







# Old Boots (Pride and Prejudice Variations #3)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Thoughtfully conceived and deftly executed, *Old Boots* is an exceptional *Pride and Prejudice* variation that should not be missed! Replete with brilliant dialogue, heartfelt relationships, hilarious antics, and satisfying romances – if you are searching for top-quality Austenesque, you need look no further—AUSTENESQUE REVIEWS

Once our troubles had been understood and shared, we returned to our programme of mutual harassment that was our particular form of lovemaking.

MR FITZWILLIAM DARCY HAS DEDICATED HIMSELF to duty and decorum since his father's passing, striving always to uphold a reputation as the model gentleman. But a visit to Netherfield Park awakens a restless, mischievous spark within him—an uncharacteristic craving for the carefree days of his youth.

HIS NEWFOUND ABANDON BEGINS even before he sets foot inside Longbourn when he rescues a spirited young lady from a raging stream—Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the infamous lightning bolt of Hertfordshire. But Elizabeth's spirited independence and outspoken nature turn Darcy's chivalry into chaos, as his well-intentioned rescue is met with sharp retorts and icy disdain. Instead of gratitude, he receives a frosty rebuke, igniting a surprisingly prickly rivalry—and a terrible curiosity that only deepens.

AMIDST STOLEN GLANCES, PLAYFUL BARBS and daring pranks, Darcy finds himself increasingly drawn into Elizabeth's world—where her quick wit humbles his pride and his reckless heart begins to stir. As their bond grows amidst the backdrop of social expectations and hidden secrets, the tension sparks into something far beyond mere mischief.

In this captivating tale of second chances and irresistible attraction, Darcy and Elizabeth grapple with their feelings—and their desires—to discover whether it's possible to reclaim a love as fiery as the storms that first brought them together. *Old Boots* is a humorous regency romance with low angst and a guaranteed happily ever after for Darcy Elizabeth.

## CHAPTER ONE

The day began with the arrival of a lazy sun that rendered everything it touched slightly golden, and the October air was crisp and comfortable.

Since a gentleman is obliged to wear a waistcoat under a well-tailored coat, a snugly tied cravat, not to mention breeches, stockings, and tall, close-fitting boots, I was grateful for such cool weather after the stifling days of summer.

I had travelled a great deal in the hotter months and was feeling weary beyond my years, a consequence, I supposed, of the monotony of going from one place to another with very little variation in scenery.

This time, I travelled up from London to visit my friend Charles Bingley, who was considering acquiring a middling-sized estate in Hertfordshire.

He was a scatterbrain, but a likeable one, and I consented to go because I knew he would need a great deal of help managing a piece of land, even a leased one.

I yawned, rested my temple on my knuckles, and turned my sluggish attention to a smattering of cottages that went by in a blur.

The terrain then spread out before me, and more out of habit than interest, I made note of the crops, the general state of the fields, and the occasional woods and water.

The land in the southern counties is too generous to demand much of its farmers, and as a result, no one did more than a passable job of cultivation.

All these things I abstractly considered while staring at a stream, running parallel to the road.

The water was swollen and the current roiling, making it look more like a river in flood, and I presumed the area had recently had heavy rain.

A landed man will always think about drainage when looking at a stream, and I was in the midst of wondering whether Netherfield Park was muddy or dry, when with only half my attention, I began to notice a lady up ahead.

She stood on the embankment, balanced only by one hand grasping a tree limb as she stretched precariously over the frothing water.

She was staring intently into the current, and such was the tautness and intensity of her pose that the rest of my attention snapped into focus.

I struggled from a slouch into an upright position and began pounding on the roof of my carriage. As the wheels stopped, I jumped to the road, yet before I took one step towards the woman to ascertain what was needed, she dropped like a stone into the water below her!

I confess, I blinked twice to assure myself I was in my right mind, but a bonnet floating downstream on the fast-moving water caused me to shout with surprise and break into a run. In a flash, I was on the bank, frantically scanning upstream for any sign of the lady.

I spotted her instantly, not ten yards away but moving quickly, and after one second of anguish for my boots, I, too, plunged waist deep into freezing water.

With her back to me, the woman was submerged chest-high and struggling to stay upright, judging from the splashing all around her.

With grim determination to make quick work of rescuing her, I crashed through the ice-cold current, grasped her by the waist, and dragged her towards the bank.

I had heard that a drowning person can sometimes fight his rescuer, but I was surprised by the force of resistance with which my effort was rewarded.

“Let me go!” she bawled, and then, while flailing wildly against me, she spluttered, “You are making this harder!”

With a surprising degree of strength, she lunged away from me, and when I once again had a crushing hold around her waist, I became vaguely aware that we were not alone. She was clinging to something that thrashed and flailed for its life.

But before I could fully grasp this development, my foot slipped as we wrestled, and I stumbled, pulling us completely under water in a tangled mass. By some feat of superhuman strength, I found a foothold, righted myself, thrust us to the surface, and hauled myself, the lady, and?—

“A dog?” I spat in disgust as I landed us, panting, gasping, and coughing in a heap in the mud midway up the bank.

“Take your arm off me, sir,” the woman cried hotly, and when I loosened my grip, she struggled to her knees and then stood upright, dripping head to toe. “I cannot believe,” she said, her chest heaving, “that you plunged me all the way under water. I am lucky not to be dead!”

By this time, I, too, had scrambled to my feet. My temper was equally exercised, and I replied with ill-disguised irritation. “You are lucky I intervened, otherwise you certainly would be dead!”

She huffed, looking me over head to foot. She obviously had more to say to me, but

she still had not regained sufficient wind to argue. She turned her ire onto the soggy lump at her feet.

“You stupid, ignorant creature!” she said, wagging her finger above his head.

The filthy hound looked up hopefully and thumped his bedraggled tail at her in encouragement.

“Look what you have done. I could not be more ashamed of you.” The animal’s ears folded back on his head, his tongue lolled out, and he looked lovingly at his accuser.

“We should not be standing in this wind,” I said irritably, forcing my teeth not to chatter in my head. I called to my footman, who stood with his mouth agape on the grass above my head. “Come, Becket, bear a hand.”

He pulled me up the muddy ledge. In turn, I reached back and pulled the young lady up towards the grass, and once she topped the bank, I made towards my carriage with her hand still in mine.

She pulled back, causing me to have to turn to see what was amiss.

“I live just down that road,” she said, pulling her hand out of my grip, “not more than a mile.”

“You are joking. You do not mean to walk. You are soaked to the skin.”

She lifted her chin and assumed a posture I did not much like. “I should warm up if I walk briskly.”

My knees were beginning to shake, and I had no patience for the kind of pettish opposition that required I beg to be of assistance.

“Get in that coach!” I roared, pointing sharply towards the open door, which was now only a few yards away .

To my consternation, the lady did not meekly obey, but the hound jumped to his feet and disappeared inside my carriage’s darkened interior. I had not intended to take the animal up, thinking he could run behind the horses, and it seemed the young lady agreed with me.

“Bandit, come here. Come down at once!” she demanded.

He peeked out the door and wagged his tail, but otherwise, he would not budge even after repeated commands. After a minute of this futile urging, the lady glared at me, and with very little grace and even less gratitude, she let Becket hand her up.

In much the same spirit, I followed her, and within a few minutes, my coach was turned around and tooling with unnecessary briskness down the road.

Our haste I took to be testimony of my coachman’s disapproval of such a feckless purpose as ferrying a dog.

I found myself in perfect sympathy with him, still rather upended by the realisation I had ruined my boots for such a stupid cause.

“Bandit?” I observed with heavy sarcasm.

“If you are about to remark that every boy between here and Scotland names his large, unmannered hound Bandit, I would be forced to agree,” she said, swiping in annoyance at the strand of wet hair stuck to her cheek. I handed her a carriage rug and draped another over my lap as she spoke .

As if to purposely annoy me, the lady took the rug, and rather than making use of it



herself, tucked it up around the dog at her feet.

“There, you worthless animal,” she said sternly. “Jane will give you a tremendous scold just as soon as you have warmed up in the kitchen.”

I looked askance at the source of the unpleasant odour in my coach.

He was what could be loosely referred to as a hound but of such mixed parentage as to make him obscure in his features.

Clearly, he was of a stupid disposition which rendered him delighted to be yelled at, thrilled to be chased with someone’s half-chewed slipper in his mouth, prone to running out in front of horses in pursuit of squirrels, cats, and blowing leaves, and otherwise being a blight on the entire canine species. She should have let him drown.

“I am Fitzwilliam Darcy,” I said abruptly, in lieu of blurting out my opinion.

“I am visiting Mr Bingley at Netherfield Park for some weeks.” I could not help the note of antipathy in my voice even as I attempted to be polite, but in my defence, I had every right to be annoyed to be in Hertfordshire.

“We had heard the estate might be leased,” the lady said disinterestedly as she looked out the window. “I am Elizabeth Bennet. My father’s estate is just there, if you would signal your coachman.”

This tepid reply was as much as I would get in response to my overture of civility because Bandit had recovered enough to stand.

And since he looked like he would shake himself dry, she commanded, “Sit down, you brute!” before looking up at me, her eyes awash with satisfaction. “I am afraid your coach will forevermore smell of wet dog,” she said, the implication being that I

would have been better off letting her walk home.

I could not but agree.

The lady, apparently the daughter of a gentleman, had all the address and refinement of an angry matron who bullied schoolboys for a living.

I could hardly say such a thing aloud, so I gave her a generous view of the back of my head by pretending interest in the passing hedges.

Soon we rolled to a stop outside a manor house constructed in the Tudor style of aged, golden-coloured stone.

“You will forgive me if I do not call,” I said coldly. “I am not suitably presentable at the moment to meet your family.”

Miss Bennet—Elizabeth was it? No matter. The lady looked at me with both brows raised. “You will at least step out and explain to my father why I have been sitting alone in a closed coach with you, sir.”

I blushed to be told my duty as a gentleman, a sensation of abashed heat in my cheeks I had not felt since I was sixteen.

As I followed her out into the stiff breeze that turned my fingers to ice, I was met by a contingent of persons standing wide-eyed on the steps.

A tall, slight, elderly gentleman stepped forward with a frown of perplexity on his face.

Behind him stood an elegant blonde lady, and behind her, a small knot of persons I took to be servants.

All eyes being upon me, I bowed, opened my mouth to speak, and was promptly interrupted.

“Your dog chased a squirrel down the riverbank and fell in, Jane. Would you believe it? It appears the idiot does not know how to swim,” Miss Elizabeth said crossly. “Bandit! Come here, you ignoramus. Get out of that coach this instant.”

The dog obeyed and gleefully shook himself as he had surely been longing to do for the last five minutes. All eyes, having swung momentarily to the dog, then went back to me.

“This is Mr Darcy, Papa. He—” She seemed to be biting back the urge to say something perfectly vile about my assistance, when her sister came forward.

“Mr Darcy,” she said with a curtsy, “I thank you very much for lending your aid to my sister. Will you not come in and have something hot to drink?”

“No, he will not,” Miss Elizabeth snapped. By this time, her lips were blue and she, too, was visibly shaking. “He is soaked to the skin and would rather be anywhere else than paying a call on us.” She offered me a scant curtsy, which had all the deference of a shrug, and marched into the house.

I bowed, and said, “Mr Bennet.”

He bowed and replied, “Mr Darcy,” and with that, I was greatly relieved to be on my way from the place.

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### CHAPTER TWO

Shortly, we were in the yard at Netherfield Park.

As I stepped into my coach at Longbourn, I had told my footman that I wished to be taken to the service entrance of the estate, so we went down a rutted road south of the house rather than the manicured drive that led to the front door.

We clattered to a stop amid the usual buckets, barrows, feathers, and composting rubbish found at the back of any large house.

Becket opened the door. “Fetch the housekeeper,” I said, in no mood for pleasantries.

The lady came out, looking slightly harassed. When she told me her name, I said, “Mr Bingley is expecting me. As you see, however, I have lately had to—I am not inclined to be received by the ladies of this house just now, Mrs Nicholls.”

“No, sir—I mean, yes, sir, Mr Darcy. ”

“And I would rather not be stared at.”

She seemed to understand, and after a curtsy and begging my pardon, she went inside for a length of five minutes. When she returned, she said, “The way is cleared, sir, and your room is ready, if you would follow me?”

“Has my man arrived?” I asked tersely.

Carsten, my valet, had served a duke's son who died young, and he had very fastidious notions about travelling ahead of his gentleman to make things ready.

That very morning, he had shaved and dressed me before dashing, I presume, to catch the nine o'clock mail to Hertfordshire.

This left me time to have a leisurely breakfast, speak to my sister, read my letters and the news sheets, select a book from my library, meet with my personal secretary, and otherwise fritter away the time until my planned departure at half past ten.

"I told him that you will be needing dry clothes and hot water, sir," she said.

There were no servants to be seen. I traversed a darkened hall, and the steep, ill-lit service stairs, and was soon shown into my room.

"Sir!" Carsten gasped.

"Just so," I said grimly.

He rushed to help me out of my coat which was no easy feat, given that I shivered uncontrollably and the sodden wool was plastered to my shirt. Soon, I was stripped from the waist up, and when I sat down, my valet bent to attend to my boots.

"Oh, sir," he gasped again, this time mournfully.

"Ruined, I am afraid."

"Yes." He could say no more, though the subject loomed large between us for the interminable length of time it took for him to wrestle those wet, muddy boots off my legs.

All I could think of was that it had taken three months for this pair to be made, that my second-best pair was in Derbyshire, and that my spare boots, which I had brought along for tramping through fields, had no shine left on them, not to mention a few scars and scrapes in the leather.

“Should I send to Pemberley, sir?” Carsten asked, apparently having had these same thoughts.

“No.” I may have been rich, but I had not yet become ridiculous. “Send to Hoby to start work on another pair. We shall manage with the ones I have. We are in the country, and from all appearances, we shall meet only rustics here.”

As I lowered myself into the water, I could not remember when I had anticipated a hot bath more. Perhaps that was because I cannot remember when I had ever been colder or muddier.

Carsten tiptoed around collecting the rest of my wet and ruined clothes.

He must have sensed my mood, which I admit, was sullen.

I had spent the principal years of my adulthood catering to duty and secretly resenting my endless obligations.

Some of the stoniness of my thoughts must have melted away as he brought up a third round of hot water because the longer I soaked in luxurious warmth, the less irritable and more reflective I became.

I principally pondered why I found myself in this mediocre spot on the map. Soon I came to own the truth. I had been glad of an excuse to escape my sister Georgiana’s haunted face. She was impossible to console and suffered from an irrational belief she had disappointed me.

In truth, she had disappointed me, but I thought I had done an excellent job concealing my sentiments. I found it difficult to accept that my sister had lowered her guard so completely that a rake could convince her to elope. Thankfully, I arrived in time to rupture his plan.

I scowled and submerged my head for the fifth time. When I came to the surface, I set those memories firmly aside and settled into the examination of my other motives for this excursion into the country.

Leaving London was always a pleasure to me. I am not a town dandy, and by retreating to Hertfordshire, I was spared any number of balls and parties my position required me to attend.

I reflected with almost a melancholy air on the carefree days when my father was alive, and I could engage in the anonymous and ordinary pursuits of a young and healthy man of privilege.

I enjoyed shooting, fencing, visiting friends, and travelling as widely as I could.

I went on a petite grand tour at the age of fourteen, and on a lark had even gone as far as Gibraltar in my cousin's sailing yacht before he lost it at cards and before Napoleon became such a menace in the Channel.

I excelled at my studies and revelled in the pliability of my mind.

Being raised on a generously funded estate, I had many full-blooded horses upon which I exercised my freedom.

I balanced out the discipline of my education with wild stunts, pranks, and breakneck rides, and I could not have been happier to be challenged in those equal and opposite ways.

But when my father died, I was immediately buried under a tower of ledgers and beset by a trail of persons.

The steward, the vicar, the housekeeper, the banker, the farmers, and the magistrate all lined up at my door and demanded my attention.

My 'salad days,' as my cousin Richard called them, were at an end.

When he, a second son, bought a commission and went to war, his salad days ended, too, and without his levity to lighten my burden of responsibility, I retreated to my estate where I became the sober-minded man I am today.

Having been habitually more inclined to enjoy myself, the task of becoming an important landowner, guardian to my young sister, and custodian of a staggering fortune required an exercise of will.

I was proud of how assiduous, responsible, and dependable I had become.

I had learnt reserve, having suffered the consequences of my adolescence early on after inheriting my position.

Giddy confessions, impulsive disclosures, ill-considered investments, and the imposition of many false friends quickly taught me not to be anyone's gull.

The maintenance of this closed, dignified bearing was not effortless, but nothing worth having is free for the taking to my way of thinking.

Not only was I required to become serious and calculating, but my father's unfortunate and untimely passing thrust me into the glare of lights on society's stage.

And this, more than the press of responsibility, I truly resented.



For in addition to having inherited both a fortune and a highly profitable estate, I had relations in the peerage.

This in itself would have been bearable, but the fact that I then became little more than a prize bull at a market of heifers was intolerable.

Women regularly sidled up to me, bumped me accidentally, dropped things in my way, invited me to call on them, or to routs, or to musical performances, and even, with unnerving frequency, to some secluded alcove where, presumably, my baser nature would overwhelm my good sense.

Even married women apparently lusted after me, a circumstance that mortified me and my cousin Richard found hilarious.

My reserve only deepened, as has my general resentment at being little more than a commodity, and worse, thought so stupid I would fall prey to such schemes.

This thought brought me directly to Bingley's sister Caroline. Miss Bingley was the worst of the worst, believing that since I was her brother's friend, I was also necessarily destined to be her husband.

"Carsten," I said, my eyes flying open. "When I am fit to be seen, discretely find Bingley and ask him to come to me."

My valet knew what was required. He had become an ally in the war to protect me from manipulation of all kinds.

Half an hour later, sleepy, warm, and wrinkled as a dried apricot, I met Bingley in my dressing gown.

"Darcy!" he cried. "We have been in the parlour waiting for you to come the entire

afternoon!”

“Forgive me. I had to stop to help a lady. She fell into the river, and I fished her out, but I was too filthy and chilled to arrive at your front door.”

“Rescued! Gracious, Darcy. What was she doing in the river and at this time of year?”

“Never mind that. The point is I do not want it touted about. Do you suppose it is possible that I can just go down for dinner and make your sisters believe they missed my arrival?”

Miss Bingley gasped as I came into the salon just as the dinner gong sounded. I bowed to her in acknowledgement.

“Mr Darcy! But—” she spluttered, almost at the volume of a screech. “I—we have been waiting all afternoon to greet you properly! How did I miss your arrival?”

I temporarily ignored her to greet her sister, Mrs Hurst, and her husband. I then returned my attention to the horrified countenance of my hostess, and said as meekly as I could, “I do not rightly know, madam.”

As the hours of the evening progressed, this mild deception began to strike me as something of a tremendous prank.

Miss Bingley must have been glued to her chair, determined to receive me.

How I entered the house without her knowing confounded her to a vexatious degree. She could not cease to remark upon it.

I began to suspect that she was no particular favourite of the servants of the house.

From the butler to the lowliest maid, I detected a closed rank.

No one was the least bit sympathetic to Miss Bingley's quandary.

When questioned as to when I arrived, as they invariably were, they collectively feigned confusion, ignorance, or to have been elsewhere at the precise moment in question.

She had requested the butler to look over the wine for dinner, she had sent her footmen out to the stables to assure the grooms' readiness to receive visitors, and she had sent Mrs Nicholls upstairs to look over the rooms. All manner of excuses were serenely provided as to why no one could tell her the particulars of my arrival, and her distress seemed to entertain them almost as much as it did me.

Even Bingley, who is not the sharpest blade in the armoury, blandly looked upon his sister's bewilderment and said, "Pish, Caroline. Give over. The man is here, as you see."

### CHAPTER THREE

Some form of deviltry entered the house then, for in the days that followed, and I hoped for the foreseeable future, I had more freedom than I expected.

No one could track my movements accurately, and when my hostess demanded to be told where I had gone, she was sent on fool's errands all over the house and grounds.

It was just as well. My throat was somewhat scratchy, my voice thick with congestion, and I suspected that the hoyden down the road had caused me to do the unthinkable. I was coming down with a cold.

I could not bring myself to refer to the woman as a lady, for she was a rash and venturesome miss who did not deserve the designation.

And though I wished never to think of her again, my thoughts of her ill-treatment of me became quite exercised every time I looked down at the state of my poor, old boots.

How was I to hold my head above the rabble, to maintain my dignity, when I looked like a mere country squire about to spend the day in his kennels?

I was not inclined to wear silk stockings and satin knee breeches all day long when in the country, but I resented that I could not strut down the lanes in boots that shone like black tar in sunlight, nurtured to spotless perfection by the attentions of a career valet.

Carsten even had the effrontery to look upon me that same morning, two days after my dunking, with something like defeat in his eyes, as though he longed to explain that his genius could only go so far.

Thinking to avoid his lugubrious examination of my appearance, I escaped both him and Miss Bingley by suggesting I would spend the morning in the library.

I then took the service entrance, which had become my haunt and refuge, out of doors.

There, in nature, a place Miss Bingley generally did not understand for lack of familiarity, I thought I would simply conquer my nascent cold by pretending it away and doing exactly what no one recommended.

I walked along briskly, looking like an ordinary nobody in old boots, while considering Netherfield's lands as I went.

Middling to be sure, the yield from the farms would be unremarkable, and in certain years, below what was spent to produce it.

If Bingley leased the place, he could make the choice to let it limp along, or he could decide to do some good in the world.

Unfortunately, while his heart was generally in the right place, his head was firmly anchored in a cloud.

I had no faith the estate would prosper under Bingley's management, and it irritated me.

If I was anything at all, I was a stickler for stewardship.

The grass on the verge bore the brunt of my annoyance. I whipped at the seed heads with my cane, walking a good distance from Netherfield lands, until I was brought up short by the sound of a dog barking up the lane.

Damnation. There she was! I steeled myself for a meeting, and upon looking closely, saw that at least she was not alone. The horrid animal was restrained on a lead, as it should have been on that fateful day, and was dragging along the harridan's genteel sister.

As I approached them, some spirit of provocation moved me to speak, as opposed to my first impulse, which had been to merely tip my hat and walk on.

It might have been the look of irony that swept over Miss Elizabeth's face upon noticing me.

Obviously, she would rather not be civil to me, and sheer perversity required I force a conversation.

I spoke with the specious humility that so completely frustrated Miss Bingley. "Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth."

Predictably, Miss Bennet came forward with a welcoming, open expression. "Mr Darcy, how pleasant to see you this morning."

Unfortunately, she could not be quite as polite as she wished to be, since at that moment, her dog was compelled to investigate some smell across the road.

Miss Elizabeth graced me with a saucy curtsy before preempting her sister's control and taking Bandit where he demanded to go. This left me free to speak to her sister, which given she was both beautiful and beautifully behaved, was not a chore.

I was not inclined to return to Netherfield to play hide-and-seek with Miss Bingley, so I made myself agreeable and began to walk in the same direction as the Miss Bennets.

My conversation with the eldest was perfectly circumspect.

We spoke reservedly and with pointed attention to every possible topic bland enough for indifferent acquaintances of every age and disposition.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth Bennet passed us with the eager hound, glancing at me as she did so, and discomposing me into momentarily forgetting what I had been saying.

Was it my imagination, or did she really have the effrontery to look askance at my boots?

The lady's face was perfectly agreeable, but the cast of her expression was ever so slightly unruly, tinged perhaps, with diabolical mischief.

