse in the stable. Don’t think he even saw me.” He looked at his wife and jerked his head in the direction of the stairs. “Lovebirds already upstairs then?”

“Aye,” said his wife. “Bout bloody time, I’d say.”

Between fevered kisses, Darcy muttered about a horse, an inn, and rain. Having disposed of his waistcoat, Elizabeth pulled his shirt off, and he was lowering her to the bed when she began to laugh. “Your boots!” she yelped. “Let me get them. You must relax.”

Darcy, on the bed, rolled over onto his back, a small weary smile on his face, and wordlessly held out one leg. She pulled and tugged at the boot, but the soaked leather was stubborn. Babbling her relief all the while, she finally straddled his leg, her back to him, and pulled. Minutes later, one boot was off, and after another brief struggle, the other followed it in the same fashion. She turned to share her triumph, one boot raised in the air, to the sight of a beautiful, dishevelled man in her bed, sound asleep and snoring.

Elizabeth dropped the boot to the floor and sighed. Darcy was safe and dry; that was the main thing. She removed his wet stockings, blew out the candle, crawled in next to him, and pulled up the covers. She was asleep before her head touched the pillows.

Darcy opened his eyes. All was quiet. He was warm and dry in a bed, a comfortable bed, in a dark room lit only by glowing coals in the fireplace. His clothes were gone, excepting his breeches. Someone had covered him with a quilt. He was warm and sleepy. His muddled brain could not remember where he was, but he felt safe, though his arm ached badly. He had dreamt of battling a fierce storm. There had been a lamed horse in the dream. And something had happened to his boots? He closed his eyes to slip back into slumber.

Near his ear, he heard a soft sigh. His eyes popped open, and he slowly turned his head in the direction of the sound.

There was Elizabeth, on her side facing him, sound asleep. He watched her breathe and let his mind return to the previous night. It had not been a dream. He had thought himself to be making good time on the second day of the journey until the afternoon when one of the post horses went lame. They had unhitched the beast and limped to the next posting inn, and by the time they got back on the road it had begun to rain. After another hour it had become a downpour with no signs of diminishing. They came to a small inn at a crossroads, and he hired rooms for his coachmen. He was determined to get to Elizabeth, but he would not endanger his men to do so. Another

fresh horse and he started out on horseback. He reckoned he was perhaps one or two hours away, but as the storm strengthened, the roads became a quagmire. Several times he and the horse took shelter, in derelict buildings or under trees along the way. The wound on his right arm had been healing nicely, but holding the reins of a frightened horse in a storm was aggravating it. He knew not how long he had been riding when he realised that underneath the howl of the wind, he could hear the sea. At last, he had seen the lanterns, glowing lanterns hung by the doors and windows of a house and outbuildings. He had been exhausted, soaked through, and chilled to the bone.

Watching her sleep was worth every second.

He could not help it; he had to reach for her. He rose onto his elbow and carefully moved a lock of hair away from her face. She stirred slightly, her hair in her eyes and wildly tangled about her shoulders. Her eyelashes fluttered briefly, but sleep did not yet release her. Her eyes closed again, but after another moment she blinked several times and was alert. "Darcy!"

She reached for him, her fingertips skating lightly along his cheek. "Are you well?"

"I am now."

"You must have been frozen! I did not know whether to hope you would come or that you had taken shelter somewhere."

"I probably should have taken shelter. I was not in a rational state of mind. Often, I am not, where you are concerned."

He reached for her, and she shifted readily into his arms. He kissed her, running his hand down her back.

“Can this come off?” he said, his hand full of the fabric of her nightgown. “Shall I offend you if I admit to wanting to see you without a shirt?”

Elizabeth laughed. “How adept you have become at using my words against me.” Even in the dim light he thought he could see a deep blush rising across her chest and neck.

She took a breath. “I have never...you are the first. The only.” But she rose to her knees, threw off the offending article and curled against him once more, burying her face in his chest.