It may have been the sharpness of her brows as they lifted in judgment, or the barely perceptible thinning of her lips and flaring of her nostrils.

She was amazingly delicate in her bone structure for someone who could so expertly pantomime mockery and broadcast derision all at the same time.

I pointedly dismissed the shrew and turned back to her sister. Over the course of our walk, however, Miss Bennet decided she should take a turn managing the most unmanageable dog ever born. This left me to walk ahead with Miss Elizabeth.

She smiled at me with closed lips and said, "I see you have dried out at last, sir."

She had the poor taste to bring up such a topic without preamble, did she? I could not

help but engage her. “And you? Have you found your bonnet?”

“Indeed. I mean to wear it to church on Sunday, though it is shrunken and misshapen beyond recognition.” She then looked at me fairly directly. “But have you caught a cold, Mr Darcy? Your voice sounds a little thick to me today.”

“Perhaps it is only hoarse from being required to shout at you,” I said blandly, glancing behind me to assure myself her sister was not within earshot of my ungracious reply. “And you, do you not fear your drenching might make you ill?” I confess, I sincerely hoped it would.

I had meant to discompose her through the expediency of incivility, but the lady handily shrugged off my set-down.

“I believe a strong determination to be well is the best deterrent to falling ill. I never entertain the possibility, particularly when everyone around me tells me I shall surely die from a drenching.”

“I see. But that is perhaps a difficult stance should you indeed fall sick.”

“Oh well. If I do get sick, which I have not done since I had mumps and measles, then I hope I shall do so with a modicum of humility. At the very least, I expect I shall be philosophical about it.”

“Your approach is profoundly unscientific,” I observed from the platform of a superior education. “Persons fall ill from specific causes, not from lack of will,” I said, even as I was forced to clear my congested throat.

“Oh? I suppose my evidence is purely anecdotal. Have you never known a person to sicken and die after having long-entertained an imagined frailty?”



I instantly thought of my uncle Lewis de Bourgh, who was obsessed with every pain and sniffle, attended by five physicians, seen almost every week for some cause or other, and who shuffled off his mortal coil at the ripe age of only forty after living a life of supposed invalidism.

But it was the astringent note in Miss Elizabeth's voice that truly struck me. She was speaking from experience and still raw to think of it. Rather than answer, I fell into a respectful silence. I knew the sound of tragedy when I heard it, even if it came out of the mouth of a?—

“Bandit! Oh no!” Miss Bennet interrupted my reflections, and I turned to see the unruly dog had wrapped his lead around her legs and was on the verge of pulling her to the ground.

“To heel,” I shouted, leaving Miss Elizabeth's side to relieve Miss Bennet of her tormentor. “You must behave yourself when walking with ladies,” I commanded as I took the lead up short, forcing the dog to sit while I spoke to him.

“Now, if you wish to enjoy your exercise, you had better do so as a civilised dog. You are not a monkey, sir, and you will cease flinging yourself about.”

Bandit seemed to appreciate plain speaking. He became docile as a lamb, glancing hopefully at me from time to time, as though he wished for a little reward for good behaviour.

“You shall get no praise from me, sirrah,” I said in an aside to him, and began to put him through his paces.

Whenever he began to think of capering, which he communicated through his leash, I pulled him up short to remind him of his dignity. Soon, we turned and proceeded back the way we came, and I was quite absorbed in my corrections. Before I knew it,

I could see Longbourn through the trees.

“You have wrought a miracle on our Bandit,” Miss Bennet said in wonder. “I have never seen him so well behaved. Will you not come in for tea and greet my father?”

I glanced at Miss Elizabeth, who looked wholly unimpressed by the prospect of my visit, and said I would be happy to do just that.

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*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 4:59 am*

### CHAPTER FOUR

The interior of Mr Bennet's house was just as I imagined it would be after having seen the exterior.

There were clues here and there that it had been remodelled in the last century—an awkwardly placed arch, marble flooring in the hall, and a pair of windows in the parlour that looked too Palladian in style to match the rest of the glazing.

Miss Bennet urged her father to come out of his library, and he greeted me with distant civility.

He was slightly bent as though from the weight of old age and had about him an air of distraction.

He was not in the least inclined to nurse along a conversation.

Miss Elizabeth went directly to a chair and began to sew, and a young lady came into the room bearing a tray.

"My sister Mary," Miss Bennet explained, before serving my tea, and I searched vainly for something to say. Thankfully, Miss Bennet's manners were such that she smoothed over what threatened to be an awkward silence.

"As I said earlier, Mr Darcy, you handle Bandit very well. How do you do it?"

"Having bridle-trained a few high tempered stallions, I adopt a certain tone of voice."

“Truly? I have tried to speak to him insistently but to no avail.”

“That is because he only hears your tone that, forgive me for saying so, is far too forgiving.” I tried to keep my attention focused solely on Miss Bennet, but I saw Miss Elizabeth’s eyes roll just a little as she listened.

And so I said, perhaps too pointedly, “Neither is a tone of exasperation likely to command his attention.”

Mr Bennet observed he had yet to see anything other than his dinner command the dog’s attention, but his eldest daughter then described to her father the obedient creature he had become under my tutelage.

“My wife did not allow dogs, perhaps for good reason,” Mr Bennet said, “but my daughter is a pudding-heart where that mongrel is concerned, and I am a pudding-heart where she is concerned.”

All three daughters graced their father with such a loving look at his confession that I could not help but be struck. For some reason, I felt compelled to offer my assistance.

“If you like, perhaps I could show you how to manage him better.”

“Would you, sir? But that would be marvellous! I can only agree, however, if you promise such an undertaking is no imposition on your time. I understand you are here for the shooting?”

Mr Bennet roused himself a little, and we spoke sparingly of sport. I finished my tea and excused myself, only after making arrangements to come back to train Bandit to heel.

Unfortunately, Miss Bingley held back tea at Netherfield Park on my behalf. I had no

desire for more, however, and this became yet another stone in her shoe.

“Tea, Mr Darcy?” she asked sweetly.

“Thank you, no. A glass of claret would be welcome, however.”

The wine was dispensed by a footman at the chinoiserie cabinet where the spirits were kept, a circumstance that threw Miss Bingley into confusion.

“Wine? But I know how much you enjoy your tea, sir,” she said.

I might have relented because, in truth, I am not thoroughly wicked, were it not for the footman’s expression as he lifted his eyes to me for clarification. It was almost as though he willed me to cross her.

“I believe I would like the claret,” I said, turning to speak to Bingley.

“Well! But I prepare his tea just as he likes it,” I heard Miss Bingley say to her sister sotto voce.

There was something in this proprietary statement that caused me to rebel. While sugar in my tea was not my preference, nor was tea without cream, I decided then and there never to ask for my tea to be stirred in the same way twice in a row.

My programme of disrupting Miss Bingley’s claims of familiarity grew over the following days. I suspect that some discussion of the lady’s discomposure must have been indulged below stairs because Carsten began to give me a few hints.

“I have heard, sir, that Miss Bingley has requested the roasted capon for dinner,” he said one morning shortly after the incident of the tea.

I frowned at such a seemingly random comment, but then my valet casually added that Miss Bingley believed that dish to be one of my favourites.

Our eyes met in a flash of solidarity. “Is that so?”

That evening, when I was offered a portion of the capon, I declined, opting instead for a second helping of soup.

It would have been very poor taste for Miss Bingley to remark upon my odd selection, and she refrained but only with obvious difficulty.

Her assurance was knocked slightly out of square, and she faltered more than once in leading the dinner conversation.

Meanwhile, I became a great favourite of the servants and began to enjoy my status. My horse was always saddled before Bingley’s, and Mr Hurst complained his hot water was late in the mornings, while mine arrived promptly, still steaming, with shy smiles and deep curtses.

My host seemed fairly unaware of these doings, as were Mr and Mrs Hurst. Louisa Hurst was a slightly empty-headed, incurious lady, which was just as well, given she married a lump of flesh who loved only food and drink.

Thus, we careened along. Most mornings, the gentlemen went out shooting, and most afternoons I spent with Bingley, trying to force him to pay attention to what I tried to teach him.

And while he expressed eagerness to learn, he only became truly eager when he had visitors or went out visiting.

Unlike me, Bingley was a man who loved to be amiable, social, and accommodating.

But he was not without compassion, and he seemed not only to understand but to provide for my preference for solitude.

“A local gentleman, Sir William Lucas, called on me yesterday while you were out,” he told me one afternoon.

I had gone for the third time to Longbourn and spent a solid hour instilling a particle of discipline in my brainless student—Bandit, not Miss Bennet.

“Oh? And how did you find him?” I said, dragging my mind away from the Bennets.

“Quite cordial, in fact. He has offered to introduce me to everybody worth knowing.”

I groaned inwardly, but replied impartially. “Oh?”

“You do not want to always be visiting,” Bingley said with a burst of perspicacity, “but if you would like to join me, of course you are welcome. I leave it to you, Darcy.”

“I have enjoyed my solitary walks,” I murmured, drowning out my twinging conscience, since my absences were all spent, not alone, but in company at Longbourn.

“And I have no intention of disrupting your pleasure,” Bingley continued. “I am for Lucas Lodge to pay a call, and I mean to take Hurst with me if I can roust him off the sofa.”

“Hmm? What?” mumbled the man drowsing by the fire.

“I was only jesting, Hurst,” Bingley said, in the loud voice one uses with an elderly or drunken person. “I am making a few calls this afternoon if you would like to go.”

“Take Caroline and Louisa,” Hurst mumbled, before once again closing his eyes .

When the subject was brought up with the ladies, they agreed to go.

Miss Bingley looked perfectly satisfied with the plan, and I suspected that my presence when the invitation was extended implied I would go along.

How Bingley got her to leave the house without me I do not know, for I was already hacking to Longbourn.



### CHAPTER FIVE

My homes were as far from boisterous as possible, and yet, Longbourn was as staid and restful a place as I had ever visited.

The interior was always pin-drop quiet, and the mistress of the house, Miss Jane Bennet, had an air of all-pervasive serenity that seemed to keep the inhabitants in thrall to quietude.

A subdued and undemanding conversationalist, Mr Bennet must have recognised a similar tendency to taciturnity in me, and we struck out tentatively on a course of amity. Early in one of my visits, he had asked me if I was a reading man.

“I consider myself to be, sir,” I said, and then striving to encourage the lagging conversation, I added, “Unfortunately, the library at Netherfield Park is poorly stocked.”

“Is that so? I am surprised. I would have thought such a place would have a large, interesting collection. What do they have?”

“The sonnets, of course, and Gibbon’s histories. And other than what looks like a textbook on Greek culture from the last century, and a smattering of mediocre poetry, there is little else.”

Mr Bennet scowled his disgust, an expression more animated than any I had seen him adopt.

“It is always enraging to me to hear of what some men consider to be essential reading,” he said.

In fact, he was so much moved by my description that he added, “You are welcome to select something from my meagre collection if you become desperate.”

“I may very well partake of your generosity. What are you reading these days, sir?”

This led to a comfortable hour in his book-room as he called it, which was certainly compact but filled to the ceiling with a respectable number of rare and interesting reads. I let down my guard. How could I not? This was a man who wanted nothing from me.

I told him of my latest acquisitions of fully illustrated Oriental histories, of biographical accounts of the wilds of the Americas, and of a few of the more scandalous, farcical bits of literature that were becoming all the rage in London.

“Those satires are more to my daughter’s taste,” he said with the ghost of a smile in his voice. This was the first glimpse of humour I had yet seen from him.

“Miss Bennet?” I asked in surprise.

“No, no. Jane is only ever moved by mundane poetry. I was speaking of Elizabeth. She has read most everything here that is not written in Greek or Latin, and yet she revels in farce. I suppose she got that predilection from me. I used to be similarly enamoured of words that bite.”

I did not quite know how to reply. First, there was about the entire household the air of mourning.

The ladies’ dresses, though not black, were invariably dark and nondescript.

And Mr Bennet's reference to how he used to be hinted at loss.

I could not enquire into such a delicate topic, and so I turned my thoughts towards the perplexing notion that Elizabeth Bennet had read so widely, unrestrainedly, and deeply.

That she enjoyed satire, I could not possibly doubt.

Her every expression, at least where I was concerned, smacked of an exceedingly dry wit simmering below the surface.

The fact that she longed to unleash her most stinging rejoinders and witty criticisms upon me engaged my newly emerging contrary spirit.

I was simply tired of being so damnably well-regulated.

Thus, I thwarted Miss Elizabeth in much the same way I did Miss Bingley.

Where I had learnt to be aloof around ladies in general, I became almost courtly in my attentions to the ladies of Longbourn.

Miss Elizabeth could hardly rake me with scathing observations of my character when I was so obliging to her sister.

Nor could she protest outright whenever some mention was made of my bold and daring rescue of the family dog.

To my amusement, these occasional, passing references seemed to cause her blood to boil.

Miss Elizabeth, I realised now, had wanted to rescue Bandit herself.

Simply put, she hated to be helped, could not stomach appearing weak or incompetent, and loathed the common perception that women were either frail or stupid.

The fact that I had nearly sent us pell-mell down a raging current, dragged under by our heavy clothing, patently threw the lady into a state of outrage whenever she was forced to sit meekly by while I was praised for my heroism.

I looked at the lady complacently and, I admit, somewhat smugly when this sort of thing went on. She threw daggers at me with her fiery eyes on those occasions, and I suspected she wished I had not managed to pull us out so quickly, so she could enlighten her family that I had nearly drowned her.

And yet for all my bland smiles, meekly downcast eyes, and sanctimonious deflections of her disgust, she still managed to goad me into crossing swords almost imperceptibly and with great regularity.

When we went out of doors for Miss Bennet to begin to learn how to manage Bandit's lead, Miss Elizabeth perforce attended us for the sake of propriety.

As I critiqued her sister's tone and coached her vocabulary of commands, I could not help but feel as though I were being judged, weighed, measured, and classified.

In a juvenile game of tit for tat, I likewise monitored Miss Elizabeth's movements in the parlour after our lessons.

I looked at her sewing critically, widened my eyes in disapproval at her occasional opinions—always independent and occasionally too brilliant to be flattering—and otherwise classified her coiffure, her complexion, her symmetry, and even her smallest mannerisms. I knew my countenance suggested I was categorically unimpressed and that my observations were very close to jaded in how they must

appear to her.

I was certain of this because it took concentration and determination to stifle an occasional yawn and otherwise manipulate these apathetic expressions onto my face.

In fact, there were many things about the lady that made a lasting impression and would have earned her stares of admiration were I not careful and determined to play this game.

To classify Miss Elizabeth as merely energetic would have been to understate the case.

She looked perpetually on the verge of leaping out of her chair to fly around the room.

She also projected the vibrating readiness of a person who could do twelve things at once and expertly to boot.

There were many clues in casual conversation that implied she could hold more than one train of thought.

Besides that, I could not wonder that while I had caught a cold in the river, she had only grown more robust. She was filled to bursting with energy, with raw intelligence, and with unfulfilled potential.

And in such a retiring house, I wondered how she managed to contain her unnaturally high spirits.

### CHAPTER SIX

Netherfield Park was a perfectly acceptable place to stay, but I became increasingly interested in my private sojourns down the road.

Mr Bennet satisfied my need for sparse and meaningful conversation in a way Bingley never could.

Miss Bennet provided a sharp counterpoint to all the panting, marriage-hungry ladies of my acquaintance, and I enjoyed the unique sensation of untroubling female company.

Some ladies could be amazingly restful creatures, I reflected with surprise, and yet I was not so entirely tamed that I wished to be lulled into a complacent stupor for the remainder of my life. I liked a challenge, and Longbourn housed the most challenging creature I had ever met.

I did not refer to Bandit. Though he, too, was a challenge, it was over Miss Elizabeth and her clever provocations I wished to prevail.

While visiting for the second time during my third week at Netherfield Park, the minx and I were again engaged in our private game.

Bandit had been put through his paces in the parlour on account of rain.

I had then ended his lesson by forcing him to lie down on his rug at Miss Bennet's feet, and he did so in a state of total agony.

The beast squirmed and occasionally moaned as though pleading for mercy. His eyebrow whiskers twitched as he looked from me to his mistress in hopes of a reprieve.

“Stay,” I commanded in a low rumble, and after thumping his tail at me in apology and submission, he went back to the barely perceptible whines of the tortured.

The idiot dog was beginning to amuse me, and I suppose I was suppressing a reluctant smile when my eyes met Miss Elizabeth’s as she sat across from me.

My hostess had let the conversation lapse. We were none of us chatterboxes, and after becoming better acquainted as time passed, we sometimes collectively agreed to allow the comfortable entertainment of our own thoughts.

Miss Bennet sewed for the poor box, and Mr Bennet read a periodical I had brought from Netherfield.

Miss Mary also bent over a book, and Miss Elizabeth, who had been looking at a letter in her lap, ceased pretending to be occupied with it and was engaged in studying me as boldly as I had been studying her for the past quarter of an hour.

Her eyes sparkled in response to my wry smile, and with seemingly lazy intent, she directed her all-seeing, razor-sharp gaze slowly downward, fixing it pointedly and somewhat critically on my unprepossessing boots.

Every nerve and fibre of discipline under my command was required to stop me from shifting my legs in mortification, in striving to make the state of my mucking-about boots less obvious.

With resolution, I withstood her scrutiny, and when her eyes finally rose to meet mine, I hitched my right brow upward and silently dared her to comment aloud.

This apparently delighted Miss Elizabeth.

We were secretly sparring under the very noses of her family!

She pursed her lips forcefully to snuff out the chuckle that threatened to undo her.

Once she had conquered her amusement, she again met my eyes, glanced at my boots and back to my face, and this time, she pulled her lips downward in a pantomime of sympathy common to nursemaids who look upon some trifling bump on a child's knee.

I rubbed my chin in vexation—in absolute frustration.

I could not conjure up any sort of expression on my face that would answer her mockery as completely as I wished.

I finally replied with the sort of scowl I used on Bandit when I admonished him for being a bad dog and in doing so, forced Miss Elizabeth to stifle a shout of laughter under a cough.

Because I was a merciful man, I offered the lady a reprieve by releasing Bandit from his forced stillness. He bounded towards me, poised to leap into my lap and lick my face, and so I ordered, “Sit!” before we went once again through sit-stay-come commands.

Eventually, I drank tea as I liked it and just as all three of the Miss Bennets had learnt to make it for me, without once evincing the sort of triumph over their accomplishment that I had seen from Miss Bingley. But I only took one cup, knowing that tea at Netherfield awaited my return.

Once back in Miss Bingley's web, I continued my campaign of obstruction.



“Tea, Mr Darcy?” she asked, with only half her former assurance.

“Yes, I thank you,” I said, and then I waited expectantly, as any frequent guest would, for a perfectly stirred cup.

She floundered. “A lump of sugar, I believe.”

I let a slight frown flicker on my brow before I cleared it and said, graciously, “Plain, if you would be so kind.”

She sighed in defeat.

At dinner, she studied my plate, my face, and my every mannerism for some clue as to my pleasure or disapproval, but I had played cards for higher stakes and did not show my hand.

I shunned the carrots one night, only to relish them the next time they appeared, and so on.

In this, my valet assisted me by giving me a preview of the menu so I could think ahead on how to confound my hostess.

Later in the parlour, Miss Bingley sought to regain her footing, speaking in a sing-song, repetitive manner I have always found grating.

“I know, Mr Darcy, you will enjoy hearing Mozart. You have always appreciated Mozart.”

“What piece did you have in mind?”

“Why, the Rondo alla Turca, ” she said bravely, flipping her music to the page she

had in mind to play.

“Do you perhaps know his sixteenth sonata? I hear the Turkish March everywhere I go,” I said pleasantly.

“I say, Darcy, so do I!” remarked Bingley. And it was all I could do to maintain my indifferent expression when the footman began to cough and had to leave the room.

By then, even the obtuse Mrs Hurst seemed to notice that her sister was not herself. After the lady fumbled ever so slightly through a composition that was equally if not more popular than the Rondo, Louisa Hurst gently suggested they play cards instead of listening to music.

I declined the invitation to ruffle Miss Bingley any further that night and thought instead of what I would next do to rile Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

But my visit the following day—yes, my calls had become habitual—did not go quite as planned.

Miss Elizabeth was nowhere in sight, and Miss Mary went with Miss Bennet as we put Bandit through his training.

I decided that such a half-wit animal should probably be trained to good behaviour no matter with whom he went, and so I began to initiate Miss Mary into the astringent tone and lead pressure required to force him to heel.

Mary Bennet seemed a closed book to me. She was circumspect almost to the point of incivility, and she could not possibly shine when positioned next to the beauty of one sister and the outright brilliance of the other.

But to my way of thinking, modesty was never a fault, and rather than resent her

place in the constellation, Miss Mary simply shone in her subdued way.

It was to her advantage that she was just as intelligent as Miss Elizabeth. She took direction with instant understanding but did not trouble me with expressions on her face of scepticism, or of droll, quizzical, or even risible ideas when attending to my instructions.

After my lesson, Miss Bennet and I walked companionably along behind Miss Mary as she learnt to hold Bandit's lead.

Jane Bennet was perhaps my ideal woman, and I might have begun to consider her in another light altogether but for the fact that I could never quite bring my attention fully to her qualities. My mind was forever leaping around to locate, to engage, and simply to look at her devilish counterpart.

"Where is Miss Elizabeth today?" I asked with laudable disinterest.

"Lizzy? Today is her day to spend with the cottagers. She is teaching the youngsters who are not working the harvest their letters. And today, she has a special errand which has satisfied my sisters and me quite completely."

"Oh?"

"We have sewn all the children new flannels for the coming cold," Miss Bennet said, gracing me with a look of pleasure.

"That is thoughtful. Do you do so every year?"

She paused. "This is our first, sir," she said with a modest, downcast look.

Again, I felt as though there was a fact related to this family I knew nothing about.

“Then your sister will be met with double the excitement if this is not a traditional gift.”

She rallied and said, “Just so. We drew straws to decide who would have the pleasure.”

“And Miss Elizabeth won?”

“Well, no. Mary won, but she conceded that walking the entire estate with such a bundle was perhaps more than she could manage. Lizzy, you see, is a strong walker.”

I did not doubt it. We paused at the little wilderness area behind the house.

Bandit was made to sit like a gentleman, which he would never do as long as he wiggled like a puppy and shifted his weight from paw to paw as though bitten by ants.

Still, he was making progress, and I thought perhaps we should begin to give him a little trial of heeling off leash as we went back to the house.

I began to feel quite satisfied with myself as the mongrel, thick-skulled and excitable as he was, walked sedately beside us. His good behaviour came to an end, however, when upon nearing the house, Bandit first smelled and then spotted Miss Elizabeth in the distance, returning from her errand.

He bounded away from us and nearly knocked her down.

After a second's hesitation, I kicked into a run after him, bellowing at him to stay, but to no purpose, since the lady was forced to drop her depleted bundle of flannels in order to fend him off.

Amidst her objections and attempts to dissuade him otherwise, Bandit joyfully leapt in the air to slurp at her chin.

When I reached them, I grasped the scruff of his neck and wrestled him into submission.

“Forgive me,” I said, panting. “I thought he was ready for a trial off his lead. Apparently,” I said sternly, eyeing the miscreant, “he is incapable of anything but jumping on people and yelping as though he is being murdered.” I then shook his scruff to emphasise my displeasure.

She swiped at her sticky chin with her handkerchief and brought her eyes up to mine. They sparkled and shone, and I felt slightly disoriented.

“You are forgiven,” Miss Elizabeth said archly.

“Am I?” I asked, in the style of a dazzled fool.