“I want to see you, my love,” Darcy murmured. He stroked her side, her back, her legs until she relaxed and adjusted herself so he could see. Her eyes were closed, her soft skin and tousled hair reflected the dark golden light of the coals. She was all delicious curves, from her waist to her hips to the sweep of her back, from her delicate neck to the hollow of her shoulders. He was going to kiss and touch every inch of her. She sighed and reached for him, her hand on his neck, her fingers touching his hair.

Instantly he was up, discarding his breeches and back in bed before she could even open her eyes. “Do not go away. It is cold without you,” she grumbled.

He pulled her close. “Let me warm you, then,” he whispered.

Elizabeth could not breathe. In truth, she could breathe but she could not take a deep breath. There was a rather large man lying partially across her, sleeping deeply, his face buried in her neck, his heavy arm around her. It was not comfortable, but she would not complain. What was air to love?

It had been...oh, there were no words. Glorious? Magnificent? Fun? Elizabeth had understood the mechanics of it. She had not anticipated all they would share, the

intimacy of feeling, the sense of oneness. There had been something sacred about it, yet her lover's playful side had been much in evidence. The corners of her mouth turned up at the thought. My lover.

This man was everything she had ever dreamt of and some things she had never imagined. Her love for him was overwhelming. They had been in accord since their reacquaintance, but they were both strong-willed. They would quarrel, then they would talk. They would share their feelings and work through their disagreements. How wonderful it might be to make up with Fitzwilliam after an argument.

It was morning, but Elizabeth would not have chosen to rise from her bed even if there had not been a heavy obstacle in her way. She wanted to linger with him in her chamber all day, to share their bodies again and again.

They could not, for today was the day they were to be married. Elizabeth carefully ran her hand along Darcy's arm in an attempt to slip out of bed, but instead it tightened around her.

"Where do you think you are going?" his rough voice rumbled against her neck.

Elizabeth closed her eyes. Rising for the day was going to take some self-discipline on her part.

"Fitzwilliam, I have no idea what time it is. I would not wish to be late to the church because we lay abed."

Darcy raised his head, his eyes clouded with sleep and disgruntlement. He heaved a deep sigh. "Our wedding is the only reason I shall leave your bed today."

Elizabeth rose and stepped into her dressing room. "I had a change of clothing with me," she heard him say. "And the licence."

“They are here,” Elizabeth called from the dressing room. Now wrapped in a robe, she put her head round the door. “Agueda has our clothes all ready. We have just enough time to wash and change and have something to eat. I rang for hot water.”

Darcy’s eyes lit with interest.

She laughed at him. “Just a wash today, my dearest. We shall have time for more later.”

Laughing in sheer joy, they tidied and dressed each other, feeding each other fruit and bits of bread from the tray the housekeeper had left on a small table.

There was a knock on the dressing room door, then Elizabeth heard her housekeeper’s voice. “Youssef has the cart ready, missus.”

“Are you ready?” she asked Darcy.

He was peering sceptically into the cheval glass. “It is not often that I must shave myself, but it will have to do. Your housekeeper has done wonders with my clothes.”

Elizabeth led him out through the garden to the stables, where Agueda and Youssef were waiting with a farm cart hitched to a sturdy cob. Darcy stopped short.

“We are riding a farm cart to the church?” he exclaimed.

“It is the only conveyance we have here. Unless you would rather walk, and the road is ankle-deep in mud,” replied Elizabeth. “And it is more than a mile.”

“That has never stopped you before,” he grumbled, but he lifted his bride into the back of the cart and then jumped up beside her. Elizabeth’s servants, who would serve as their witnesses, sat up on the box. The bride and groom sat side by side, their

legs dangling over the back of the cart. As they neared the village, Darcy jumped down and quickly picked a bouquet of wildflowers, handing them to Elizabeth as the cart rolled to a stop before the church.

They walked in together, arm in arm. The rector was waiting for them.

Standing face-to-face, clutching each other's hands, they spoke their vows. At the ceremony's conclusion, rector or no rector, Darcy pulled her into his arms.

"I have never been so happy," he said softly in her ear.

She looked up at him, her eyes swimming in tears. "I do not think I have been either," she whispered.

They pulled themselves together and signed the documents the rector provided, making polite conversation all the while.