“Well,” she said drily, “there is always tomorrow if you would rather be at daggers drawn with me.”

“A difficult choice.”

“You like vexing me, do you?”

“Very much. Yet, I have not earned a single word of approbation from you, and perhaps I would, for the sake of novelty, rather be in your good graces for once.”

“Dull but vaguely possible. You have made Mary smile, and for that, I suppose I can be as docile as a lamb where you are concerned.”

I took her bundle, and she allowed it, though not without a hint of impatience. “You resent assistance, I presume?”

“By no means. Only your assistance, Mr Darcy.”

Why this vile statement thrilled me, I cannot explain. “How so?” I asked, feigning boredom with the topic. “Why am I to be singled out for your displeasure?”

“Why indeed,” she said, with a most alluring toss of her dark curls. And then, in yet another mercurial shift, the lady said, “But I must ask you, sir, if I have yet been forgiven?”

“Forgiven for what? For the lingering scent of musky hound in my carriage, for four days of a stuffed head?”

“Of all my sins against you, I suspect my lack of worshipful gratitude has been the worst,” she said sweetly. “But somehow, I cannot find it in me to thank you sincerely for scaring the life out of me, plunging me underwater, and for nearly knocking loose my hold on my sister’s drowning dog.”

“There you are wrong, miss,” I said crisply.

“Am I? What have I done that is worse than failing to truckle to your superior self?”

“You have ruined my best boots,” I said gravely, “and for that, you are months away from absolution.”

Her laugh pierced me. “Oh? I suppose that upon receipt of new boots, the loss of the old ones will be forgotten.”

“With Herculean effort, yes.”

I could have gone along in this way for another five miles, but we approached the door of the manor house, and Miss Elizabeth excused herself.

I rode away bewildered and lightly singed.

Playing pranks on Miss Bingley required an entirely different skill level than seeking to discompose the lightning bolt at Longbourn.

In fact, Longbourn in general, began to trouble me.

It was a refuge on the one hand—a welcome respite from the constant threat of entrapment at Netherfield Park.

But I was becoming—what was I becoming? I suppose the word was entangled .

I was becoming attached to the Bennets, and unsure whether this was warranted or even wise.

### CHAPTER SEVEN

I have been my own master since the age of two and twenty. As such, I decided to wean myself from the comforts of Longbourn and attend to the business for which I came.

This ambition, however, proved to be impossible. Bingley was never at home. He had been invited to the homes of the Longs, the Gouldings, and to Lucas Lodge, in addition to visiting the vicar, the magistrate, the squire, and most recently, the newly arrived colonel in charge of the militia.

I reluctantly crossed Netherfield's lands off my list of present concerns. I was preoccupied and found it difficult to worry about something as abstract as next year's harvest on an estate my friend may or may not choose as his country home.

I confess I was a touch more than preoccupied.

Truthfully, my spirits were ruffled. The cause was yet another letter from Georgiana.

My sister's correspondence was strangely disheartening.

Her carefully penned letters were timid and devoid of all feeling, much less any sort of truth.

She pretended to be enjoying herself, while expertly weeping between the lines.

So instead of retreating to Longbourn where I risked being struck by the lightning



bolt that was one sister or lulled further into a serene dream by the other, I followed Bingley out into the society of Meryton.

I met everyone and approved of no one. The grinding rounds of polite inanities, of attending to Miss Bingley, who was increasingly prone to swooning, of wondering in vain if anyone in this county had any notion of dignity, all wore on me.

But excusing myself to return to my sister was still too daunting, and I could not justify a long journey to Pemberley alone, only to turn around and collect Georgiana for the festive season.

Resignedly, I went with the Bingleys and the Hursts, and against my will, I searched for any sign of the Bennets.

Though they never stepped out of Longbourn, I eventually heard snippets and references to that family.

As I suspected, they were in mourning, though no longer deep, and according to the prevailing opinion, they would soon peek out into society.

The community seemed rather inclined to support them, and I came to understand the date of the regular assembly had been postponed in hopes they would attend.

I then met Mr and Mrs Philips, an inglorious pair of village busybodies.

He was an attorney, and she served as the principal posting house for all news, whether factual or not.

Every place had one of these couples, and they were uniformly and vulgarly curious.

Gossip and tittle-tattle were their bread and butter in society.

They were also aunt and uncle to the Bennet sisters!

This was a strangely depressing development. I stared at Mrs Philips even as she baldly me asked to state the sum of my fortune and wondered how she could be related to that infinitely proper family.

“My lord, sir,” Caroline Bingley said to me in an aside, “I wonder that Charles is not disgusted by these people.”

Though I thoroughly agreed with her, I was determined not to play into any one of her ploys for my attention, and so I said, “Surely you know that country society differs from town society. These people are much like those with whom I converse every day at Pemberley. I find these unassuming manners rather more welcoming than the pretensions of their more elegant counterparts.”

“You surprise me, Mr Darcy. Do you indeed enjoy this society?”

In fact, I deplored it, but at the same time, it was more comfortable to me than the soiree my aunt the Countess of Matlock was invariably hosting at this very same time on this very same day.

This realisation, which was news to me, sank home by degrees as I went from parlour to parlour.

Perhaps, without my superior boots, I felt less of a superior man.

In any case, my appointment with Miss Bennet, which I had delayed for nearly a week out of the need for circumspection, came due, and I went to Longbourn in a somewhat reflective, cautious mood.

My reception, I decided, would tell me much of what I needed to know about whether

to keep or cut the connexion.

I suppose I expected to be enthusiastically welcomed, to be petted and doted upon, playfully scolded, and forced to account for my absence. This sort of sycophancy was easy to despise, and I hoped for it to justify and ease my gradual distance from the family.

But I was not to be gratified with an easy answer to my dilemma.

I was greeted with amiability, with welcoming smiles, even from Miss Elizabeth, and with a warm handshake from Mr Bennet.

But the tone of my reception was decidedly underwhelming.

They were happy I visited but would not have repined had I stayed away.

Only Bandit rewarded me with a wild, leaping show of uncontainable joy at my return.

He made us laugh in spite of ourselves as he ran in tight, frantic circles in the drive, low to the ground, scattering gravel, and gaining speed, ending the display only when he caught sight of and felt compelled to conquer his own tail.

With his tongue lolled out in happy exhaustion, he finally decided I needed to be jumped upon.

“Sit,” I commanded.

He did, but he broke ranks after five seconds and began capering again.

Miss Elizabeth then intervened in a tone that suggested her tolerance for nonsense

was at an end. “You had better come here and sit down,” she warned with a snap of her fingers, and to my surprise, the dog went to stand beside her and sat down.

“Very good,” I remarked.

She smiled at me but rather more coolly than I would have liked, and we went into the house.

Mr Bennet and I spoke for a while about a history he had just purchased, I asked Miss Bennet about the cottagers and about Bandit’s progress, and I spent time speaking with Miss Mary about the novel she was reading, Pamela.

Eventually, I suggested we should take Bandit for a walk to evaluate the degree to which he had regressed.

“Oh Lizzy, do go,” Miss Bennet said. “I am at a critical point in my embroidery, yet I do not want to delay Mr Darcy. You do not mind if I stay back, do you, sir?”

I smiled. There was nothing to mind. I was not being pushed or teased for some mercenary purpose.

Jane Bennet did not have a manipulative bone in her body, and I stepped close to see the complexity of her design that with three needles and three different colours of thread, was believably difficult to interrupt.

Miss Elizabeth, on the other hand, seemed anxious to go.

She slipped the lead over Bandit’s head, and we sailed out the door.

I had expected Miss Mary to walk with us, but she did not and would not have easily caught up to us if she had wished to.

We walked at a pace suitable to the dog's enthusiasm, and there must have been a smell in the air that pulled him forward, as opposed to his usual habit of stopping to no purpose every third step.

For a considerable stretch of time we were quiet. Elizabeth Bennet seemed to be captivated by some private train of thought, and I was captivated by a little curl that persisted in tickling her ear. At last she spoke and took me completely by surprise.

"I will own," she said airily, "I had not expected you to return to visit us."

"What?"

She slanted her eyes at me and said, "I have heard from my aunt Philips that you had met."

I walked along and began to seethe as I did so.

"Your silence speaks volumes, sir," she said crisply.

"If I am silent," I said finally, "it is because I cannot believe you wish to confront me in this way. What am I to say? Hmm?"

"Why, if you are sincerely interested in my wishes, you would say something resembling the truth."

"Such as?"

"Such as you were dismayed to make their acquaintance and by association, would rather not befriend us so completely as you already have! You might not cut us overtly, but you shall retreat by degrees and your warmth in our society will gradually turn a little chilly. When we part, which I am sure we shall, you will be

glad of your escape, and we shall be relieved of all of our apprehensions as to how to regain your full regard. In time, none of us will remember we were once on the verge of being very good friends.”

“And your conclusions as to how I should feel, what I should think, and whom I should choose to know are based on what precisely?”

We had pulled Bandit to a stop and faced one another.

“They are based on what I have learnt from my aunt Philips and from Lady Lucas—your maternal uncle is an earl, his sister is a baroness, your estate is worth a fortune, and your society is coveted in the highest circles.”

“You assume a great deal with regard to my preferences based on my history alone.”

“I do not, sir. You have always impressed me with your sense of superiority, of entitlement, and of your very lofty place in the hierarchy of society.”

“How have I done so?” I barked, and then, from an excess of frustration, I bellowed at her restless dog, “Lie down!”

“By your every tone and gesture. By that tone of voice alone with which you have just subdued Jane’s dog. By force of habit—by privilege alone! You are who you are.”

“I fail to understand why a sense of self-command condemns me to the ranks of those who refuse to visit a country gentleman who happens to have uninteresting relations.”

She paused rather dramatically. “I wonder, Mr Darcy, whether you shall continue to visit us when I tell you that my other uncle is in trade and lives within sight of his warehouses in Cheapside.”

By the grace of God, I did not gasp in horror.

But like any man who has had a glove thrown in his face, some vein of grisly resolve burst and warmed me with righteous anger.

I would prove this woman so far in the wrong her head would swim.

I would serve her an enormous helping of humility and positively choke her with civility.

How dare she assume I was such a small-minded man!

With my jaw firmly shut, I willed my body to shrink to normal proportions after having swelled in protest. I calmly took her arm and Bandit's lead and moved us forward. When I spoke, I did so with careful, smouldering dignity.

"As you see, I am still here."

"Apparently so," Miss Elizabeth observed blandly, looking at me head to foot before offering me a pert little smile. Clearly, she was as unconvinced of my sincerity as she was of my longevity as her family's acquaintance.

### CHAPTER EIGHT

The well-established tension between myself and Miss Elizabeth tightened.

We maintained the impression of goodwill because, in truth, we respected one another a great deal, but we often found ourselves studying each other, circling and testing as fencers do, just before the master shouts, “En guard.”

Her relations gave me pause, but I rationalised that Bingley also had relations in trade, and he was my particular friend, was he not?

The pertinent fact was that Mr Bennet was a gentleman, and his daughters were suitably genteel by birth, regardless of their wider connexions.

The margin of their respectability was thin—too thin by my usual standards—but something fundamental had shifted within me.

I no longer considered Mr Bennet’s relations to be quite so tawdry as I would have only weeks ago.

While I congratulated myself for being cured of arrogance, Miss Elizabeth lightly lifted her right brow whenever I spoke and regarded me with the blasé disinterest of a sceptic.

Thinking to wipe the lingering smirk off the lady’s face, I stubbornly exhibited my most congenial manners, the ones I reserve for my trusted friends, and I went back to visiting Longbourn with the regularity of a clock.



When I was next there, I asked Mr Bennet if he would take his daughters to the upcoming assembly.

“If Jane decides they will go, I suppose I shall take them,” he said, with a melancholy air, and then he surprised me by adding, “If my wife were alive and my youngest daughters not in school, I would have been dragged out regardless of my preference.”

It seemed I was not the only person in the room stunned by his remark. The heads of all three daughters swivelled and their eyes widened at Mr Bennet before they regained their composure.

I refrained from asking after the two younger daughters, whose existence had only now been revealed.

Instead, I said, “I am sorry for your loss, sir. Was your wife’s death relatively recent?”

“Nearly a year ago,” he said quietly, and then perhaps wishing he had not brought that dreaded topic into the room, he addressed his eldest daughter .

“Well, Jane, you are the mistress of these things now. What say you? Are we to put on our finery and go out in the world next week?”

Miss Bennet had recovered her bearings and placidly replied, “If you will take us, Papa, but we shall not dance. I believe the next time we venture out after the assembly, we shall do so if we are asked.”

I cleared my throat. “Mr Bingley plans a ball at the end of this month. Perhaps you would allow me to lead you and your sisters out onto the floor, Miss Bennet?”

“Since we have not made the gentleman’s acquaintance,” Miss Elizabeth said, “I

doubt we shall be invited to his estate for a ball.”

“I have every intention of introducing him to your father at the assembly, and I can assure you that you will be included with the rest of society here.”

“Mr Bingley is a sociable man, sir?” Jane Bennet asked with a hint of surprise, while her sister looked to be choking on a stinging remark.

I realised belatedly that perhaps I should have brought Bingley with me to make him known to her father weeks ago. My failure to do so smacked of—well, it certainly appeared as though I considered my friend and his family to be above meeting the Bennets.

A blunt confession seemed in order. “If I have hesitated to bring Mr Bingley to you, though you would find him both civil and engaging, I did so because I would have been required to bring along his sisters, and they are neither of them delighted to be in the country.”

“I had heard they are exceedingly elegant ladies,” Miss Elizabeth said, stabbing me with a look of triumph.

She must have been deciphering my reluctance to make the introduction for some time, and because she was so piercingly perceptive, her conclusions were within a fraction of the truth.

“Would they find us terribly rustic, sir?”

I was on the verge of yielding yet another point when Miss Bennet rescued me.

“Of course they would, Lizzy,” she said, in the tone of a most gentle reproof. “Our society in Meryton is unvaried and confining. I am sure Mr Bingley’s sisters are used

to much better entertainment and more elegant people in London.”

I released my held breath and said, “Truth be told, Miss Elizabeth, I had no wish to be obliged to blush in embarrassment for their manners.”

I rode away from Longbourn later that day after finally having won a match.

My disclosure, which rang with honesty, caused Miss Elizabeth to stumble for once.

Her lips parted, but she had no snapping rejoinder, no scalding-hot expression with which to dispute the one thing with which she could not argue—a sincere statement of fact .

Miss Bingley would have been mortifyingly overbearing when faced with the civility and modesty of the unpretentious ladies of Longbourn.

She would have looked down her nose at their plain dresses, at the comfortable, well-worn furniture, and the simplicity of the tea service.

And she would have taken no pains to disguise her pitying opinion of Mary Bennet, not to mention her dismissal of Mr Bennet.

Neither of them would have been of any interest to her at all.

That treatment of people I had come to think of warmly would have been uncomfortable to witness, but the fact that Caroline Bingley would have been forced to sit politely with Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth, both more beautiful than she, and both so obviously well-acquainted with me—well, I believe she would have turned outrageous, sneering at her hostesses, and setting them up as rivals, forcing me to speak aloud my disgust of her manners.

There was little I abhorred more than just that sort of scene, but my avoidance of it had made me look, to Miss Elizabeth at least, scurrilous in my attentions to her family.

This dawning understanding left a taste in my mouth I did not like.

Perhaps it was chagrin. Whatever it was, I did not celebrate my victory and instead went away from Longbourn more bruised than happy .

My tattered feelings were further exacerbated by the increasing desperation of my hostess.

Miss Bingley's eyes, which had sometimes struck me as narrow as a cat's that sat purring with self-satisfaction, were now more likely to be wide with anxiety.

The continuation of my prank, in concert with the unrelenting hindrances of a household staff that could not respect her, rendered her easily startled and frequently lying on the sofa with a vinaigrette.

"Mr Darcy," she said in the fading whisper of those near death, "You are finally here. Forgive me for not making your tea, sir. Louisa?" She made a vague motion at the tea tray.

"Are you unwell, Miss Bingley?" I asked perfunctorily. I had been forced to attend one too many such prostrations and had depleted all my sympathy.

"She is having another fit of nerves, Darcy," Bingley explained, waving in his sister's general direction. "Never mind that. I suppose the birds have all gone now?"

I allowed Mrs Hurst to stir up whatever concoction she had in mind and drank it down while staring out the window and speaking to Bingley about the shooting

season that would soon come to an end.

This led me to the precipice that I sensed on the horizon, that of selecting a day to leave Hertfordshire, and I spoke of other things to forestall my decision .

“Is your sister equal to giving a ball?” I asked in a low voice.

“Dashed if I know what has got into her, but if Caroline is having one of her fits, then Louisa can play hostess. I very much want to open the doors to this place, Darcy. Everyone has welcomed me so warmly here, and I wish to show my appreciation.”

In his declaration of intent, I sensed an unspoken resentment.

The Bingley fortune had come from trade, and that accounted for the tepidness with which Bingley was often received in town.

My friend must have suffered a rare half-second of reflection that caused him to think of something else that was on his mind because he turned from the window and spoke in a more public voice.

“I do hope you will be feeling up to going with me to the assembly hall, Caroline. Our neighbours expect us, you know, and I wish to oblige them. Hurst, Louisa? I hope you are in the mood for dancing.”

“Does Mr Darcy intend to go?” Miss Bingley asked weakly.

“That is entirely up to him,” Bingley said with rare annoyance. “Should you not lie down in your room if you are ill?”

She struggled into an upright position and sniffed. “I simply needed a moment to compose myself after the incident with the cook. ”

Hurst, never a man to disguise his feelings, groaned and left the room, and sensing the family was on the verge of an argument over whatever had happened in my absence, I excused myself.

### CHAPTER NINE

Carsten dressed me for the assembly in white satin breeches and waistcoat, topped off with an expertly tailored black velvet coat.

“Am I slightly overdone, do you think?” I asked as I looked at myself in the mirror.

My valet momentarily faltered in the final alteration of my cravat. Knowing me so well, Carsten must have reached the conclusion that tonight I did not want to outshine whatever I would look like at Bingley’s upcoming ball.

He relaxed his shoulders and said, “I have brought your gold waistcoat for the ball, sir. This is a step below that. Would you prefer the gold tie pin? We shall save the sapphire for the ball as well.”

My conscience was already suffering from having so thoroughly bashed Miss Bingley’s confidence that she hovered on the verge of a nervous collapse, and I did not have the will to further dampen anyone’s self-opinion.

Thus, I went to a country assembly dressed for a night at the Pavilion in Brighton half dreading Miss Elizabeth’s reaction to my appearance.

The affair was precisely what I thought it would be. The entire neighbourhood arrived in romping high spirits, the room was too small, and the musicians were raucous, yet they could barely be heard over the din.

Sir William Lucas greeted us with just the kind of excessive flourishes I disliked, and

our party's arrival commanded the attention of the room.

We were beheld as the cherry on the cake, the plat de résistance , and what was worse than that, we gave off the collective air of expecting to have been received in just that way.

As I made my bows to Lady Lucas, I caught Miss Elizabeth's eye. How could I not? If for no other reason than curiosity as to what the lady might be thinking, there was no room I ever entered where I would not search for her.

Rather than delay the inevitable, I turned to Bingley. "I would like to make you acquainted with a friend of mine."

"A friend? Of course! I did not know you had friends hereabouts. "

"The family is just out of mourning. Pray, do not remark on it."

"Of course not. Caroline, Hurst?"

I could not help but notice that Bingley had become a touch more commanding with his family since the termagant that had ruled him from childhood had turned so unsure of herself. Hurst and Louisa were biddable to whomever held the reins, and our party followed me to Mr Bennet and his daughters.

The introductions went entirely as I expected.

Miss Bingley looked close to collapse to see me cordially take Miss Bennet's hand, to speak respectfully and warmly to her father, and to carefully include Elizabeth and Mary Bennet in my obvious regard.

Bingley immediately asked Miss Bennet to dance, and he looked suitably crestfallen



when she gently refused.

I should have then led Miss Bingley out to the floor.

The expectation that I would show her that mark of attention over every other lady in the room was surely universal, but in my defence, I have never been a saint.

I turned to Charlotte Lucas, Sir William's eldest daughter, who stood next to Miss Elizabeth.

"I am pleased to see you tonight, Miss Lucas. Might I have the pleasure?" I extended my hand, and though I longed to maintain my air of studied goodwill, I could not help but bestow upon her companion the tight, closed-lip smile of a challenge.

She had, after all, accused me of arrogance, and I meant to make her eat her words.

Miss Elizabeth's brows raised in pure scepticism. She curtsied and boldly held my gaze until I was forced to tear my eyes from her face and attend to my partner.

I set about making myself agreeable to Miss Lucas. I spoke of things I hate speaking of—principally the weather, the roads, the falling leaves, and the whereabouts and doings of the Prince Regent.

"Yes, I have met him, and he impressed me as very amiable," I replied when asked my opinion. That I thought he was a glutton for pleasure and spent too much of my taxes on himself, I did not say.

When we finished, I led out Miss Lucas's younger sister, a trial that prepared me to pay similar attention to all the most down-trodden, neglected spinsters of the entire county.

I lent my consequence to those ladies who passed beneath the notice of every other man in the room, not from saintliness, but because the devil in me was wide awake to the chagrin my movements were inspiring in the breast of my adversary.

Once or twice, she had to stifle a laugh at my specious displays of sociability, and while this was gratifying, I believe the pleasure of capturing her attention for the entirety of the evening was my principal aim .

With every twirl around the room, I found Elizabeth Bennet where she stood at the periphery, and I met unblinking her passing expressions.

While I danced with Miss Maria Lucas, she cocked her head with something bordering on curiosity as to how I was going to get that shy rabbit to utter a single word to me.

With Mrs Long's nieces, Miss Elizabeth cocked her head the opposite way and looked me up and down, daring me to continue this farce for one more pass around the room.

I enjoyed a little moue of commiseration when I took the vicar's wife down the line, and later, a reluctant smile of joy when I surprised a somewhat doddering lady who looked perfectly stunned to be asked to dance.

Only after that set, which was, I admit, delightful if only for the sake of the humble happiness I inspired in my partner, did I find Miss Bingley.

Having endured my successive snubs, Caroline Bingley was sadly enraged by the time I held out my hand to her.

I led her around the room and strove for a better attitude towards my friend's sister.

She had endured a great deal of abuse from me.

I did not dare send her over the edge by smirking at Elizabeth Bennet, as I longed to do.

For the length of our dance, I paid proper, respectful attention to my partner and even tried to engage her in civil conversation.

“May I escort you to the refreshment table in the next room, Miss Bingley? ”

Evidently in no humour to fall victim to my capricious charm, she replied irritably, “I doubt I shall go in. It will be even hotter and noisier than this room, sir.”

“Might I bring you something else instead?”

“I am not hungry. Besides, what will these people serve us? If there are oysters, we shall all be made sick, I assure you.”

“Perhaps a piece of cake?”

“I think not.”

“Then I shall bring you a cup of punch.”

“You may, Mr Darcy, but I am not sure I shall drink it.”

For the fifth time in that half an hour, she sniffed and crimped shut her lips to show me the extent of her displeasure with my earlier desertion.

I continued to ply her with civility, which unfortunately, had the contradictory effect of enraging her further.

The moment I took her back to Bingley's party, she demanded to be taken home.

Bingley's reaction was somewhat too loud. "No, truly, Caroline?"

"I will take her and send the carriage back," Hurst said on a yawn.

"I suppose that means that I, too, must go," Mrs Hurst said impatiently. "I hope the cook can send us up some cake to eat. Really, Caroline," she pointed towards the closet-sized space Sir William had proudly called their 'supper room', "I was so looking forward to the cakes I saw in there.

"Pray do not speak to me of cake!" her sister snapped, and I politely stepped away from them so as to draw less attention to their unhappy conference.

### CHAPTER TEN

I declined to dance any more sets and instead spoke briefly to Sir William Lucas before finally gratifying myself by finding a chair next to Mr Bennet, who was subdued and required nothing of me.

Two sets later, I was again waylaid by Sir William as I crossed the room, and upon hearing the last strains of the dance were about to be played, I excused myself and went directly behind Miss Elizabeth and took her arm.

She had just been speaking to Mr John Lucas, who moved away when I approached, and was somewhat startled to be so possessively handled.

“Calm yourself,” I said in a low voice. “I am only taking you for refreshments.”

“Upon whose permission do you do so, sir?” she asked coldly.

I chuckled and bent closer to her ear. “Your father’s. He is peckish and does not want to fight a crowd for his plate. I have secured him one of two tables in the alcove and he wishes for his daughters to join him.”

“Gracious, how gallant you are,” she said with an arch look, but I felt her relax and knew I had not truly annoyed her. I saw her sisters ahead of us and swept them up, steering the party towards a premium spot in the refreshment room that had cost me a shilling to secure.

Apparently, Meryton society had not learnt the general expectation that people should

be allowed the dignity of eating without interruption.

. As we ate, people milled in front of us and engaged one occupant of the table or another.

At one time in my life, this would have annoyed me greatly.

But tonight, while Miss Bennet and Miss Mary were speaking for a prolonged period with Mrs Philips, and Mr Bennet was detained by the lady's husband, I made use of their distraction to smirk at my table companion.

"I do hope you do not imply by that stupid look that I am to congratulate you, sir," she said.

"What look is it that you object to?"

"The look often used by Bandit when he wants half my biscuit."

"I see. And precisely what, may I ask, am I trying with this so-called stupid look to beg from you?"

"You want me to congratulate you for your show. "

"What show, miss?" I asked, dripping with innocence.

"You know very well what show. I suspect you have never in your life stooped to notice any lady, leaning against a wall, thinking she wasted her money on dancing slippers."

We spoke in lowered voices so as not to be overheard. "Much you would know about it. I would venture to guess you have never been without a partner unless you wished

to be.”

“I would be forced to mutter *touché*’ were it not for the fact that my sister Mary and my friend Charlotte are so often overlooked as to cause me pain to see it.”

“And yet,” I said, “I do not detect the slightest approval from you for my efforts.”

“I had not thought you so dull-witted.”

“By all means, say what you wish to say,” I cheerfully replied, momentarily forgetting to lower my voice.

She answered in something like a vicious whisper. “I would have to be simple indeed to believe your motivation for leading out those particular ladies was purely charitable.”

“I do not know that I have ever been accused of being stupid for thinking someone was stupid,” I mused. “Did you indeed just do so?”

“Your hearing, at least, is acute,” she said sweetly.

I paused. In truth, I stopped to savour the tartness of our conversation that left the taste of sweetness in its wake.

In that moment before speaking again, however, I heard Mrs Philips ask Miss Bennet, “What news from Kitty and Lydia?”

Miss Bennet’s reply was drowned out by laughter from the next room, but her expression and that of her two sisters were clear. They looked slightly miserable at the mention of their siblings.

Miss Elizabeth must have noted my curiosity. Perhaps I frowned a little. There was some secret not yet revealed, and I puzzled over it.

“Will you call at Longbourn tomorrow, Mr Darcy?” she asked.

“I had planned to, unless you think my arrival would be a nuisance after a late night.”

“By all means come, sir. If the weather is fine, we can walk farther than we normally do and wear out that horrid animal.”

An assignation! My own horrid animal, the red one in my chest, bounded and capered in anticipation. Stay, I told it briskly. She has suggested a walk, not a tryst. We will probably have the entire village strolling after us.

We did not. I had gone perhaps too early to be polite the next day, but Miss Elizabeth was alone at the door with Bandit on a lead.

“Papa,” she called softly into the book-room after receiving me. “I am going with Mr Darcy and Bandit up to Oakham Mount.”

I started out with pleasantries. What time had they left the ball, and had they enjoyed themselves being out in society after such a period of quiet?

Miss Elizabeth’s answers were slightly impatient.

She did not need that sort of preamble, and since it is not natural to me, my attempts at light conversation soon dwindled into silence.

I decided to wait to be told whatever it was that she intended to tell me.

Fifteen or perhaps even twenty minutes ticked by in a glacial progression. It was a



long time to endure a terse silence. More than a half-dozen times I nearly burst out with a remark about the clouds or a suggestion we cross the road—anything other than sitting on a proverbial chair of nails.

“I suppose you are wondering about my youngest sisters,” Miss Elizabeth said at last. Her voice was raw, so little did she like having to speak to me of the subject.

“By no means should you tell me anything about them if you do not wish it. Perhaps I should tell you that I have a sister I have never mentioned?”

Her head whipped around, and she scoured my face with her eyes. I did not force her to press me for more information.

“I became her guardian when she was just eleven years old. I was only two-and-twenty and ill-equipped to parent a grieving child. And too, I was utterly overwhelmed by my circumstances. My father’s estate is large, his holdings complex and varied, and his fortune, though healthy, is like every other fortune.”

She cleared her throat. “How so, sir?”

“It is constantly under siege. And it is constantly on the verge of draining away, or dwindling, or being wrestled out of my control.”

“I had not thought?—”

“No, nor had I. But a rich man may as well have a target on his back,” The memories of having learnt this hard truth pressed in upon me and rather than indulge them, I spoke with light disinterest. “Forgive me. I did not mean to make it sound as though you should pity me.”

“Then you shall pardon me if I do not,” she said drily. “And your sister? How old is

she now?"

"Georgiana is sixteen."

"You did not bring her to Hertfordshire?"

"You have met Mr Bingley's sisters." I glanced at Miss Elizabeth in full expectation she would understand me, and by the wry twist of her smile, I knew she had.

"Our aunt is a coveted acquaintance in society, and they long to be on her list of invitations. Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst are relentless in their attentions to my sister, and she finds it trying. But had I known I would meet you and your obliging sisters, perhaps I would have brought her."

"What purpose could you possibly have for resorting to the butter boat? We have nothing to offer to justify such pretty sentiments."

I bit back what I longed to say, which was even prettier and more sentimental, and said instead, "You are mistaken. You do have something to offer. My sister had a crushing experience when she was fifteen, and she is also painfully shy. I have hired a lady to serve as a companion for her, but I would like to see her surrounded by friends of her own age and disposition."

"And we would serve, would we? No, do not answer that. I am being uncommonly provoking just now."

"Are you? I had not noticed any difference in how you are behaving now as opposed to any other time you swipe at me."

She smiled just a little and sank into silence. I wondered if Miss Elizabeth's confidences had come to an end when she stooped to attend to Bandit's paw after he

stepped on a blackberry cane and pretended great interest in the bare branches of a hawthorn bush.

Eventually, however, and with a sigh of resolution she said, “My sister Lydia was also young when she embroiled herself in a wild escapade. She nearly eloped with a handsome, practiced card sharp who was, we now believe, running from his debtors. He would have certainly forced my father to pay a ransom for my sister’s recovery, and she would have come back to us ruined and unmarried.

A common story, I am afraid. Were it not for a headache that plagued me that night and kept me awake, I would not have heard Lydia’s attempt to leave the house, and she would have sunk my family in a most ruinous scandal. ”

“How did she meet such a rake?”

“Easily enough. He cut a liberal swath through our little society, claiming to be cousin to Mr King, who was conveniently away in Bath.”

“Your sister was young. Perhaps she was insensible of the danger.”

“That might be a suitable excuse for any other girl of that age, but it does not serve for mine. Lydia is wild to a fault, Mr Darcy. Wilful and flirtatious, and at that time, determined to be the first of my sisters to marry.”

“Why would she wish that?”

Miss Elizabeth heaved a weary sigh. “We must now speak of my mother, sir. My father married a pretty lady with lower connexions than he might have looked for had he not been blinded by her beautiful face. In her defence, my mother might have turned out better had she produced a boy child. Instead, she gave Papa only girls. And since the estate is entailed to someone we do not know, and because she was much

younger than my father, my mother became frantic as the years passed that my father would predecease her. Her worst fears were that she would be left destitute, and her daughters would be sunk in humiliating spinsterhood. Her first thought in the morning and last thought at night was to see us married, and if she could, to see us married well.”

I kept silent, thinking her mother’s aspirations should not have been too difficult to fulfil. There were respectable men everywhere just bumping the ceiling of their station in life who wished for a gentleman’s daughter to elevate their status.

“We had no dowries,” she explained, and I wondered whether she could read my mind.

But still, they were the handsome daughters of a landed gentleman. Their prospects were far from hopeless.

“If you must have it, sir,” she said grimly, and then I knew for certain she could hear the thoughts in my head, “my mother was sister to Mrs Philips. She was just as loud as that lady and sometimes shockingly overt in her matrimonial aspirations for us. She was, in fact, quite vulgar about it. She could not see her attempts at matchmaking were off putting. More than one eligible gentleman ran from us, and I blushed to be pushed in front of one man after the other, suitable or not. I suppose sheer mortification caused me to counter her efforts by refusing to be demure.”

“So that is where you sharpened your claws, is it? On the hides of your poor suitors?”

“Consistently. But I digress. Lydia was caught. My second-youngest sister, Kitty, who is malleable and fretful, was discovered to be her accomplice. For the first time in his life, my father was shocked and remorseful. He was, you see, a hardened cynic by then, having lived with my mother’s hysteria and unable to respect her at all. ”

“And he sent them to school?”

“No, no. That would have been too simple. How can I explain such a stupid chain of events?”

“You need not.”

“But I wish you to know, sir. You would understand us better, I hope.” I walked along in anticipation of her explanation while she searched the sky as if for a reprieve from her confession.

At last, she glanced apologetically at me and said, “My father turned his self-disgust against my mother. He became even more cold and critical of her. He berated her intelligence, even in company, and he made a point of countermanding her every edict. She became fretful, weepy, and eventually took to her bed. I suppose she sought sympathy or respite from his disgust, but this ploy only earned her more displeasure. All of us, even Jane, regularly spoke to her bracingly, sternly, or even provokingly in an attempt to shake her from her ridiculous notion that she was ill.”

“And then she died.”

“Yes! And a more shocking day I cannot describe because none of us believed she was sick at all.”

“Of what cause did she die, may I ask?”

“Does it matter? In fact, she had a tumour, but that absolves us of nothing.”

“And yet you still believe she willed herself to die?”

“Had she not weakened herself so severely with such tortured thoughts and feelings, I

wonder whether she would have fallen prey to her disease.”

“You resent her for having died?” I gently suggested after a long, respectful pause.

“I certainly resent my treatment of her, my lack of sympathy, and my failure to care for her when she suffered. As do we all. You have seen my father. He is humbled. He has become a very old man before our eyes. I abhor how this has changed him. He staggers under the guilt of believing he should have been kinder to her, that he, in fact, killed her with cruelty. We hold him blameless. We share his guilt, for as I have confessed, we were not always patient with our mother and found her complaints exasperating. Yet, no matter how much we absolve him, he cannot forgive himself.” She swallowed and looked downcast, before murmuring, “And look what all this has done to Jane.”

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

I saw nothing at all amiss with Miss Bennet. In fact, I admired her and held her in the highest esteem. When her sister mournfully referred to the changes wrought on her by their situation, I did not understand.

“What has it done to her?” I asked.

Miss Elizabeth glanced appraisingly at me, but I sensed she had come to the end of her confession.

“I suppose you know more than I what the assumption of responsibility at too young an age does to a person. Besides, I have said too much already. To be overly confiding is cloying to one’s listener. No, no. Do not disagree with me, Mr Darcy.”

I smiled at her and gave her the privacy she demanded. We had come to a high spot and looked dispassionately at the scenery below. Our conversation had been too fraught to allow us to become poetic about the landscape.

Bandit sank down in a patch of grass and panted loudly while Miss Elizabeth walked a short distance away from me. At last she returned and offered me the ghost of a smile.

“Perhaps you would relieve my embarrassment if you now became overly confiding with regard to your sister.”

My turn had come to hedge. I rubbed my neck in discomfort and took a few paces

towards the cairn which marked the hill's zenith.

"Pardon me, I should not have asked that of you," Miss Elizabeth said quietly, speaking to my back.

I turned and faced her. "The subject is painful, and I am habitually closed-lipped about it, but I trust your confidence as you have trusted mine. The case with Georgiana, you see, is exactly that of your own sister's."

"What? How can that be?"

"I do not exaggerate. She nearly eloped with a fortune hunter, only he would have married her, and in doing so, he would have plagued me and tortured her for the rest of our lives."

"There seems little difference in our circumstance to be sure. We would both have been made utterly miserable and gossiped about in perpetuity. But how did your sister meet such a man? My mother was never vigilant, but surely Miss Darcy had better supervision?"

"The lady I hired as her companion was known to the villain. Mr Wickham conspired with her, undoubtedly for profitable gain, and when my sister went on holiday, he followed her and was given free access to her by the woman I hired to keep her safe." I absently snapped a dead twig off a scrubby dogwood and tossed it down the hill.

"You are likely wondering what my sister was thinking to allow herself to be courted without my knowledge, but you see, the man was the son of my father's steward and had known Georgiana all her life. "

"What a vile trick! I suppose you killed him for it."



“I certainly wished to, but my sister’s reputation was my first concern. I could not risk having it bandied about that I duelled with her seducer.”

“I suppose not. But how did the plan not succeed? It sounds as though it was a very close-run thing.”

“It was as close in my situation as your having the headache in your sister’s case.

I had a cancellation in my plans and some intuition drove me, I suppose.

Do not laugh—I cannot account for it otherwise.

On a whim, I went to Ramsgate to surprise Georgiana and to take her out to the shops or wherever she wished to go. ”

“Did you find this man in her parlour?”

“She confessed to me her plan to elope with him. He had been my childhood companion, and my sister did not know I knew him for a degenerate as he grew up. She expected me to be delighted and to convince him of my sufficient approval to allow for a respectable wedding.”

“Your poor sister,” she said. “You must have been incandescent with rage.”

I could not help turning back to look at her and was on the verge of saying I had behaved with great control. But in truth, I suppose I had turned purple with fury.

“I am sure I was. Georgiana nearly fainted when she discovered that her supposed friend was a rake and a scoundrel.”

“At least she was remorseful. Lydia became recalcitrant and would not admit her

mistake. The more we tried to make her see the degree of her folly, the more stubbornly she clung to her feelings of injustice. She positively raged at my father for interrupting her happiness.”

Bandit rescued us then from our mutually awful recollections. He stood, shook himself, and tentatively wagged his tail.

“I see you are ready for more exercise, sir,” I said, and thinking to relieve Miss Elizabeth of some of the oppression of memories her disclosures had likely stirred, I spoke with specious condescension. “Take my arm. There are some loose stones just there.”

She huffed playfully and said, “Perhaps you should take my arm, Mr Darcy. I have walked this path in all weather and even well after dusk. Besides, should you stub your toe for lack of familiarity with this path, you will further scuff your boots.”

“What a shrew you are to bring up that painful subject,” I said, but I claimed her arm with the confidence of a gentleman, and she relented sufficiently to turn Bandit’s lead over to me.

“How did your sisters come to be sent to school?” I asked, after a suitable interlude in which we walked briskly downhill.

“Jane made the decision. She was, up to the time of my mother’s death, the gentlest, least polemic girl ever born.

Nothing undid her faster than conflict. But she found herself thrust into the role of matriarch.

My father had descended into a nearly irretrievable melancholy, and Jane was left to manage Lydia, who stormed and threw tantrums at any form of restriction applied to

her.

Kitty, torn to pieces between Jane and Lydia, began to pretend to be ill just as our mother had done, and Mary fell ill in earnest. I suppose I was of some help to Jane, but in truth, I was so angry at how broken my family had become, I had to be tiptoed around lest I erupt.

“With the greatest reluctance to burden him with our troubles, Jane wrote to my uncle, Mr Gardiner, in London. He was my mother’s brother, and he is, if I may say so, a reliable, respectable man. We put Lydia at Mrs Trencher’s in Bath.”

“Did you?”

“I assume you have heard of it.”

“I have.”

Mrs Trencher had made a reputation for herself as a lady who found husbands for the girls enrolled in her school, whether they were ill-favoured, dull-witted, or stained in their reputations.

Her bridegrooms were usually widowers in need of mothers for their children, or men who were equally ill-favoured, dull-witted, or also stained in their reputations.

I had heard the only qualification Mrs Trencher required of her students was a guaranteed dowry of three thousand pounds.

“If you are wondering how we provided for my sister’s dowry, my mother’s legacy provided each of her daughters one thousand pounds.

Jane and I gave up our portions because Lydia must marry, or she will surely ruin us.

And until she is settled, she must be looked after by someone who shares her ambitions for a match. ”

“And your other sister?”

“She is also in Bath, but at Mrs Spencer’s Academy. Our hope was that in separating them, Kitty might find her way. ”

“Has she?”

“It is still too soon to tell. Jane would never say so, but she believes she failed us by being unequal to the job of repairing my sisters’ characters.

She grieves over it, and is, as you see, as humbled by her guilt as my father is by his remorse.

The end result for Jane is that she has given herself over entirely to the task of caring for my father almost as a penance. She has even resigned never to marry.”

For some reason, Miss Elizabeth looked at me carefully as she told me this, and so I replied with reasonable assurance, “The right man might change her mind. Besides,” I continued somewhat philosophically, “some semblance of her former self may rise up over time. I can attest to this phenomenon. We are given perhaps more than we can manage, and we stagger under the load, but sooner rather than later, we take it on and are made stronger for it. We begin to find a way forward as ourselves—as who we were born to be—rather than who we are expected to be.”

Was this, in fact, what was happening to me? Was this newfound self, this devil in me that tormented Miss Bingley and befriended persons that were considered below me by my friends and relations, the resurgence of the carefree, ungovernable young gentleman I used to be?

“Huh!” I blurted out.

“Pardon me? ”

“Oh, I only had to clear my throat.”

“I have forced you to talk more than you usually do.”

“You have forced me to do more than that, miss.”

The lady was, by degrees, regaining her sense of humour. “I?” she scoffed. “How have I forced you to anything? Just what do you accuse me of, sir?”

“You have forced me to pay attention to a dog that should have been left in the river.”

“Had you truly meant that, I would have to cut the acquaintance.”

“You know I do not. But he is certainly a dog I would never deign to notice. How did he come to impose himself on your sister?”

“He arrived on our doorstep as a half-starved handful of fur on the day of my mother’s funeral.”

“Dear me. I suppose Miss Bennet had been so consumed with her duties after your mother’s death that she did not know what to do with herself. Did this mongrel become the new object of her concern?”

“I failed to mention it was sleeting that day.”

“He made himself irresistible by being pitiful.”

“If I knew Bandit to be intelligent, I would accuse him of that. But I believe it was a simple case of fate. Besides, Jane believed he would grow into a lap dog.”

“Did she not make note of the size of his paws?”

“She was too busy cooing into his little puppy face, sir. The thing is done. He is ours now, and believes himself to be the best thing that ever happened to our family.”

Rather than begin to wonder whether he was the best thing that ever happened to me, I changed the subject, and we spoke of a wide range of topics that were neither painful nor revealing until we reached Longbourn.

### CHAPTER TWELVE

L ongbourn remained quiet, and I guiltily left Miss Elizabeth at the doorstep and slipped away.

We should never have been given the liberty to walk alone for more than an hour and a half.

As a friend of the family and after walking with them so often in pairs or even alone for short distances within sight of the house, I suppose my presence was no longer considered interesting or dangerous to the reputations of the Bennet ladies.

Netherfield Park was just coming to life when I arrived. I retreated to my room to change before breakfast, and when I went down, I met Bingley and his sister Louisa.

He was distracted with plans for his ball and in a tight conference with Mrs Hurst, who blinked and smiled at every idea he proposed.

Miss Bingley may have been a pretentious baggage, but she would have been capable of putting on a proper ball.

My friend was suggesting some outrageous decorations and a staggering number of dishes for his supper.

“How does Miss Bingley fare this morning?” I asked, hoping to interrupt my friend’s flow of creativity.

“She is still abed, Darcy. Is there aught you would like to do this morning? I have selected the twenty-sixth as the date for our ball, and I mean to visit a few of my friends to alert them that invitations will be forthcoming. Would you care to go with me?”

I hedged. “I have some letters to attend to, if you do not mind.”

“Of course, but would you visit Mr Bennet, and let him know I am hosting a ball? I do hope he and his daughters will come.”

Then and there, I should have invited him to go with me, but the devil within me rose up in a fiercely possessive flush of resistance.

I simply did not want to share my friends with anyone, nor did I want Bingley, who fell victim to Cupid every other month, to plague the ladies of Longbourn with poetry.

“I shall call tomorrow.”

I spent the remainder of my morning in the library.

I did not look at a single piece of correspondence, though there was plenty of it.

I stared at the clouds that built up on the horizon and then pulled my chair to the window.

With my old boots propped indecorously on the sill, I watched raindrops as they swelled on the glass before streaking down to their death on the ledge below.

I thought of the many revelations Miss Elizabeth had shared with me. Our young sisters had nearly identical histories! I could hardly reconcile the improbability of that



coincidence.

Remarkable as that was, I also shared common ground with Miss Bennet's early assumption of responsibilities she did not want, and I sincerely understood Mr Bennet's melancholy.

My father had suffered an irrational degree of guilt when my mother died, and he was never the same man as a result.

In my own mother's case, he had not been cruel, but he had not been present at the time of her accident.

Nothing anyone could have done would have rescued my mother.

She died after having tripped and hit her head on the stair rail.

The doctor said the glancing blow had caused a fatal bleeding in her brain, but my father, a man of great intelligence, was sadly convinced he could have somehow prevented the accident from ever happening in the first place.

He regretted the shoes he had bought her, the carpet on the stairs, the fact that the family was at Pemberley, and many similarly irrational incidentals.

I suspected Mr Bennet rehearsed a similar litany of regrets in his mind. He was often far away, though present in the room, and he reminded me a great deal of my father when he fell silent.

Some slight noise in the adjacent parlour brought me back from these sombre recollections.

My hostess must have come down. I thought with real remorse of Mrs Bennet's

nervous collapse and of how I was pushing Miss Bingley a little way down that same road.

I left my solitude in an effort to make amends with my hostess.

Alas, I had burnt my bridge to ash.

“Mr Darcy,” she purred, “have you been out visiting this morning? How are your friends at Longbridge?”

“Longbourn. The weather is dreary this morning. Perhaps you would like to play cards?”

“No, no. Louisa and I are taken up with putting on a ball for our neighbours. How delightful it will be to play hostess to the cream of Hertfordshire society.”

She was determined to be cattish, and I was determined to keep trying. “They are likely to be impressed by your efforts. It is not every day that a private ball is given here.”

She laughed—a false, unhappy sound. “Oh, but you know, Sir William Lucas has been to Saint James’s .

I am sure that he and his wife are used to elegant parties every day of the week.

” She turned her attention back to the list Mrs Hurst had made of Bingley’s ideas and said brightly, “But all is not lost. Charles would like us to drape the ballroom in gauze. ”

“Surely you could talk him around.”

“But why should I? I would like to make a spectacle and, as you suggest, impress these people you have come to esteem so much. What say you to red?”