The rector excused himself, and the wedding party boarded the cart for the ride home. When they arrived, Elizabeth took her husband by the hand and led him all over Windward House—the house, the outbuildings, the gardens, and down to the cove. "It is your home now too," she said, taking great pleasure in his interest and delight in the beautiful building and its grounds.

Later, as the sun traced its downward path to the western horizon, they sat on the balcony, looking out at the sea, listening to the sound of the waves rushing onto the shingle below. Elizabeth was in Darcy's lap, her head on his shoulder.

"It is so beautiful here. Calming, somehow," he said softly.

"We shall be at Pemberley most often, I think," she said. "It is very beautiful there, from everything I have been told. I greatly anticipate calling it my home. Let us come

here on holiday, as often as we can.”

“Aye, and bring our children,” he said. He cupped her face in his free hand. “Will it be difficult for you, my darling, leaving this place and only being able to visit it in future? Will you miss your home?”

“ You are my home, Fitzwilliam. I am at home whenever I am with you, anywhere you are.”

“And I you, my one and only love.”

EPILOGUE

August 1827

Elizabeth leant against the carriage window and watched as her view of Windward House and the sea retreated into the distance. Her husband, seated next to her, put his arm round her.

“Homesick already, my love?” he asked, lightly kissing the top of her head.

“You know perfectly well who my home is, Fitzwilliam. If you speak of houses, Pemberley is our home, and I would never change that. Much as I love Windward House, it is not our true home, but it is our play-ground. I treasure our holidays there.”

The Darcys, with their five children, had reluctantly concluded a long summer holiday, and their small caravan of carriages was travelling north. The children and their nursemaids rode in the large coach rumbling behind their parents’ smaller, more fashionable, carriage.

“It was lovely, was it not?” Elizabeth sighed.

Darcy snorted at her. “If you like noisy, dirty children traipsing sand indoors and carrying seashells, rocks, feathers, and seaweed into the house all day.”

She scoffed. “I do like it, and you do as well. You cannot fool me. Why, only last week I watched you help Tommy and George drag a barnacled old tree limb out of

the water. You sat on the sand almost every afternoon with Alice and Maddie, digging holes with their little buckets and trowels.”

“And you worked with Janie on her drawings for hours.”

Since their marriage, the Darcys had spent at least one holiday a year in their house facing the sea, especially near the anniversary of their marriage. As their children arrived, they were brought along. Over the years they had developed a preference for a simpler type of holiday. Removed from their great responsibilities as master and mistress of Pemberley, they could simply be together: he and she, husband and wife, Papa and Mama. They brought no servants from Pemberley or London but sent for nursemaids to attend the children when it was time to travel. They had Agueda and Youssef, and they could bring down additional servants if needed.

They ate and dressed simply and spent long lazy days in the garden and at the cove. They sailed whenever the weather permitted, flew kites, built sandcastles, and took long walks on the shore. The children grew brown as berries, roaming freely and playing with Samuel, the son of Agueda and Youssef. They picked out songs on the guitar. On warm nights they brought bedrolls to the balcony and looked at the stars with Grandfather Bennet’s telescope until they fell asleep.

Besides Agueda’s Samuel, the Newfields also had a Samuel, as did the Leonards and the Dunbars. Their own son George bore the full name of George Samuel Bancroft Darcy. For a man who never had a child of his own, his namesakes were scattered across England.

“How fortunate we are, Fitzwilliam,” Elizabeth said softly. “My heart overflows with gratitude for our family. All our families.”

“Aye, mine as well,” Darcy said. They leant against each other, relaxing to the rhythm and sway of the well-sprung carriage.

“Someday, when we are at Windward House, I should like to tell the children the story of how I found the lover’s eye,” mused Darcy. “They are too young now.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth agreed. “And how you found me and captured my heart. They will discover that their sober, dignified papa is a great romantic.”

Settled in the circle of his arms, she continued, “Here is my someday plan, dearest. Someday I shall take you on a voyage around the world, and we shall have another great adventure.”

“I shall hold you to that,” her husband replied as they rumbled down the road towards their future and whatever adventures it would bring.