“You know already what I think of a ballroom shrouded in red gauze.”

“Oh yes! Indeed, I recall you made some sneering comment at Lady Caldwell’s affair last year. I shall see if I can find blue then.”

“Pray excuse me,” I said, having reached the tail end of my patience. The limitless correspondence required of a landed gentleman seemed preferable to spending another moment in Miss Bingley’s wounded aura. I retreated back to the library.

After I read and replied to six letters, I wrote a note to my sister.

I told Georgiana of making the acquaintance of a country gentleman who was bookish and retiring.

I mentioned his pleasant daughters and their unruly dog, and I even went much further than I normally would, describing a recent incident when Bandit arrived at the kitchen door with a limp cat hanging in his jaws.

Miss Bennet, who had gone down to talk to the housekeeper, released a rare, unladylike scream that startled Bandit into loosening his jaw, and the cat, who had only been playing dead, then ran away.

Bandit gave chase, and he was only brought to ground an hour later and a mile away when I found him in the spinney, covered in mud, digging at a weasel’s hole. I wrote to my sister:

Apparently, he forgot all about the cat which must have been pretty tame when compared to a weasel.

He returned home triumphant and properly pleased with his state of filth, only realising he might have offended when he was plunged into the trough by the backhouse boy and the groom.

Miss Elizabeth remarked that he even sulked for once.

This struck the family as an improvement in the animal's mental function, since his usual reaction to a scolding is gratitude for the attention.

The ladies then expressed a sincere hope he would suddenly become a smarter dog, and I went to Mr Bennet's library lest I burst out laughing at the idea.

I had little hope that a single frothy anecdote would meet with any more success in engaging Georgiana than had my few attempts to reconcile with Miss Bingley.

One attempt at reparation never leads to reconciliation.

A kind of campaign of many such peace offerings over time would be required.

Miss Bingley was a lost cause, I decided, because I did not have the will or the patience to befriend her.

Besides, encouragement would only render her more determined to possess me, and I did not like the idea of being anyone's trophy.

I had made a career out of avoiding that very thing.

But I would try to build a bridge with my sister no matter how long it took.

Retrospection and some flash of insight communicated to me by Elizabeth Bennet gave me reason to believe I had done a poor job of concealing my anger.

My sister, being fairly modest, would naturally assume I was angry with her, and this misunderstanding had surely caused her endless grief ever since.

This brought me full circle. I replayed my entire morning's conversation and smiled to remember Elizabeth's flashing eyes when she said of Wickham, I am sure you killed him. Without a doubt, she would have killed Wickham with her bare hands had she been in my shoes, gossip be damned.

As the ball approached, days at Netherfield became thick and miserable with unspoken unrest. Miss Bingley, failing to bring me to my knees with a proposal of marriage through the expedient of pouting, began to grate on her brother.

Even Mr and Mrs Hurst grew tired of her occasional rants and snide references to the inferiority of the county of Hertfordshire.

More than once the conversation ended abruptly when I arrived for breakfast, and the air around the table became oppressively polite.

Clearly, they argued regularly, forcing me to go earlier and earlier to break my fast so as to let them fight in peace.

And this left me free to go earlier to Longbourn.

It was just as well. The Bennets' attendance at the assembly meant that the neighbourhood was free to knock down their door. The family was now plagued with company, and twice I had to leave after the usual quarter of an hour instead of making myself at home for the morning.

"I am glad you came when you did, Mr Darcy," Jane Bennet said one morning after I apologised for finding them still at the breakfast table. "We are expecting callers at eleven, and I did not know when we would be able to take Bandit out for his

training.”

I was unsurprised to see the mongrel sitting in anxious alertness at her feet. Dogs at Pemberley were allowed indoors if they were well-trained pets, but they were put in the loose-box in the scullery during meals without exception.

“He howls unrelentingly, sir,” Miss Elizabeth remarked as she stirred her tea. She refused to look at me and did so to great effect. How she could cause me to feel so de trop and uninteresting through the simple act of eating her breakfast was a mystery.

“Pardon me?” I asked, taking the chair Mr Bennet offered to me.

“I refer to Bandit. Clearly you are astonished to see he has the liberty to beg for scraps. We must look like the Ye Olde Man & Scythe in Yorkshire after the hunt.”

“A little,” I said. “All that is missing are strings of birds hung from the rafters in various stages of decay.”

She strove mightily to continue snubbing me but ended her campaign on a chuckle before she turned to her sister. “Do you take Bandit out today, Jane?” she asked.

“I would like to go. Will you come with me?”

“Certainly, unless Mary wishes to get out of doors.”

“Why do we not all go,” I suggested. “The air is sharp, and we shall make quick work of our walk, I think.”

We went then, and the wind was biting cold. Even the dog, who had a cast-iron construction, seemed unconvinced of the viability of our plan. He managed—barely—to pay attention to our commands and eyed the road behind him

longingly.

A brisk, cold walk rendered Longbourn almost heavenly with warmth and welcome when we returned.

I went to sit with Mr Bennet in his book-room for some time, and only decided to go when I heard the knocker.

From the sounds in the hall, I felt certain the Lucas family had arrived, Sir William having a distinctive and penetrating voice.

I went with Mr Bennet to greet his company and stayed for five minutes more for the sake of politeness before excusing myself.

I left the parlour and was heading through the vestibule when Miss Elizabeth came out into the hall behind me.

“Mr Darcy,” she said almost surreptitiously, “might I have a moment of your time?” In a flash we were back in the breakfast parlour, now cleared of dishes and deserted.

“I met a lieutenant in the militia yesterday by the name of Wickham. He was at my aunt’s house for a card party. I do not know whether this is the man you told me about, but he is rumoured to come from some county in the north. He is newly kitted out in a red coat and charming as the sun in May.”

“The devil you say.” I put my hat and crop on the table and stared at her. “I suppose it is him. How could it not be? He has plagued me all my life.”

“What will you do?”

“I suppose I will have to kill him,” I said darkly.

“No truly, what will you do?”

“I-I do not rightly know. What should I do?” That I asked a lady for advice on a purely male matter of business struck me as madness. I opened my mouth to retract my question and to beg her pardon, to ask her to overlook?—

“I am glad you asked me, sir,” she said briskly. She then began speaking and gaining momentum until I felt I had been given my marching orders and was expected to click my heels and salute.

“No.”

“And why not?”

“Because you are not serious. You cannot be! What you suggest is a heinous thing to do to a man, even though he is a villain.”

She tossed her curls and flashed her eyes at me. “I am always struck,” she said, “when what is considered ordinary abuse of a woman, is decried as unthinkable and inhumane when applied to a man.”

“I-I did not mean to imply?—”

“You will suit yourself in this matter, but should you decide to follow my advice, you must act as quickly as possible. The plan relies on the supposition this man does not yet know you are in the neighbourhood, so he cannot make the connexion to you and your family. Now, pray excuse me. My long absence might be noticed, and I do not want to have to lie to my sister.”

She swept out of the room and left me reeling in the turbulence of her wake. Not even an hour of formulating every possible objection was required for her idea to begin to



steal its way into my imagination. My greatest resistance centred around the underhandedness required.

A gentleman would deal directly with his enemy, look him in the eye and enact a frontal, justified revenge.

But when dealing with a man who is not a gentleman, I began to wonder whether he deserved to be treated as one.

Miss Elizabeth's plan was both wild and wicked, and it was also the very definition of poetic justice .

With the sinking feeling that Elizabeth Bennet could handily induce me to do anything by simply tossing her curls, I went in search of my coachman.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Once again, I stood in front of the mirror and winced a little at the exquisite , as dandies are sometimes labelled, looking back at me.

It was the night of Bingley's ball, and Carsten was aglow with pride after a spell of disappointing mornings spent helping me put on dog-eared boots and the necessarily humble coat that must be paired with such footwear.

"Splendid," I said, as convincingly as I could, and then I began to make my way to the parlour. As I walked down the hall, Bingley came out of his room.

"Darcy," he said, glancing surreptitiously behind him and causing me to pause. "Would you open the ball with Caroline?"

"If she wishes it, certainly."

He visibly relaxed, and I tried to ignore my slightly oppressed feelings on the matter.

We gathered in the parlour before the ball and drank a little wine.

Miss Bingley swept into the room in a dress of coral satin and a feathered turban pinned with a diamond brooch.

I bowed and asked for the pleasure of leading her out for the opening set.

"I do not plan to dance," she said, turning from me to fuss with Mrs Hurst's puffed

sleeve.

I bowed in acquiescence, but my friend became irate. “Not dance! What are you talking of? You shall dance, Caroline. I insist.”

I took my glass of wine and went to the ballroom to come to terms with the gaucherie on display. It was there, under a strange contraption of blue and green gauze at the entrance of the room, that a footman found me.

“Mr Reese has sent a message that all is underway as requested, sir.”

I politely thanked him and went to the window to stare out at the gathering night.

I cannot say I rejoiced that my people had succeeded in abducting Wickham and taking him to Scotland.

In all truth, I was bewildered by the devilry which had lately arisen in me that enabled me to perpetrate such a horrible trick on a fellow.

I was at risk of sinking into guilty feelings and longed to speak of my misgivings to the plan’s mastermind, if only to hear her reassure me.

Bingley, who must have finished his quarrel with his sister, interrupted my reflections, and with forced cheerfulness, he bounded past the clustered palms that lined the room.

“Is this not a cheerful sight, Darcy?”

“You shall be the talk of Hertfordshire for the next year at least.”

We began walking towards the hall, where the sounds of guests arriving could just

now be heard.

Bingley lowered his voice. "Caroline asked me to say she would be happy to open the ball with you."

I did not feel equal to commenting on such an awkward business. I smiled pleasantly at Bingley to convey my complacency even as I expected a miserable half an hour in his sister's company.

We met the guests, and when Mr Bennet arrived, I went directly to him and warmly shook his hand.

I bowed to his daughters, casually bespoke a set with each lady, and took the old gentleman forward to greet their host and his family.

Bingley was delighted, claimed the supper set with Miss Bennet, and before I knew it, the evening was underway.

Miss Bingley's countenance was a little ravaged, but she managed to pretend to enjoy herself as we opened the ball and gave perfectly acceptable though minimal responses to my attempts at polite conversation.

Whatever Bingley had threatened her with must have been brutal indeed to merit such a show of obedience.

Good manners would never allow me to ask what stick was held over her head, and in fact, I did not care to know. I was much more interested in the third set of the evening.

Jane Bennet, beautiful as a painting and placid as an angel, partnered me for the second set. Bandit, she said, had been restrained for the evening in the groom's

quarters, since he had twice attempted to run after their coach as they made for Netherfield Park.

“How old is he now?” I asked, though I knew he must just now be one year of age.

They would suffer from his tyranny for another five years at least, or perhaps even longer, if he were one of those dogs who did not mellow with time and come to prefer a rug by the fire to sprinting after any turning wheel.

I bit my lip lest I express my condolences and turned the subject to dancing.

The ladies were, she said, a bit apprehensive of going out in full feathers after so long a spell of circumspection.

I then made her laugh by pretending to stifle a sneeze when a lady’s feathered headdress passed under my nose.

We talked of Mary, searched out Mr Bennet’s whereabouts to assure ourselves he was comfortable, and smiled at one another for the rest of the set.

At last I could put my hand out to Miss Elizabeth. She looked at my gold waistcoat, velvet coat, sapphire pin, and swept her eyes down my shining satin knee breeches, silk stockings, and to my gleaming black shoes.

“By all means, scoff if you will.”

“I would not dare. But I will say, it was perhaps unkind of you to outshine your hostess.”

“Did I? I did not mean to.”

“She was thrown completely into the shade. No lady in the room could make out the elegant details of Miss Bingley’s dress, such was the glare of her partner. I could not, even now, tell you what colour she is wearing.”

“Were you indeed mesmerised by my ensemble ?” For the sole sake of being droll, I pronounced the word in French.

Miss Elizabeth eyed me appreciatively. “Other ladies certainly were, but I was not. I was dancing with a young officer who blushed every time he spoke to me. Perhaps he is the reason I did not pay proper attention to Miss Bingley.”

“You are rather desperate if you must gloat over disconcerting a mere youth.”

“Do you suggest that if I were to disconcert you, Mr Darcy, I would have cause to gloat?”

I chose to ignore that question. “If you would like to gloat this evening, which I believe you came here to do, I will tell you that my coach is travelling north as we speak. ”

The steps of the dance parted us more than I would have liked throughout this conversation.

It was a frustrating fact that an exchange that might take three minutes in any other setting requires three times as long when dancing.

I did not have the luxury of time to speak to the lady at length as I would have liked, and when we came together again and waited to go down the line, I said, “I am feeling slightly guilty.”

Miss Elizabeth smiled so tenderly at me as to momentarily make me forget where I

was. "I confess, I too have suffered a twinge of conscience in the matter."

I lowered my voice to be assured we would not be overheard. "A merciful confession. It allows me to point out that the scoundrel in question is of the very same ilk as the rake who made mischief with your sister. Wickham deserves to suffer the consequences of his iniquity."

"I know you are right. I only wonder whether my plan was in error. Perhaps he should have been dealt with honourably. Should a dishonourable deed be met with another dishonourable deed?"

The woman was impossible! Should I send an express up the road to abort my plan? I wondered. We stood face-to-face, ready to pass down the line, and it was then that I caught sight of a peculiar light in her eyes.

"You are tormenting me for your private amusement," I growled .

"Your punctiliousness demanded I tease you a little," she said with specious innocence.

"She-devil," I whispered when we came together, and though what I said was not meant to endear me to my partner, I could not escape the feeling I had uttered seductively into the ear of a lover. Her blush confirmed it, and it was then my turn to gloat.

I danced next with Mary Bennet, then took Miss Lucas out onto the floor, and partnered her younger sister for the supper set.

After we dined, I sat out the rest of the evening with Mr Bennet and even took him to view the pitiful contents of the house's library.

I thought that by not dancing a second time with any lady, I was being crafty and deflecting speculation regarding my preferences for any one of them.

Unfortunately, sitting for the last half of the evening with the father of three of my partners rendered me twice as interesting as I would have been had I simply indulged myself and danced again with the ladies in question.

I was blissfully unaware of the stupidity of my plan until the morning after the ball.

Bingley came down to breakfast, looking sleepy and slightly puffy around the eyes.

He was in a complacent, satisfied mood, having received such heaps of praise for his ball as to set him up in perpetuity as a star in the firmament of the local society.

We talked in the desultory fashion of men who have slept too little and imbibed too much. The ball, the neighbourhood, the militia, and Colonel Forster were canvassed.

And then he said, "I say, Darcy. You were the talk of the night."

"Me? How so?"

"There is no call to be sly. I am your friend. By rights I should be the first to be told."

"I am not being sly. You must speak plainly, I am afraid, for I do not understand you at all."

"Why, the neighbourhood is in full expectation you will make an announcement. They half expected you to do so last night, and more than one person pulled me aside to press me for intelligence on the matter."

A tendril of dread crawled up my spine. "What sort of announcement is the



neighbourhood expecting, Bingley?"

"That you will offer for Miss Bennet, you dolt. It is no secret hereabouts you are at Longbourn every day, and you went even before they were formally receiving visitors."

I sat back in my chair with a thud. "Mr Bennet is my friend, Bingley." As I spoke, I heard the gravity, dismay, and even the regret in my voice.

"If you say so," he said, striving not to snicker. And then, in a more commiserating tone, he said, "Cheer up, Darcy. You look positively downcast. I have heard that the parson's mousetrap is only temporarily painful. You shall adjust to captivity in no time at all."

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

My day of reckoning had come. I had been too careless in my attentions, and as my heart pounded in dread, I marvelled at how fate had announced itself—a thunderclap of doom that was both foreordained and entirely unexpected.

Why was it that retrospection is so damnably clear? I should have seen this coming.

I tasted ashes in my mouth and felt the colour drain from my face. “Excuse me, Bingley,” I said, putting my napkin down and pushing away from the breakfast table. “I have some business to attend to.”

I saddled my own horse out of the need to be alone, and in a sober state, I rode to Longbourn.

Miss Bennet welcomed me with an open smile. She sat with Miss Mary, but Miss Elizabeth was not in the room. After the ritual of greetings, I excused myself and went to Mr Bennet’s library.

“I am afraid I have done your family harm, sir,” I said almost immediately.

“Oh? How so?” he asked in surprise. “Will you not sit? Shut the door, and tell me what is amiss.”

“I have raised the expectations of the neighbourhood that I will offer for your eldest daughter.”

Mr Bennet looked placidly at me. Some spark of his erstwhile cynicism shone out in that look, and he said, “I have never cared one whit for the opinion of my neighbours. You need not do anything honourable if you are on the verge of doing so.”

“But—”

“I would not grant my consent in any case.” As I stared at him in disbelief, he shrugged. “My daughter holds you in esteem, but she does not love you, sir. And—correct me if I am mistaken—I do not detect in you anything warmer than respect for her.”

“I admire Miss Bennet greatly.”

“A tepid reason to marry if I may say so. In my youth, I would have considered that sufficient, but I have come to regard the married state as a challenge that requires a great deal more substantive cause to justify entering it. My answer is simply no.”

“Perhaps I did not make myself clear, Mr Bennet. The matter is already a subject of gossip?— ”

He waved his hand, dismissing my explanation before I had even finished stating it.

“You must submit yourself to the humiliation of being considered a scrub, Mr Darcy. The phenomenon should last somewhere around forty days, and then it shall be forgotten. In the meantime, I hope you continue to visit us, secure in the knowledge you will leave here without a wife. My daughter will not be injured, and in the wake of your so-called desertion when you do leave here, we shall enjoy a better-behaved dog.”

“I have not been entirely successful with him, sir,” I said to no purpose, perhaps because I was stunned into stupidity by both my situation and Mr Bennet’s response

to it.

“You are young yet. You will one day realise that you will never be entirely successful in anything you do. But you need not take my word for it, for I am speaking from the lowly position of having made many mistakes.”

“But what of Miss Bennet?” I asked, unwilling to accept his judgment. “Are you certain I will not injure her? At the very least, I will have damaged my own reputation, not to mention hers.”

“You will both survive,” he concluded drily. Clearly, his mind was made up.

“Should I not at least speak to her? Apologise...or prepare her for the hints and teasing she will likely suffer?”

“By all means speak to her. If anyone can put you at ease, my Jane can.”

Of course, Jane Bennet did exactly that. Miss Mary went ahead of us with Bandit, and we fell behind, since I had begun to walk slowly—the universal sign between perambulators that something private must be said.

“I am afraid I have set the neighbourhood to talking of you,” I said.

“Oh?”

“There is a general expectation?—”

“Oh, that. I do not know why it is, Mr Darcy, but my marital expectations are always a subject of interest when any man bespeaks a set with me. Do not regard it, I beg you, for I certainly do not.”

“I would not injure you for the world.”

“And you have not! You are my father’s friend, and we rejoice to see him recover some of his former—well, I do not know how to classify his style.”

“If you mean his mind is sharp, and his manner of address is perhaps too piquant to be comfortable, then perhaps I know what you mean. He showed me a little of that this morning.”

“Did he? But how wonderful!”

We began to walk at a normal pace to relieve Miss Mary of Bandit’s lead. The dog had the attention span of a fly and required too much concentration to be a comfortable walking companion.

But before we reached her sister, I asked, “Is there aught I could do to relieve you of any discomfort my friendship might have caused you?”

One thing I admired about the ladies of Longbourn was that they were never coy and freely spoke of what they wanted.

Miss Bennet quickly confided that she thought her father could use a holiday, particularly as it was at this time last year that her mother died.

She did not say so, but I inferred he found the place too full of memories of his wife, and he was fairly haunted by his recollections.

She applied to me for an idea as to how he could be induced to leave home, even for a few days, and I produced one on the spot.

We went back to the house, and I lingered for some time, though Miss Elizabeth

never did appear. She had gone walking, I discovered, after resorting to a blunt inquiry of Mrs Hill. And though I scanned the road and adjacent paths as my horse cantered back to Netherfield Park, I did not see her.

The following morning, I was eager to return to Longbourn and did so on the flimsy excuse that I would rather ride for exercise than shoot on the very last day of the sanctioned ptarmigan hunt.

I was gratified to find the entire family in the parlour without visitors for once and particularly satisfied to look at Miss Elizabeth's face and form.

There was something so nearly transcendental about her.

She glowed as though from an ethereal source and never quite seemed made of clay to me, particularly when surrounded by those of us who clearly were.

Even Miss Bennet was a mere earthenware angel in comparison.

Perhaps it was the quality of fire, or of light, or of some combination of the two elements she expressed even while doing something as mundane as writing a letter. Miss Elizabeth was both hot and brilliant, and not for the first time did I think of her as a bolt of lightning.

I strove mightily to catch her eye, but she was not amenable to my game. I ploughed ahead regardless, for I had a plan, and with it, a full expectation that as I unravelled it before the Bennet family, she would be forced to look at me at least in wonder, if not gratitude.

"I must return to London for a small errand," I said.

The statement was perfectly true. Hoby had accelerated the construction of my new

boots and required a final fitting before he began to stitch them together.

“I wonder, sir, whether you would like to join me?” I spoke to Mr Bennet, of course, but caught the attention of his daughters.

Three pairs of eyes flew to the gentleman to search out his reaction. Miss Elizabeth sat at a little escritoire in the corner of the room, and though she instantly turned back to her letter and continued to pretend to be fascinated with what she was writing, I saw her brow twitch upward as I spoke.

I did not wait for him to answer and began to embellish my invitation.

“I shall return in two or three days, and I thought perhaps you might like to browse my library much as I have browsed yours? My business will not take me any time at all, and should you care to go with me, we can scour the bookshops for rarities and new printings.”

Hoping for a reaction from Miss Elizabeth, I began to ramble on expansively and with the intention to demonstrate my open-mindedness to the principal sceptic in the room.

“I understand your brother-in-law lives in London,” I said with satisfaction.

“If he is a reading man, perhaps he would join us.”

This did earn me a look, but it was of scorching incredulity and immediately retracted. The lady went back to scratching, now furiously, with her quill.

“Mr Gardiner is no stranger to a bookshop, but he is a man who prefers lectures,” Mr Bennet said.

“Then we should see whether there is anything interesting on offer. I am always agreeable to listening to a learned man in a lecture hall.”

Miss Elizabeth’s chair scraped the floor as she stood and left the room abruptly, leaving me momentarily confused. Was she angry? I could not come to any conclusions, however, because the matter was still being actively discussed and required my attention.

“But shall you go, Papa?” Miss Bennet asked, glancing once at me, before turning her full attention to her father. “You would enjoy a visit to London, would you not?”

“I should not leave you, Jane.”

“But we are perfectly comfortable here, and we would not begrudge you a reprieve from watching over us. Should it make you easier, we might ask Uncle Philips to stay with us while you are gone.”

Mr Bennet turned to me. “I admit your scheme is tempting. When do you plan to leave?”

We spoke for a few minutes more, and between Miss Bennet’s gentle urgings and my casually dropped inducements, such as a passing mention of Ptolemy’s *Geographia Cosmographia* which awaited him in my library, he agreed to go.

It was a strange victory. Certainly, I looked forward to Mr Bennet’s company.

And I experienced a natural sense of gratification when I perceived the relief and happiness on the faces of Miss Mary and Miss Bennet.

My success was duly rewarded with warm regard on that front, but the absence of what I really wanted, which was to dazzle and perhaps solicit an equally admiring



look from Miss Elizabeth, left me flat.

I could hardly wander about the house, corner her in some room or other, and demand to know why she was not flattered on her father's behalf by my invitation.

At the height of my discomposure, its source and origin came back in the room and sat opposite me. The air about her was brisk as she looked over at her father.

"Well, Papa? Are you going to London for a little town bronze?"

"I believe I am, Lizzy. Is there aught I can bring you?"

"Perhaps just a diamond tiara for our next assembly," she said lightly.

"I had in mind something of an improving nature, such as a book on humility."

"That would be a complete waste of your means, sir. But you could bring Jane something from the drapers and not go amiss. And Mary is in need of a new pelisse. Aunt Gardiner could be applied to for assistance should you agree to ferry a parcel or two home when you return from your exploits."

This exchange continued for a few moments and eventually the conversation shifted. Ultimately, we fell into a space in which no one felt compelled to speak solely for the sake of making noise.

I scoured Miss Elizabeth's face, allowing my confusion to show.

She raised her chin, and then with great deliberation, her eyes followed, and she looked at me with an expression of such weariness, of such blasé disbelief, that her feelings were plain to see.

She was disgusted. Nay, perhaps not disgusted—she was disappointed in me!

My eyes widened into an irate question. Had I been speaking aloud, I would have demanded, “What have I done now?”

She shrugged and went back to her sewing.

I opened a periodical and stared at the print while thinking, righteously, of what I had said and how I said it. How dare she be disappointed!

I had conquered my prejudicial feelings against consorting with a member the tradesmen class and should be congratulated. I refrained from sniffing, which I abhor as an expression of injury, and instead rattled my periodical as I turned the page.

No more than two minutes later, I began to suffer that sinking, oppressive sensation that comes with having been a gross idiot.

The invitation to her father was not what irritated Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

It was the smacking dose of condescension applied to her relation in trade that she did not like.

Had I indeed spoken as though I were willing to pat the unfortunate man on the head as I offered up the rare treat of my company?

Singed again, and acutely aware of having flown too close to the sun, I limped back to Netherfield.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Having seen first-hand that intent was powerfully communicated and impossible to disguise, even under cover of elegant manners, I could not erase the realisation from my awareness. What better example did I have than my hostess?

When I announced my plans to leave briefly for London, Miss Bingley professed herself to be crestfallen while wishing me to the devil.

She had good reason for her feelings, for she also perceived my intent from the very beginning, which was to harass and snub her, all while attending to her with an air of benign innocence.

Whether she was conscious of this or not did not matter.

She felt it, as had Elizabeth Bennet that same morning, though the latter was acutely aware of and could articulate what had displeased her so very much.

Well, I would not give the lady the satisfaction of condemning me twice for the same sin.

I would adjust my intention before I spoke and made sure I was clearly on the right side of things.

Certainly, I now intended to meet Mr Gardiner with a proper degree of respect, and having admonished myself sufficiently, I moved on much as a man does when he loses a substantial wager at cards.

I folded, paid up my note of hand, per se, and in a state of well-earned sobriety, I went to the stable.

John Reese was returned from Scotland, and he met me with an air of mischief satisfied. I spoke of my intention to travel to London and when I would need him to be ready, and we walked towards the paddock for a private conference.

My coachman gave me a full account of his errand.

He was pleased with his success and said as much, claiming if there was ever a rascal in need of a lesson, it was George Wickham.

He did not know of Wickham's villainy with regard to my sister, though he probably suspected it, having been with me at Ramsgate.

But he had ample reason to relish our deed, for as the son of my father's steward, Wickham had made himself infamous with the servants of Pemberley.

While the matter was fresh on my mind, I went to Bingley's library to write a letter to my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam.

There was not a soul alive who hated Wickham more.

By divine timing, while I was still paring my quill, the post arrived with a parcel from my butler in London containing the society notices from three different newspapers as requested. I took up my pen.

Dear Richard,

I enclose three clippings which may be of interest to you.

You may be surprised to read that our friend has married.

As I understand it, he was lately an officer in the militia but left his post unexpectedly, having fallen in love with the daughter of a blacksmith from Luton and flown to Gretna Green.

The lady's father, apparently in company with his two grown sons, felt compelled to pursue the couple to assure they were in fact married and even went so far as to pay for notices to be printed in the gazettes to satisfy themselves of the legality of the matter.

An unusual step for that class of person, but I suppose since his daughter was marrying an educated, gentlemanly fellow, he was making a show of her conquest. I could write more, but your time is valuable, and I should wait until I see you next to tell all.

I trust you are staying out of harm's way, and I wish you Godspeed and an early leave.

Darc y

This tantalising morsel of information would cause my cousin to burn with curiosity, and I chuckled for the first time since the day after the Netherfield Ball. I sent the note express to his regimental headquarters on the hope it would be taken across the Channel in the next packet.

The journey from Meryton to London was not long when a man has the luxury of his own coach, prime horses, and competent people.

I took up Mr Bennet at ten o'clock in the morning, and when he asked whether we could stop at Lucas Lodge to say a brief farewell to Sir William, I was happy to

comply.

Mr Bennet was surprisingly garrulous for such a retiring, sad old gentleman, and even offered to bring Sir William anything he wished from London.

Sir William, equally garrulous, wished for nothing, and we were away before Reese had to walk the horses.

Only when we were a mile up the road, and after seeing a peculiar look about my companion's face which reminded me of his second daughter, did I perceive that I had been the brunt of a joke.

I hardened my jaw. "I suppose our going to London together will only add fuel to the speculation."

"Did you just now think of it?" He chuckled. "I had thought you more perceptive, Darcy. "

"I am pleased to have amused you, sir," I said stiffly.

"Come now. Even you must admit that there is pleasure to be had in confounding our friends and neighbours?"

"I do not enjoy being classed as a rake and a libertine who leaves a trail of broken hearts behind him."

He smiled at me enigmatically and said, "I doubt that will happen. Meryton society is curious and prone to chirping, but like birds, their memories are short. It is not as though you have left one of my daughters at the altar, after all. The fact of the matter is they have misrepresented your friendship with my family. The fault is their own if they come to the wrong conclusions because you have, in fact, raised no expectations

in us.”

“Well,” I conceded irritably, “were I not personally involved, I might find the situation mildly diverting.”

“I knew it. I knew you could not be so punctilious in your heart as you appear to the world.”

I could hardly continue to sulk when faced with Mr Bennet’s triumphant grin. And so I said, almost in a tone of resignation, “Lately I have begun to think I am downright wicked.”

“Oh?”

I told him of my surreptitious arrival at Netherfield, of Miss Bingley’s marital aspirations for me, of the conspiracy of the servants and my complicity, of my dance partners at the local assembly, and of the tea, the capon, and the Mozart.

Mr Bennet was momentarily amused and even laughed aloud. And then, likely thinking of his own case, he said in a more serious tone, “Those are mild pranks, but perhaps the lady has suffered enough?”

“My sentiments exactly, sir,” I said, and we lapsed into silence.

My London house was always a source of pride to me.

Impeccably furnished and the best example of understated elegance, it had the added intangible of being a peaceful, well-ordered establishment.

Not out of fear of me but out of respect for the house itself, my servants would never engage in the chicanery I had witnessed at Netherfield Park.

These impressions flashed through my head as the carriage pulled to a stop, but I managed to stifle the impulse to show Mr Bennet into the hall as though he were being welcomed into a rarified palace.

The thought of Miss Elizabeth's reaction to the merest flourish of pride on my part was sufficient to dampen my enthusiasm, and the gentleman once again reminded me of his dark-haired daughter in that he expressed no awe or admiration.

One house was much like any other to Mr Bennet, or so it seemed, and when he said he would like a short rest, I asked Carsten to show him to his rooms and to unpack his things.

Not being an elderly man, I had no excuse to retire, though I longed to do so.

I had gone to Hertfordshire in a state of ennui, and I returned to London with something of the same affliction.

The urge to wallow in the weariness of my heart in a darkened room, perhaps with a glass or two of brandy, was strong but not yet insurmountable.

I knew the source of my oppression, and yet I refused to name it, as though in doing so, I would somehow seal a fate I did not yet want to face. Instead of thinking any more about it, I did what every man does who wishes to avoid something—I sought distractions.

Thankfully, I had the means to forestall introspection. My private secretary had a parcel of letters for me to read, a stack of invitations to be politely refused, and a few summaries of matters of interest for my edification.

The war slogged on and looked, from the current vantage point, to be interminable.



The Prince Regent was at odds with the Prime Minister, and the Admiralty was once again in turmoil over the distribution of prize monies.

I heard nothing I did not know, but the habit of receiving information from multiple sources was one I learnt the hard way, having once invested and lost three thousand pounds on the basis of something I read in *The Times*.

I listened in perfunctory fashion, dictated a few replies to my man of business and Pemberley's steward, and then went to find my sister.

Georgiana was shy of me, as always. But I had come away from Hertfordshire in humbler boots and possessed of a wider perspective.

I had unwittingly run shy of her too. I had become grave in response to her dismay in my presence, and between the two of us, we made for a miserable, downcast pair.

Thinking to break the pattern, I went to her and warmly kissed her cheek.

"How are you faring, Georgie? You look well."

I greeted her companion, Mrs Annesley, told them of my guest, Mr Bennet, and drank a cup of tea. As my sister poured under Mrs Annesley's watchful eye, I felt a rush of compassion. What a parade we have made of such a simple act.

"I did not know you do not use sugar in your tea," I remarked.

Georgiana blushed. "I stopped using it when I began to pour yours. That way, I can remember you do not like it, and I shall not make a mistake."

"I have lately had tea prepared every possible way, and I have discovered that I do not much care one way or the other. Perhaps we should have tea as you like it for a

change?”

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Her eyes reluctantly rose to my face, she blushed again, and I had no hope that my meagre suggestion would be attended to. Mrs Annesley covered our awkward pass by asking after the roads and weather. And then a miracle occurred.

“How was Miss Bennet’s dog when you left?” my sister timidly asked.

“Bandit? Oh, well, let me see. Yes, I remember. He was confined to the loose-box in the stable for having dug a shaft so deep behind the chicken house he had to be pulled out by the tail.”

“Did he?”

“Twice. And on the second occasion he managed to breach the fence but no one noticed his handiwork. In the morning they were missing three hens and a pullet.”

“Oh dear. What will happen to him?”

“Happen to him? I imagine he was admitted to the house after only an hour of punishment, petted and scolded in the same sweetness of spirit with which Miss Bennet utters every word she speaks, and he will be begging for scraps at breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Georgiana smiled, and the dimple on her cheek made a rare appearance.

“Do not tell me you, too, are in sympathy with him,” I said. “He nearly drowned me.”

This led to the recitation of my least favourite story, for no matter how I minimised

my role in Bandit's rescue, I was seen in a far too heroic light. Nevertheless, my sister was speaking to me and smiling, and her companion looked to be holding her breath, such was the rarity of her happiness.

Shortly after, Mr Bennet came down and took tea.

His presence was not nearly as disconcerting to my sister as I feared it would be, and I wondered whether it could really be as simple as making myself agreeable to her.

I blinked to realise my ineptitude. She was not so much shy of company as she was fearful of making my opinion of her worse, should she make a mistake in front of me.

I was rescued from sinking into even more self-disgust when Mr Bennet asked to see my library. There, he expressed a marked appreciation in the form of a grunt.

“You did not tell me to expect a room the size of Hatchards.”

“You would have classed me as a mere cockalorum had I done so. You know I cannot claim more than stewardship. I have added to the collection, but this is the work of generations.”

“Do be quiet, Darcy. Let me browse in peace.”

I chuckled and left him to it.

Later, we enjoyed a pleasant dinner. Mrs Annesley is a skilled conversationalist, and she kept the old gentleman talking of his daughters, of his books, and of her particular interest in the naturalists, a topic in which he was deeply conversant.

I had never seen Mr Bennet behave with more engagement or civility, since when at Longbourn, he was comfortable enough in my presence not to have to pretend to be

happier than he felt.

Still, the effort was oddly curative, and he seemed five years younger to me.

The following morning my guest accompanied me to Hoby's and, in a moment of self-indulgence, bespoke a pair of boots for himself.

We then went to Scofield's, Sheppard's, and The Lighted Lamp Book Repository, and we even went to an emporium of used goods which had a little-known table in the corner stacked high with literary cast-offs.

Most of it was worthless, but we went on the slim hope we would find something of value.

When Mr Bennet pulled out a beautifully preserved early edition of Don Quixote, we snickered like schoolboys who had stolen the matron's shoes.

Mr Bennet then further delighted me by striking a brutal bargain with the shopkeeper and sighing as though he were being imposed upon when he paid the trifling sum required.

We returned to my house where he proudly showed off his find to Mrs Annesley and my sister. The hours flew by without our notice.

"I am afraid it might be too late to pay a call on Mr Gardiner," Mr Bennet said when the gong sounded that it was time to dress for dinner.

"We can stay an additional day if you would like."

"That would be best, Darcy, if you do not mind," he said, and when he came down for dinner, I thought he looked fairly splendid under Carsten's management.

Once again, we enjoyed a comfortable dinner, and my sister even spoke once or twice.

“Does Miss Bennet ride, sir?” Georgiana asked in the whisper of a mouse.

“I do not keep riding horses for my daughters, though Jane has the occasional use of our mare. I never even let Lizzy learn.”

“No?” I asked. I knew the reason before he spoke it.

“She would have frightened the hair off my head. That child was born without fear.”

“She does not ride at all?” my sister asked in a much stronger voice. The notion clearly horrified her, for though she was timid in the parlour, she was bold as a man on the back of a horse. Not even her love of music could eclipse Georgiana’s passion for riding.

“She walks everywhere she goes which is just as well. Lizzy has too much energy to be comfortable, and if she were not spent after a long march, she would be miserable in the evenings. Our acquisition of a hound has given her even more reason for exercise.”

“I have heard of Bandit,” Georgiana said, breaking her record for words spoken at the dinner table twice over.

“Darcy can tell you all about him. My strategy is to pretend he does not exist. ”

I obliged them by relating the morning when we were confined indoors because of rain, and he caught sight of his tail while performing sit-stay-down. He spun in ever-faster circles and ended in a crash of china when he collided with the tea table.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Mr Gardiner, the Bennets' tradesman relation, was a perfectly acceptable acquaintance.

Upon meeting me, he did not display a trace of wonder.

Apparently, he was on speaking terms with any number of gentlemen of means, and I was just another such man.

Mrs Gardiner, too, was a pleasant surprise.

She grew up not five miles from Pemberley, and her manners were far more elegant for their sincerity alone than those of Miss Bingley or Mrs Hurst. I would not hesitate to bring my sister to her house should I be invited to do so.

As I sat eating tea sandwiches in the parlour of their house in Cheapside, I reflected that I had eaten more helpings of humility in those few weeks since making the acquaintance of Miss Elizabeth Bennet than had been served to me in my lifetime .

Mr Bennet, meanwhile, had discovered a lecture to be given in the open forum of the Royal Society by Mr Poole, just returned from Java, an emerging expert on tropical birds.

He regretted to Mr Gardiner that he could not stay for that, as it was in two days, and asked whether his brother-in-law would go.

“There is no reason we cannot stay a few days longer, is there, sir?” I asked.

Mr Bennet beamed his pleasure, convinced Mr Gardiner that there would not be anything more interesting to be heard, and promised we would see stuffed specimens and coloured drawings of birds we could not imagine coming from the mere Garden of Eden until we were all convinced.

“Are ladies allowed in the open meetings?” he asked me.

“I believe so, though they are not commonly in attendance.”

“I only ask because Mrs Annesley would enjoy this lecture. Natural sciences and birds in general are of interest to her.”

“Should she agree to go, I may go with her so she does not feel ill at ease,” Mrs Gardiner said.

Predictably, when this plan was later presented to Mrs Annesley, she was aglow with excitement when she learnt of the lecture, and the plan to attend was set into motion .

Seeing as though my guest was only too happy to avoid returning to Longbourn just yet, I suggested we stay in London until the following Monday.

“That would be best, Darcy,” he said agreeably. “I have not yet gone to the shops for my daughters. Mrs Annesley and Miss Darcy have committed to go with me and to help with suggestions as to what to buy.”

“Have they? When do you go?”

“In half an hour,” he said.



How this schedule could justify staying until the following week we left unsaid, and having nothing else to do, I soon found myself tacked on the back of their expedition. Thankfully, I was not superfluous to the job at hand.

“What colouring is your daughter Mary?” Mrs Annesley asked as she looked over the selection in the window of a draper’s shop.

“Ordinary,” Mr Bennet said with a shrug.

“She has light brown hair and brown eyes,” I hastily interjected.

“Would she look better in ivory or white?”

“Ivory,” I said with confidence. Unbelievably, I was then forced to describe the girl’s height and general construction, since her father could not conjure a single word on the subject. Mrs Annesley thought she saw just the thing and took Mr Bennet inside the shop. I waited outside with Georgiana .

“Do all the Miss Bennets look alike?” my sister asked in a rare opener.

“Oddly enough, they are all different. Miss Jane Bennet, the eldest, is tall and blonde. Miss Elizabeth is the shortest in stature and dark-haired.”

“Are they pretty?”

Gracious! Was this an inquisition? “I suppose they could be called pretty.”

“Are they accomplished?”

I turned away from the street, which I had been watching to pass the time, and looked down at my sister. “To what end are these questions, sprite?”

“I am only curious.”

“Miss Bennet is mistress of a household, which means she has many accomplishments of that nature. Miss Elizabeth has read almost every book in Mr Bennet’s library, and Miss Mary is diligent at practicing her pianoforte, though she could use a master.

” There was so much left unsaid in this reply that I felt the need to fidget with my watch chain.

“If I ever have the opportunity, I would like to meet them,” Georgiana said.

I was spared the task of conjuring a reply when Mr Bennet came out of the shop with a box and three bundles wrapped in brown paper.

We went next to a sweetshop and the adjacent tea shop, where Mr Bennet bought delicacies and imported teas for his daughters. He then declared himself bankrupt and exhausted, and we went back to my townhouse.

The lecture, which fell on the following evening, was interesting, I admit.

Mr Bennet and Mrs Annesley paid profound attention to the lecturer.

Meanwhile, Mr Gardiner, his wife, and I were less fascinated by the birds than by the various characters who flock to a meeting of the Royal Society.

We finished the evening with glasses of wine at Mr Gardiner’s house and stayed in convivial conversation far longer than I would have suspected possible.

Having discovered my guest was perfectly capable of making plans for all of us, I was not required to think of what we would do the following day. This was just as

well, because whatever I would have decided would have been interrupted.

To my surprise, a friend arrived to visit me. “Bingley?” I called out when he came into my study after breakfast.

“I would wager you did not expect to see me today,” he said happily. “I too had some business requiring that I come to town. I wonder if you would have time to look it over? That is unless I interrupt?—”

“I have no plans at all. Give me a moment to tell my sister you are here. ”

After the ritual of greeting Bingley, Mr Bennet took my sister and her companion to see the Elgin marbles, and I gratefully declined to see them for the tenth time, citing business.

Bingley laid before me a mundane proposal with little likelihood of return. “I have doubts about this fellow,” I said carefully. “Perhaps we should visit my man of business for his opinion?”

This was the gentlest approach I had at my disposal.

Drummond was able to tell a man he was an idiot and make him feel clever all at once.

The meeting took longer than I would have liked because we had no fixed appointment and had to wait our turn.

But the outcome was satisfying, as the money that was burning a hole in Bingley’s pocket got put to better, more secure use, and my friend’s pride remained intact.

Bingley invited me for dinner at his club, so I sent a note home for my sister and

obliged him.

I had, after all, not been the best companion to him in Hertfordshire.

Though he was curious as to my purpose in London with Miss Bennet's father, I had no inclination to discuss the matter.

Instead, we talked of other subjects and of Netherfield Park, which he informed me he liked a great deal but had not yet decided upon for a long-term commitment.

After dining, we spent several hours at the card table. Since we had taken my coach, I then took Bingley to his house in town, and at his urging, went inside for a glass of brandy.

No sooner had the butler opened the door than a figure appeared on the landing above us.

"Caroline? What are you doing in London?"

"I could not bear it another minute, Charles. Really, that place was beyond endurance! I do not care where you send me. I closed the house and?—"

"You closed the house? You cannot have done so! Our guest was set to return to us on Monday."

"Well, I am very sorry if I have offended Mr Darcy," she said, as though I were not standing beside her brother, "but he is capable of changing his plans."

"Where is Hurst? And Louisa?"

"They brought me here, of course, and then Hurst took Louisa to visit his brother.

Why they cannot be content to live in a house of their own is?—”

“We shall speak of this later. I say, Darcy?—”

“I am not incommoded in the least. I suppose my trunks are waiting for me to send someone for them, Miss Bingley?”

“I suppose they are,” she said, turning on her heel and going back up the stairs.

“I believe I must stay with—I am very sorry,” Bingley said to me. He was as close to angry as I have ever seen him.

“Do not regard it in the least. When I take Mr Bennet home, I shall stay the night at Longbourn. There is nothing easier.”

I spent five minutes assuring him I had not taken offence, that he really must stay in London and see to his family, and I left without having imbibed any brandy, which was just as well.

I had a great deal of thinking to do, and I may have even indulged in it unwillingly had I sat late into the night nursing a bottle of strong spirits.

One thing that I could not put off thinking about, was the arrival of Christmas, which was bearing down on us.

I would have to take Georgiana to Pemberley.

We never spent the festive season anywhere else, and our people would think it unlucky for us to break with tradition.

In fact, I was usually home by now and had put it off far longer than I should have.

My sister might have wanted to inquire why we lingered, but she was still too in awe of me to do so.

“I must take my sister to Pemberley,” I told Mr Bennet that evening after I explained that I would have to beg for room and board on Monday night.

“Do you plan to bring her and go north from Hertfordshire?”

“Only if our visit would not be an imposition.”

He insisted it would not, but then he said, “Describe to me your library at Pemberley. Is this,” he waved his hand around the room in which we sat, “as your sister tells me, a miniature in replica? ”

I then understood he had no wish to spend the season at Longbourn, and why would he? His wife had died shortly before the holiday only a year prior. “You would be very welcome to decide that for yourself, sir.”

“Am I so easily read?”

Politeness required I ignore that question. “If you must have it, sir, my library in Derbyshire is the ninth or tenth wonder of the world—well, perhaps it is the eleventh. In any case, you should see it. I insist.”

“I hope Jane will not be too disappointed if I do not spend Christmas at home. I shall make it up to her, however. I may impose upon Mrs Annesley and Miss Darcy again in the morning to take me to the shops to buy a few more presents for my daughters.”

The following morning, I tapped on my sister’s door and went in. Georgiana was propped up in bed with her cup of chocolate, forcibly reminding me of my mother who spent every morning in that same way.

“If you are in earnest about meeting Mr Bennet’s daughters, I believe you may have the opportunity, Georgie.”

She looked up at me in surprise, and I told her of our plan.

She seemed more startled than frightened and agreed to be ready to remove to the country on Monday.

I then sought out my butler and my housekeeper and made all the necessary plans.

I asked Carsten to visit Hoby and pay him whatever ransom was required to have my boots ready to go before I left London, and sent my private secretary to a rare book dealer to scout out something, preferably with engravings, that I did not already own, and have it sent to Pemberley.

If Mr Bennet was to be my guest at Christmas, I meant to be prepared with a gift for him.

Finally, I wrote to Mrs Reynolds, my housekeeper in Derbyshire, and bespoke the best selection from my hothouse be delivered in quantity to the Miss Bennets of Longbourn, Hertfordshire, as close to Christmas Day as could reasonably be arranged.

I asked my butler to have a hideously expensive case of port to be delivered to my cousin in Belgium, where his brigade was temporarily stationed, and then I went to the family vault at my principal bank.

Georgiana was now old enough to begin receiving jewellery, of which I had more than I could ever want to own. I selected a delicate headband with a few diamond clusters. She would care very little for such a trinket once she discovered the yearling mare newly arrived at Pemberley’s stables.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

We went to Hertfordshire, the four of us snugly fitted in the coach.

Mr Bennet entertained us with a wry tale of having met his heir for the first time not six months ago.

The man must have been a caricature of the old gentleman's imagination, since no one could possibly be so strange a combination of stupidity, false humility, and self-importance.

"Did you visit him?" I asked, recalling Miss Elizabeth's claim they had never met the man. Did she even know her father had made his heir's acquaintance?

"Having lately learnt of my wife's fate, he came to Longbourn unexpectedly while my daughters were visiting Mrs Gardiner," he explained.

I wondered whether this was when his youngest girls had been taken to school, since Mr Bennet looked momentarily grieved.

But he roused himself from his reflections and said, "He had the effrontery to appear at my doorstep to announce he came to pick a wife from among my girls."

"He could not have!" Mrs Annesley cried with amusement in her voice. "You have said that only to make us laugh."

"I am in earnest, madam. He did indeed offer to marry a daughter to lessen the sting



of the entail.”

I reluctantly thought such an arrangement might have been for the best. “He did not succeed with the ladies?” I asked.

“He was never given the chance. I would rather see my daughters at the mercy of the parish than forced to live with such a fool.” Mr Bennet chuckled at the expressions of horror on the faces of the ladies sitting across from him.

“You do not believe me, but I am sincere. He was a stupid brute of a man, dressed as a parson, who bowed and scraped at anyone who even smelled of quality. I offered to have him horse-whipped off my estate if that would make leaving easier for him, but he left voluntarily, presumably to Kent.”

“No. Surely not!” I said, whipping my head around to stare at Mr Bennet. “Mr Collins is your cousin?”

“You have met him, have you? But this is wonderful! You can certify my account of him as fair, for even now, Mrs Annesley is looking at me with disbelief. ”

I shook my head in dismay. “He is in possession of the living held by my aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh.”

Mr Bennet again laughed aloud. “My cousin’s esteemed patroness is your relation, is she?”

I could not express any of my damning opinions of her. Instead I said, “You are right. He would never have done for your daughters, sir.”

My sister asked how Lady Catherine could have selected such a man for a living, and I replied, “You have only to think of our aunt to know that she would prefer someone

she can dominate. To see them together is exquisitely painful, though I believe Mr Bennet would find such a farce the most entertaining thing he had witnessed in his life.”

My sister shuddered, Mr Bennet smiled to imagine it, and very soon we were at Longbourn.

I am loath to admit how fiercely my heart pounded upon my return to a place that was ever-present in my mind.

To cover my discomposure, I made a show of being glad to see Bandit and even unbent enough to ruffle his ears.

He answered with ear-piercing barks of joy, slobbered on my sister’s gloves, trampled Mrs Annesley’s shoes, and seeing the boy approach from the stables with a lead, he then made a game of running wildly down the drive, through a field, and into the spinney while being chased by half the household.

“Oh Bandit,” Miss Bennet sighed complacently. Miss Elizabeth went forward to my sister, took her and her companion into the house, and the rest followed. I spoke to Reese about the horses, begged my groom to aid in bringing the dog back home, and then I, too, went inside.

What I saw at the door to the parlour arrested me. There, sitting on a sofa between Miss Bennet and Miss Mary, with Miss Elizabeth on a chair close by, was Georgiana, beaming her joy.

I came quietly into the room and exchanged a look with Mrs Annesley. And though I was sure that lady would rather sit by the fire or be shown her room, she had the good grace to allow Mr Bennet to take her to his book-room to see the published journal of the notable naturalist, Sir Joseph Banks.

I turned back to the cluster of ladies on the sofa.

“But we are behaving very badly to harry you with our attentions,” Elizabeth said as she stood and offered her hand to my sister. “May I take you to your room? Your maid has been here this past hour, and I am sure she has put things just as you like them.”

Mary followed them up the stairs, leaving only Miss Bennet in the room .

“I hardly know my father, sir,” she said. “Is he indeed in such good spirits or is he making a show for us?”

“What you see is what he has shown to me since we left Hertfordshire, which is a rising interest in the world and an animation in his conversation. You were right that he only needed a change in scenery, but I am sorry to take him away from your family at the festive season. Would you not come with us? We could delay a day or two?—”

“You are kind to offer it, sir, but you see, my sisters are expected from Bath. It is all for the best. I did not know how Papa would manage seeing them again, and in fact, I have so dreaded Christmas I had delayed sending for them until it could be put off no longer.”

“When do you expect them?”

“Tomorrow. You must think me an ogre not to send for them the moment I could freely do so, but I kept them as parlour boarders for the past two weeks out of cowardice, I suppose.” She paused and looked downcast before adding, “I should perhaps explain that my father is forcibly reminded of my mother when he sees my younger sisters, but Lydia in particular casts him into gloom, for she favours our mother in both looks and manners. I feared he would sink back into the low spirits

from which he has so lately begun to heal. ”

After a slight pause in which Miss Bennet mastered her ruffled feelings, I spoke lightly and with a smile in my voice.

“You must write to me if there is anything you need. You may do so without fear of further raising the expectations of our acquaintances, and I daresay my reputation would survive even if you did.”

She looked up in surprise and smiled warmly. I was then able to ask her what I wished to know, what my gentle jest had alluded to.

“Has it been difficult for you?”

“Not in the least. I pretend not to understand the broadest hints and refuse to be baited into any conversation in which your name is featured. And now that my father is going to Pemberley for Christmas, I suspect my neighbours might be confounded and begin to wonder whether perhaps the case is just as I have told them—you are my father’s friend. ”

“I am that, and as such, you must rely on me. Promise that you will not hesitate to apply to me should something arise that would make your father miserable to confront.”

She reached out her hand to me, and I took it. “I promise, Mr Darcy.”

Elizabeth joined us on the very heels of that private conversation, assuring Miss Bennet that Georgiana was comfortably situated and that Mary had finally rescued Mrs Annesley from her father’s library and taken that lady upstairs.

Mr Bennet, having no one to talk to about Sir Joseph, appeared at the parlour door,

announced his intention to pack his things, and offered to show me my room.

When we reached the hall, he said, “I have no idea where we have put you. That is Jane’s room, Elizabeth is there, and Mary is here.

I am certain Mrs Annesley is in here,” he said, since the door was ajar and she could be seen speaking to his middle daughter.

He then knocked on a door and said, “This is either Miss Darcy’s room or your own.”

Carsten opened the door to a bedchamber the size of my dressing room at home.

The accommodations were as simple as a good inn, sparse but spotlessly clean.

I was relieved not to find myself in the room of one of the younger sisters, fitted out with dolls on the dressing table, and a clothespress stuffed with bric-a-brac.

My valet did not look quite convinced, and so I said, “This reminds me of my old room at Pemberley. I was very comfortable there.”

Dinner at Longbourn was equally simple to the guest rooms. Yet, I found myself utterly charmed by the lack of apology with which it was served.

If there was ever a mark of quality, it would be the complete acceptance of one’s place in the world, neither slighted nor lacking, not embarrassed or even proud.

The inelegance of country fare was completely compensated by the familiarity of the diners, and I watched with complacency as Mr Bennet embellished his exploits in the shops and exhibitions of London with occasionally dry and mischievous remarks.

The Miss Bennets were enthralled by the resurgence of these remnants of the father they once knew, and they did not fuss or fret over my sister.

Georgiana was quiet to be sure, but she was not the centre of attention for once, and before my eyes, I watched her relax.

I saw then how the constant pressure of solicitous concern, even on the part of people who care deeply, might be oppressive to someone so shy.

What my sister wanted was a little neglect, to be ignored for once, and to be given the privacy of anonymity.

Miss Elizabeth must have recognised this, for she directed the conversation towards her father or to Mrs Annesley and studiously avoided applying to Georgiana for remarks.

I wished to catch the lady's eye, to somehow thank her with a grateful look.

But, alas, she was studiously avoiding me as well.

All that was left for me to do was to aid her in her quest to shield my sister from the intrusion of being noticed, and so I entered into the conversation with a determination to be interesting.

I hoped, by speaking widely, including Miss Mary, and even striving to entertain for once, to earn an exchange with the liveliest mind at the table.

But she refused to be baited. To my chagrin, the only time I managed to capture Miss Elizabeth's attention was when Mr Bennet casually mentioned our time spent with Mr and Mrs Gardiner after the lecture at the Royal Society.

Only then did those wildly intelligent eyes fly to my face, intent, I suppose, on discovering a particle of condescension for which she could condemn me.

“Indeed,” I said pointedly to her elder sister, and speaking with the most objectively sincere intonation I could conjure, “I enjoyed making the acquaintance of your aunt and uncle. Do you visit them often?” I then threw my auditor a look of challenge, for I had conquered my sanctimony in regard to her shabby connexions, and I dared her to find fault in my reference to them.

She instantly looked at her plate, and then at her sister Mary, the candelabra, the napkin on her lap—she was desperate, in fact, to look anywhere other than at me. This was just as well since I could not disguise my triumph over a point scored.

The punishment I endured for having just once discomposed a lady who discomposed me with shocking regularity was to be relegated to the rank of a chair or even the rug. If she looked at me at all, she did so as though I were an inanimate object.

Meanwhile, my sister sat with Mary Bennet, and that unlikely pair who spoke so seldom, found something to speak about, albeit in voices so low as to exclude the rest of us.

Mr Bennet continued his campaign of charm, passed out his gifts brought from London, teased and cajoled his serene daughter as to the contents of the packages, and sternly warned his second daughter against opening anything before the twenty-fifth of the month.

He applied to Mrs Annesley to further annoy the ladies by asking whether his purchases would suit and pretending to fret about his choices.

The eldest fell for his ploy, and tenderly reassured him in advance of the perfection of whatever he bought, which left his second-eldest the job of promising to rip open the

paper on every single package and to pass unsparing judgment on his unreliable taste within five minutes of his leaving in the morning.

This sort of talk cut me out entirely. I was relegated to the corner with only Bandit for company, and even he had nothing to say to me.

Having evaded capture by his pursuers from Longbourn, he returned home hours later at a full run.

Apparently, he was chased to the kitchen door by an enraged tenant as the result of a raid of the neighbouring farm.

This episode ended in the exchange of the dog's life for an apology and six chickens from Miss Bennet's poultry yard. Bandit, oblivious to his narrow escape, slumped his head onto my knee and allowed me to stroke his ears.

"Worn to a thread, are you? You are an idiot." I spoke in a low, desultory voice, and he thumped his tail twice before sinking down into a curl at my feet in satisfied exhaustion.



### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We retired early, conscious of the long journey north and Mr Bennet's years.

When we left London, I had sent ahead of us my second coach with Carsten and the ladies' maid for my sister and her companion.

This second carriage, now in train with my own, afforded us the comfort of occasionally separating—with the men in one coach and the ladies in the other—for the sake of space and the privacy to doze.

Mr Bennet missed his reading, not being a man who could comfortably do so while in motion, and he slept a great deal.

The hours marched slowly along as they do on an expedition that is not entirely comfortable and so thoroughly monotonous.

I did not read much myself, though I could do so without sickening.

I thought of everything and of nothing, wondered vaguely what would become of Miss Bingley, whether she and her brother had managed to resolve their differences, and whether Bingley would return to Hertfordshire to settle comfortably or stay in London and continue to try to break into the haut ton.

I thought of breaking out of that confederacy of snobbery and of never again being sized up like a prize bull.

I also pondered the problem of my cousin Anne de Bourgh, who I was regularly pushed to marry by my aunt Lady Catherine and even on occasion by my uncle, Lord Matlock.

Concluding that no amount of verbal refusing could convince anyone to stop badgering me on the subject, I moved on to thinking of my cousin Richard.

I worried about his safety more than I would admit to anyone.

But more than that, I missed him as a companion and conspirator.

Having had my cousin so lately on my mind, I was shocked when, after we had been at Pemberley only two days, he came pelting up the drive in a caped greatcoat covered with mud.

I nearly knocked him down in greeting and managed to muddy myself in the process.

“What the devil?” I asked after pounding him on the back. “Is all well?”

He grasped my shoulders and shook me angrily, even as he grinned like a fool to see me. “How dare you send me such a letter! I had to lie to get leave, you idiot.”

We could speak no more. The household came out to see what was amiss, and I was forced to relinquish my cousin to the greetings of my sister and all his well-wishers at Pemberley.

He met Mr Bennet with a touch of cordial curiosity before being taken, almost by the hand, by old Mrs Reynolds who clucked and scolded him for being a “wild scamp, coming in all your mud.” At the landing, Richard flashed me a wink before disappearing up the stairs, no doubt tenderly scolded all the way to his rooms.

Dinner and several hours passed before my cousin and I were at leisure to speak in the privacy of my study.

“You had better tell me from the beginning what you did to Wickham,” he said. Richard sat back in his chair and put his feet on a footstool. At his elbow, he had a glass of wine, and on his face, a look of relief to be still for once.

“Would you not rather rest? You look very tired.”

“I am tired, but I would rather hear this sordid tale. I posted up here like an express rider just to hear it.”

“I was in Hertfordshire with Bingley. He leased an estate there, and I spent some weeks helping him understand the land. While there, the militia came.”

“Under whose command?”

“Colonel Forster.”

“Never heard of him. So, Wickham managed to get himself a lieutenancy with that bunch?”

“He did. I heard he was in Meryton but never saw him myself. I enlisted Reese to verify this lieutenant was indeed Wickham, which he did. And then we made a plan.”

“The blacksmith and blacksmith’s daughter?”

“As a coachman, Reese knows the farriers anywhere he goes, and the farriers know the blacksmiths and so on. They found a fellow in Luton with a daughter. That he had grown sons did not hurt our cause. They brought a nondescript coach from Luton and waited for Wickham to come out of a bawdy house just beyond Meryton proper that

he was known to frequent. Between the five of them, they made easy work of throwing a cloak over his head, pouring laudanum down his throat, whipping up the horses, and taking their burden north. Simple as that.”

“Huh! They did what every rake who abducts a woman does.”

“Precisely.”

“They kept him drugged the entire way?”

“Just as a seducer would drug his victim.”

“He must have had a vile headache when he woke.”

“I am told he was violently ill. But they managed to stand him up in front of the anvil and to force a marriage.”

“I wonder that Wickham agreed to sign the register.”

“You have only to recall how vain a man Wickham is to know what some small threat of disfigurement would achieve.”

“What did this escapade cost you?”

“Upwards of five hundred pounds all told.”

“Lord, so much, Darcy?”

“I made it worth everyone’s time. To me, it was a bargain to have the thorn permanently removed from my side.”

“Of a surety, he will never be able to fulfil his ambition to marry for money. You have neatly crushed that dream. The notices were a nice touch, but it is possible he might still find someone to prey upon, perhaps farther away from London than he usually prowls.”

“The notices might thwart one in twenty schemes, I grant you. Not everyone thinks of having a man’s history investigated before signing a marriage settlement. That was only a flourish meant to torment Wickham.”

“He was told his marriage would go into the notices?”

“Yes. But you see, Richard, we are only at half the story of what our old friend has endured.”

“What?”

“You did not think I would leave him loose, did you? I cannot think of anyone more dangerous than Wickham, penniless and displaced, roaming the northern counties.”

“Go on. What did you do? ”

“It just so happened that the blacksmith and his sons celebrated the wedding a little too much. They made a great show of being sprawled out, insensible and snoring, in the public room of the inn where Wickham and his new wife were housed. Predictably, Wickham tiptoed away from his new relations in search of some means of escape, and who would he encounter almost half an hour later but Reese?”

“No!”

“Yes, Reese the coachman, known to Wickham from Pemberley, was tooling down the very same street in a gig, having come to Scotland on holiday. He had a little

money in his pocket and a few days of liberty and was feeling quite magnanimous. He hailed Wickham as an old acquaintance, expressed shock at how ill he appeared, and you have only to know Wickham to believe that Reese was soon told a specious tale of woe.”

“I am utterly lost, Darcy. You sent Reese to Scotland to rescue him?”

“Bear with me. Wickham claimed villains had taken all his money and meant to do him bodily harm, and Reese, good natured man that he is, offered what help he could. He suggested his means would perhaps buy Wickham steerage on a packet to Canada to be repaid when Wickham made his fortune in America. It was perhaps the last idea Wickham would agree to, but upon hearing shouts behind him, agree to it he did. The blacksmith’s daughter, you see, did not fancy being abandoned by her new husband and sent her family to retrieve him. ”

“You are sure he did not jump ship?”

“I am sure Wickham thought he could take Reese’s money and abort the plan somewhere along the way.

But the blacksmith’s sons and a mob of willing confederates recruited from Gretna pursued Wickham all the way to Edinburgh and set up a visible presence on the docks until the tide turned. Wickham is truly gone, Richard.”

The clock ticked in the silence that followed. “It might have been more merciful to kill him.”

“Would it have been more merciful if Wickham killed my sister outright rather than seduce her into an elopement? Think of how Georgiana would have suffered. Someone wise once pointed out the sad fact that what is considered ordinary abuse of a woman is decried as unthinkable and inhumane when applied to a man.”

My cousin leaned his head back in his chair, and after a moment of reflection, he began to chuckle. “I must admit, you exacted a brilliant revenge. When did you become so almighty wicked, Darcy?”

“I believe I have always been so. Either that or some evil spirit has overtaken me of late. I may have sent Miss Caroline Bingley halfway to the madhouse.”

“What? No. ”

We talked long into the night, having been separated for some time. As we wandered up the stairs, Richard said, “I say, who is this Bennet fellow?”

I knew better than to squirm or deflect my cousin’s questions regarding my guest. I stood by with an expression of passive goodwill as he expertly quizzed Georgiana on the subject of our stay at Longbourn, her new friends, the Miss Bennets, and her understanding of why Mr Bennet was now a fixture at Pemberley.

My sister related the very same information I had given Richard, and though he still looked askance at me from time to time in an effort to ferret out what I was clearly disinclined to tell him, he temporarily gave up the hunt.

Campaigning was hard duty, and my cousin spent time recuperating by the fire.

This left Mr Bennet and me time to ponder the shelves in my library, to debate why the Greek literature was placed in proximity to the material I had amassed on the Roman empire, and other friendly arguments common to men who read widely.

When we were not thus agreeably engaged, we sat in total silence.

We were in just such an attitude when Mr Bennet roused from his reflections.

“I suppose I had better write to Jane.”

“Have you not done so?” I admit I sounded a little shocked by his neglect .

“I should have, but I am a famous laggard when it comes to letters. My daughters would not yet be anxious at having no word from me.”

“The inkstand is just there. Would you like another lamp lit?”



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I herded him towards his duty and hovered over him to assure he wrote something to his family. Mr Bennet dutifully scribbled out a few lines.

“What do you think, Darcy?” he said a little proudly and began to read.

Pemberley is just what I think a great house should be.

The rooms are chilly in winter, and there are draughts in the halls, but all such miserable elegance is overset by the liberal use of warming pans and bed drapes of imported brocades—double hung, no less.

I sleep more like a mouse in a humble nest of down in the barn than the duke down the road who shivers in his palace, and I am striving to be philosophical in my disappointment.

I smiled at him. He really was very droll, and as I had lately begun to understand him better, I could ascertain just how easily his raillery was tolerated by his children.

“Would you rather have a room in the attics, sir? That way you can write home of the rigours of a stay at Pemberley with a little more credibility.”

He chuckled and said he had gotten too old for Spartan living and went back to his letter.

This left me to think of warming pans, and of Longbourn, and how my modest room there had supplied me with such a good night’s rest. I was accustomed to one warming pan at the foot of a bed, but at Mr Bennet’s house they had supplied three.

Even Carsten claimed to have had a warming pan for his bed, an unheard-of amenity below stairs.

I was much struck by the humble luxury of such a thoughtful attention, and when we reached Pemberley, I asked my housekeeper to copy this practice.

She agreed to it, albeit a touch stiffly.

Mrs Reynolds had been housekeeper for such a long time she did not like to be told her business.

But soon enough, even she would see that this additional gesture of hospitality would set us up a peg.

Along those lines, I thought of braving the subject of meals.

Country fare at Longbourn had struck me as so much more hospitable for ordinary dinners with family and friends.

Alas, I did not want to think of Longbourn.

But Richard's curiosity and Mr Bennet's presence sometimes made it inevitable that I would, and when I did, I confronted the howling void within that had hatched some months ago and would not die no matter how much I wished it gone.

The sensation was painful— exquisitely so—and it was also deeply, perversely, pleasurable.

Thus, I sat, thinking of stew and of warming pans, of delicious warmth on a cold winter's night, and of the home my soul had claimed as its own.

I wondered why the lady in my mind's eye would not look at me the last time I saw her.

I ached to picture her walking across the room to speak to my sister's companion.

I hoped their stupid dog had not been gored by the bull he loved to chase, that her younger sisters were not troubling to have at home again, and that the ghost of their mother was restful this Christmas.

Our own Christmas progressed just as it always did.

The rituals were well-planned from a long history of doing precisely what was always done .

We went to church, served punch and spiced cake below stairs, and I gave each servant a double wage for the month.

The tenants had a lavish feast in the barn, and my sister gave out treats and toys to the children.

Mr Bennet enjoyed himself immensely, looking upon every one of our traditions with his slightly sardonic eye and storing up anecdotes to embellish the peculiarities of a rich man's benefice for future retelling, no doubt.

Inevitably, I saw myself through his eyes, and I could not wonder at how I must have looked a veritable prig to his second daughter.

I had been raised as a so-called great man who liberally and impressively handed out largesse but always in a downward motion.

My attention, my gifts, my advice, and my patronage hovered over all in god-like

fashion, and I was so much daunted to see the condescension built into the structure of my life, even into my ordinary style of speaking, that I longed to consult my principal critic for advice on how to come down at least a full notch.

“What is Miss Bennet doing for the tenants of Longbourn?” I asked Mr Bennet when we finally had a minute of quiet.

“Sacrificing three hogs, twelve geese and half the chickens. My daughter does not like to see anyone without food in the larder in winter, particularly the cottagers. No doubt you find that both too simple and too extravagant?”

“On the contrary. I think it just and admirable.”

“Well, we were not always so benevolent, but my eldest is a thoughtful soul, and she manages the house accordingly.”

“Do you raise the extra livestock for this sole purpose?”

“Yes. My Jane economises at our own table, as you have seen for yourself. Surely, you were appalled to be served a stew rather than four courses with two removes.”

“I was charmed, truth be told. ”

“Were you now?” He chuckled. “Oh dear. I hope you do not mean to rob me of such elegant fare as I have enjoyed since arriving here.”

I smiled. “I had been thinking of suggesting we have far fewer selections.”

“Your cook would likely set the kitchen afire. Perhaps you should make such a change with a light touch and long after I have gone home.”

“I enjoy your advice on almost every subject, sir, but when you are practicing your wit upon me on the matter of my table, I am disinclined to listen.”

He guffawed and slapped his leg. “You know, Darcy, I believe you are becoming inured to my teasing.”

“Which is not to say I wish you to stop. By all means, mock and disparage me as charmingly as you can.”

We sat at the table with our port after dinner, and Richard, having witnessed this exchange, stared at me.

I did not care one whit what he made of such an impolitic exchange.

I had found in Mr Bennet a devil in disguise, a perfect foil upon which I could sharpen my own devil’s corps-a’-corps .

I did not mean to be such an easy conquest the next time I fenced with his masterful daughter.

“Did you receive a letter from home, sir?” I asked.

“I did,” he said with a dark twinkle in his eyes.

“Since you are forcing me to inquire, how do your daughters fare? ”

“You ask after my daughters, do you?”

I ignored my cousin’s squirming in his chair. “I did so out of mere attention to form. What I really want to know is whether Bandit has yet been shot by your neighbour.”

“Oh, in that case, you may read for yourself news of our dog,” he said, reaching into his coat and handing me his letter. “I ignored that entire portion and could not enlighten you if I wished.”

I now had Richard’s full attention, and I am sure I shocked him when, instead of refusing as I should have, I took the letter and pocketed it.

“Shall we join the ladies?” I asked with the affectation of innocence.

The old devil slanted a glance at me and said he would like that very much.

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

That night, I savoured every word written of Longbourn by Mr Bennet's daughters.

All three ladies had written a page. Jane Bennet's hand was as serenely elegant as her person.

She wrote of the weather, which was mild, of the neighbours, who sent well wishes to her father, and of the complacency and happiness with which they anticipated Christmas.

Mary Bennet wrote more charmingly than she spoke, using large, rounded strokes.

She gave her father an artless summary of her reading, liberally sprinkled every sentence with her deep sense of morality, and expressed a kind of existential hope for the unending improvement of mankind.

It was precisely the sentiment that every coming new year inspires in the hearts of idealists the world over, and I hoped her father would reply rather more gently than he might wish .

With my heart in my throat, I turned to the page I had purposely set aside for last. Like the veritable mooncalf, I ran my finger over the script, slanted, sharp, and gorgeous to behold.

Papa,

I do not call you dearest because you have caused Jane to worry. You know we have been on pins and needles to hear of your safe arrival, and you should be ashamed to have waited so long to write. And now I must tell you what my sisters will not.

Half the tenants are sick with a cough, the rector has visited us twice over twice in the mistaken belief we need his lugubrious consolation at this time of year, and Sir William and Lady Lucas have continued to be curious about your stay in Derbyshire.

Aunt Philips, too, has been relentless in her questions, and if you do not send me a diagram of the number of rooms, fireplaces, and windows, you must at least speculate on the amount of silver and plate to be found at Pemberley.

I know you shall do so because only you would find her vulgar curiosity amusing.

It has been well over a year since I have taken you to task for anything.

You have been too mild and, dare I point out, pitiful, to chastise.

I can do so safely now, having seen with my own eyes your horrible letter.

Jane is knitting you a scarf, thinking you are indeed cold all day and fretting you might come down with a fever.

I hope you are at least a little sorry, though I admit that the resumption of your pranks is a cause for reluctant joy.

But you must promise to spare Miss Darcy, at least, and Mrs Annesley, too, for they are far too well bred to be played with.

And now I must close with the assurance that I did just as you privately asked me to do on the day you asked me to do it.



Mama's gravestone is cleared of slush and covered with holly branches, juniper, and ribbons fashioned into a sort of pretty, festive hatchment.

It was the best I could do without hot house flowers which would have wilted in an hour.

And when Jane slipped out to visit Mama later that day, she said she wept to see such a tribute, and wondered aloud who might have done such a thing for our mother.

We then all of us went to the churchyard to ritualise and to satisfy our grief by looking upon her headstone so sweetly adorned.

I know you did not want me to do so, but I hinted that you might have had a hand in it, and this caused everyone to weep again.

She closed with a brief, fierce declaration of filial love which must have caused the old gentleman to resort to his handkerchief, for I nearly had to myself.

I read her letter once again, and again in the morning before I slipped it to Mr Bennet at the breakfast table.

He ignored me as he pocketed his letter and I pretended not to notice.

"How long is Mr Bennet staying with you?" Richard asked with artful disinterest on the following day.

We had taken our horses out for a spanking ride on the muddy path from the stable to the eastern pasture, since it would not do to let them fret from inactivity in the confines of their stable boxes. I had taken my sister out earlier and was exercising yet another of my horses on this second run.

“As long as he wishes.”

“Will you return with him to Hertfordshire?”

“Why do you ask? Would you care to do the honours?”

“Do not be testy, Cousin.”

“I shall cease being testy when you cease being curious about affairs that do not concern you.”

“Affairs, is it?”

I smiled enigmatically at my interrogator. “I have many affairs of which you know nothing.”

“Apparently. I have arrived at Pemberley and seen for myself you are on intimate terms with a gentleman with whom you have nothing in common. ”

“I trained his unruly dog.”

“Did you? I would be more inclined to believe that you are the unruly dog in need of training.”

“When does your leave expire?”

“Three Kings Day.”

“Should you not visit your mother?”

“I should, but I would much rather linger here and bother you with questions about

your affairs. ”

“By all means, stay. Georgiana, at least, enjoys having you here.”

This was how we expressed our affection for one another.

He knew I was up to my neck in something deadly serious, and I refused to enlighten him.

It was precisely how he dealt with me whenever I pressed him about the gravity of his postings on the Continent.

I knew Richard was in harm’s way simply by the nonchalance with which he claimed to be sitting idle well behind the forward push, or when he sometimes hinted that Wellesley did not even know of his existence.

More than once, I suspected my cousin was one of the notoriously foolhardy tools the allied generals used to advantage like pegs on a board.

I shuddered, not just from the cold, and kicked into a gallop that ended in a race the likes of which had enraged my mother in bygone days .

We celebrated the new year, and I watched Mr Bennet grow sprightlier with every passing day.

To my great surprise, he was a cherished favourite with the ladies.

My sister doted on him, and like a tame wolf, he accepted her care with the fond toleration he showed his eldest daughter.

In other words, he kept his fangs hidden.

To Mrs Annesley, he devoted himself with a great deal more respect, though sometimes he indulged in a brief show of wicked sarcasm in an attempt to make her laugh.

That lady, however, had a way of simply looking at him with eyes of gentle reproof and an expression of sad disappointment, not in her pupil, but in her own inability to influence him.

This look, common to the best governesses, could throw a protégé into instant docility and even horrible remorse, with nary a word spoken.

Mr Bennet thrived under her watchfulness, and he was also careful with Richard, perhaps because a colonel still fresh from a war does not give off the scent of fair game.

To me, however, the old gentleman became a highlight in an otherwise uneventful season of quiet. He observed me with the amused irony of someone who knew my deepest secret, and I acknowledged that he likely did. He seemed to be content to outwait me, and was perhaps guilty of taunting me a little.

But I was equally content to hold my hand close to my chest. I had not yet spoken aloud in my own mind what he wanted me to blurt out in confidence to him.

Why would I weaken just when the resolve in me grew so strongly?

I looked unblinkingly at Mr Bennet's enigmatic smiles and returned equally unreadable looks, and by degrees, I sensed my stock with him grew. He was coming to respect me.

That was not to say he was completely healed of all his griefs. There was still one point of pain, and it was this that came to my notice just days after my cousin

returned to his regiment in preparation for leaving for the Continent yet again.

We sat together in the library, listening to the faint sounds of Boccherini coming from the music room on the far side of the house.

My guest looked oddly bleak, and I watched him surreptitiously.

A letter had come from Longbourn which prompted this return to his aged countenance, his slumped shoulders, his humbled silence.

“What is it, sir?” I asked quietly. I could endure his suffering no longer.

He handed me the letter he held so despondently in his hand. “You cannot have been at my house so frequently that you do not know I have two daughters in school at Bath.”

“I am aware. Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia.”

“What do you know of them, then?”

“Enough, sir. ”

“You know that my youngest is enrolled in Mrs Trencher’s matchmaking school?”

“I do.”

“I wonder you still consort with us. Had my wife not so recently died, my neighbours would be hard-pressed to speak to us. They have, however, out of pity for our loss, refrained from noticing my daughter is so disgraced I must resort to trying to buy her a husband.”

He waved at the letter with faint disgust and put his forehead in his hand. I took it up and read.

Dear Papa,

I know this letter will pain you, but I fear you must bear it for Jane's sake.

You may have guessed we had planned to have Kitty and Lydia at home with us for the holidays.

Indeed, to have done otherwise would have been cruel and remarkable.

Kitty did come to us, and she is unrecognisably better behaved for her banishment.

Lydia, however, did not come. She chose to stay a parlour boarder with Mrs Trencher.

A gentleman has lately made himself agreeable to her, which accounts for her hesitation to leave Bath.

To be clear, Papa, he has offered for her.

Mrs Trencher wrote the terms of his offer, and since you directed Jane to answer your meagre letters, she was then faced with the awful dilemma of what to do.

She would not for the world give you the task of going to Bath to meet this man, yet she cannot do it herself, nor can my uncle, who is not Lydia's guardian and cannot sign a settlement.

I know not what would be required to authorise him to speak for you or how it could be arranged.

But more than that prevents us from asking him to intervene.

You remember Lydia's rages, and though you were not yourself, you must be aware how she abused our uncle when he enrolled her in that mortifying place.

That terrible errand was hard enough for Jane to ask of him.

Must we impose upon Uncle Gardiner again and ask him to settle her, Papa?

While Jane paces and wrings her hands, I am writing to you and sending this by express.

Only when this letter is gone shall I tell her I have made the decision for her.

Time is not our friend, Papa. Lydia will run away with this man if she must, for such is her nature.

You must rouse yourself, write to Mrs Trencher, and travel to meet him, and if he is not a criminal or a charlatan, you must give her away to him.

I do not ask you to act for me, but do this for Jane. Know that I would go myself and within the hour to spare you if it were in my power, but alas, I have no authority with which to act .

Your daughter,

Elizabeth

I sat silent for half a minute before I spoke. "Sign me over as temporary guardian, and I shall go on your behalf."

He grunted. "I cannot be so cowardly."

"Perhaps not, but you can be rational. I have experience with legal matters of every kind and of holding a position of bargaining power. I have the use of a private secretary who can scour this man's history in advance of my ever meeting him, and I shall act in the best interest of your family.

You, sir, would be prey to all manner of memories, to feelings that might alter your ability to reason and affect your decision.

Even worse, you could make yourself ill in an attempt to escape the epithet of coward. "

"I do not like sending a representative to see to my affairs. I would look like a scrub."

I laughed, albeit gently. "You will survive."

He sat in glum, silent resistance.

I continued to press him. "And that is the point, is it not? You must survive. I would like to deliver you whole to your daughters, for them to see you looking ten years younger in defiance of the hopes of your foolish heir."

He glanced at me.

"Think man. Should you not become stronger and quickly, you must surely dwindle into your coffin, and though you laugh at the prospect, your daughters could yet end up at the mercy of the parish."

"You use my own words most cruelly against me."



“I know they will not be put to work, sir, but they shall be poor and suffer the indignity of being shuffled between their aunts and uncles. They are too proud not to be wounded by charity. You must swallow your pride and let me go. The weather is vile, the task is onerous, and you must now find the philosophy within yourself to assign guardianship to me.”

He closed his eyes in an expression of momentary pain, and I knew I had won my point. “My youngest resembles my late wife to an uncanny degree, Darcy.”

“Seeing her reminds you of your loss?”

“More than that, she reminds me of my failings.” He sighed and in a moment of self-understanding, he said, “I am ashamed of her, and I fear she might disgust you. And should you cross her, she will become a fury.”

“She is a girl of sixteen, not Alecto.”

“There you are wrong, sir. To think of talking sense to her in the event this man is a bad bargain or to be forced to agree to a vulgar match struck by this Madame Trencher because she has been...”

He could not say what he feared, and I marvelled to see him look so utterly defeated, ancient, and frail. Every ounce of his recently accumulated vitality had drained away at the mere prospect of dealing with his youngest daughter.

After a heavy pause, he said, “You have a legal man at your disposal, I presume?”

“I do.” I asked several questions, and we spoke for a few moments, until I said, “You will excuse me while I make arrangements. You must write to Miss Bennet and tell her that all will be done. They are not to think of the matter any further. Nothing could be easier than to sign settlements should this man prove worthy, and you shall

write with news as soon as you can. Make no mention of my intervention, sir. They will only worry you have taken a turn for the worse.”

### CHAPTER TWENTY

I travelled south, just behind a handful of express riders sent scattershot before me. For once, the road was not monotonous, and this, I attributed to the nature of my errand. I had a purpose, an unhappy one, and perhaps that had sharpened my wits more than pleasure ever could.

I arrived in Bath two days later in a state of grim readiness to relieve the Bennets of the particularly thorny problem of a wayward young daughter.

At The Harington near the Roman baths, I met my secretary who had hired a private parlour in which I would conduct my business.

The express, with the writ of guardianship executed by Mr Bennet the day after I left Pemberley, arrived while I ate dinner, and later I read a three-page account of Lydia Bennet's suitor compiled by my secretary and a private solicitor .

In the morning, I went to Mrs Trencher's academy, and the woman received me in her salon.

She reminded me in the most visceral sense of Mrs Younge, my sister's treasonous first companion and Wickham's secret ally.

I wondered how I had been such a gull, for rapacity has a tawdry, predatory smell I should have been capable of detecting.

Mrs Trencher greeted me with great solicitation, thinking I had come to find a wife,

but when I sternly announced I was guardian for Miss Lydia Bennet come to look into the matter of a proposed settlement without benefit of the family ever having even heard of the man, her smile faded into a look of consternation.

“Oh!” she said, slightly startled, but then she collected herself. “Mr Fields is an excellent gentleman, sir. Miss Bennet’s family should be pleased he has made an offer.”

“Should they?”

“Of a surety. He is very respectable.”

“I would like to speak to Miss Lydia privately.”

“I should be present with her, sir, to guide?—”

“No.”

Mrs Trencher left the room in high dudgeon and returned a few moments later with Lydia Bennet.

We were shown into the dining room, and when the maid shut the door behind us, I turned to see Miss Lydia’s face contorted into a mulish pout.

Mrs Trencher had apparently prepared her pupil to defy me and to demand to marry Mr Fields.

“I am Darcy. Your father has given me leave to negotiate with your suitor on the matter of marriage.”

“He cannot have done so. My family does not even know you.”

“Your father is spending the winter at my home in Derbyshire with my sister for company. I have spent a great deal of time at Longbourn and met Mr and Mrs Gardiner in London.” I motioned to a chair. “Will you not sit? We have important matters to discuss.”

She took a seat and stated her case all at once. “I will marry Mr Fields, no matter what anyone says.”

I looked impassively across the table at her.

Lydia Bennet was pretty, plump, and possessed of that robust quality most men would call lusty.

If she were the spitting image of her mother, I saw very well how young Mr Bennet might have succumbed to such an enticement as a comely country lass swathed in lace who could bat her eyelashes in a kind of erotic invitation to sin.

“You may wish to hear what I have to say before you choose whether to marry the man or not,” I said, pulling a paper out of my pocket. This strategy momentarily surprised her and so I continued to speak.

“I have had the gentleman looked into, and here is what I know of him. Mr Frederick Fields has a house in Leicestershire, in the Harborough District on the border of Northamptonshire. He has his money from coal, and possesses an independent income of one thousand pounds a year.”

“He has told me so already, Mr Darcy.”

I continued as though she had not interrupted me. “The gentleman has a moderately sized house suitable for a man of his means with a total of seven servants, including a cook and housekeeper.” I looked up at the stubborn countenance across the table. “He

lives with his mother.”

“Oh, well, many unmarried men do,” she said with a loud sniff.

“True. You might consider how well you would like to share a household with Mrs Fields. Perhaps she is a malleable sort who might defer to you in all cases. There is an equal chance that she would expect to rule you.”

Lydia Bennet blinked twice at such plain speaking.

“In any case, you may be tempted to raise this delicate subject with the gentleman. But be aware, most men have no idea how completely they are dominated by their mothers. Should he assure you that she is the soul of maternal goodness, you may wish to ask a few pointed questions.”

“Such as what? ”

“You have only to apply your imagination, for the issue of a mother-in-law is secondary to the business at hand.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mr Fields has a reputation for bawdy,” I said, flipping to the second page of my notes.

“He has a mistress?” She gasped, turning a bright shade of red.

I spoke as I read my notes, impassively and with little interest in my subject.

“Nothing so exclusive. He enjoys variety in his private entertainments. Unfortunately, he has been indiscreet and has earned himself an unflattering reputation in respectable

circles as, forgive me, a brothel hound.” I looked over at her shocked face.

“Did you never wonder why he resorted to Mrs Trencher’s academy to find a wife? ”

The girl was angry now, not with Mr Fields, as she should have been, but with me, the bearer of this sordid news.

“Many men stray,” she said coldly.

“That is true, and if you are philosophical about it, then by all means, marry the man.”

I watched in cold satisfaction as her jaw dropped. Miss Lydia’s expression then shifted three times over—from shock, to rage, to something close to fear. My heart sank .

“Is there by chance some urgency to the matter of your marrying this man?” I asked gravely. Her silence and the wildness in her eyes told me all I needed to know. “If so, then we must strike a bargain that is as comfortable for you as possible.”

“You will help me?”

“That is why I came. I am your legal guardian. I am required to protect your interests.”

“I do not want to live with his mother,” she said, swiping at an angry tear that coursed down her cheek.

“A wise demand.”

“Frederick might give up his-his?—”

“Possible but unlikely. What you should know is this: you will need to be faithful to him until you have produced at least two or three children that resemble him in likeness. After that, you need not adhere so strictly to convention.”

Lydia Bennet, who thought herself a worldly woman, was perhaps too young to understand me, and so I said, “Have you never heard the expression what is good for the gander, is good for the goose? There are marriages aplenty in which spouses have their private loves while pretending devotion to one another. This is perhaps an unhappy way to live, and you must decide for yourself whether a compromised existence is worth the risk.”

“What risk do you mean? ”

Mr Fields was reportedly pleasant in manner, beginning to bald, and tending to soft habits, but he was privately lewd and indiscriminate. I sincerely hoped he did not turn out to be privately cruel as well.

“Your husband has the legal right to beat you, and it is not too uncommon for a woman to die under mysterious circumstances after an infidelity comes to light. Some women are afraid of the men they have married and ignore what they do not want to know out of an instinct of self-preservation. In the event the husband is not physically violent, there are also wives aplenty who exact their revenge for unfaithfulness, not by means of cuckolding him, but by the habit of acquisitiveness.”

Again, she looked at me in confusion.

“You make him pay for his infidelity by liberally overspending. Guilt is usually sufficient cause to make a weak man generous.” By now, I felt truly sorry for the girl, for she had no hope of a truly felicitous match, and I had just outlined the bleak possibilities and choices available to her.



“We have in our favour that he is nearing the age of forty and has not yet secured a marriageable lady. He is, in fact, in such poor odour in proper circles in the Midlands that he has come to Bath to see Mrs Trencher. I believe we can leverage a better settlement for your children at the very least because he wants to be married as soon as may be, and perhaps we can even secure a commitment to see his mother settled somewhere other than your house. That requirement might cost you in pin money, however, for he is not rich and would find her support a strain on his purse.”

“Then he can curb his other spending habits,” she said bitterly.

“My sentiments precisely.” I then spoke carefully and with genuine concern over the principal difficulty which I suspected the girl faced. “Is Mr Fields aware of the consequence of having anticipated his vows, Miss Lydia?”

She lowered her eyes to the table and shook her head.

“How was he given such free access to you?”

“Mrs Trencher sometimes has a headache when the gentlemen visit.”

I closed my eyes to subdue my rage and paused before speaking. “You are but sixteen years old, and yet you face a truly testing time. You might be better served to receive a little education on the ways of the world, for though you believe yourself to be sly, you are a mere babe.

“Mrs Trencher, who has convinced you she is your ally, will profit from your marriage. She receives a bounty of one hundred pounds from the bride’s family and twice that from the groom.

Your compromise was nearly assured when you enrolled here because it is in her best interest to force a match.

Do you not see? This academy is little more than a bawdy house with the thinnest veneer of respectability, and you are nothing but a pawn.

If that does not enrage you, it should, and I hope you never listen to that woman's advice again. ”

Tears poured out her eyes, and yet I did not spare her the rest of my homily.

“I wish you had not made such an uncomfortable bed to lie in, but lie in it you must. My advice to you is never again to let rage be your master, to forgo your propensity to attract attention by shocking your audience, and to turn your back on childish rebellion. Those tendencies, which you thought were essential to your nature and constituted your charm, have put you at the mercy of a man who is not suitable but will have to suit nonetheless.”

“If they had only let me elope with the man I wished to marry, I would not be in this horrible situation!” she cried.

I had anticipated this bit of resistance and pulled another piece of paper from my pocket.

“You refer to Mr Carrington, I believe.” This man was the rake who nearly ruined the girl months ago.

“Perhaps you should know he is also known as Johnson, Wilson, and Tilton, depending on which county he visits, has been married three times, is wanted by the law for bigamy and for fraud, and is actively hunted by Lord Arvis for ruining his daughter. My bet is on Arvis, who will find him before long and shoot him.”

“No. That cannot be the same man!”

“Either you have poor taste in men, or you have little experience in the discernment of character. To be blunt, there is little difference between Mr Fields and Mr Carrington. Both have preyed upon your naiveté. You are young and spirited, and perhaps too romantic. The fact that no one ever sat you down and explained the raw facts of how such men conduct themselves made you an obliging target, and you have been easily ruined.”

This relentless, unvarnished lecture broke down the last of her defences.

Miss Lydia wept noisily for five full minutes, and I sat as an impartial witness as the reality of her position and predicament sank fully into her mind.

When she finally regained some sense of composure, she was physically shaken and nearly ill.

I stepped out of the room to ask the maid to pack the lady’s necessities, with her trunks to be collected in the morning.

Mrs Trencher awaited me in the parlour, and I towered over her in righteous disgust.

“Miss Lydia is leaving now. You may send Mr Fields to me at The Harrington.”

“By contract, sir?—”

“Do you dare to suggest the Bennet family is to pay you after what you have done? ”

She stiffened and puffed up in affront, but before she could speak, I preempted her.

“Think carefully before you utter a single word to me,” I said, in a most dangerous tone of voice.

I met that evening with Mr Fields, who arrived with an air of easy assurance and amiable worthiness, and left just as shattered as Lydia Bennet had been earlier that day.

Having reached the end of my compassion, my patience, and my willingness to spare their feelings, I brutalised the pair of them equally.

What a horrible, hopeless match they made.

After informing the gentleman in blunt terms he was lucky not to face me on the field of honour for compromising the young lady, I read out his history as I knew it.

Once he realised he had no secrets from me, I forced him to agree to my terms, to evict his mother, and to fear for his life should he ever raise a hand to his wife in violence.

He would have the banns read immediately, and he would do his duty without a hint of resentment, or he could take his chances on enraging me further.

I may have suggested I wished he would give me half a reason to kill him.

After that negotiation, I walked for two hours at a brisk pace to exorcise the excess of fire that burnt in my belly, and I thought, with extreme relief and gratitude, of Mr Bennet's surrender that allowed me to act for him.

I shuddered to think of him dealing with the unsavoury realities I had confronted in the past twenty-four hours and pictured him instead, sitting comfortably with Mrs Annesley beside him on the?—

“You dog!” I muttered under my breath, and then I laughed aloud for the first time in days.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dear Miss Bennet,

I write on behalf of your father and at his behest to assure you that all is arranged for your youngest sister, Lydia.

She is to marry Mr Fields from Leicestershire on the fifth of February and has funds settled on both her and any children she may have.

Your father stayed at Pemberley and sent me, most willingly, armed with legal authority to negotiate the settlements on his behalf.

Mr Bennet has also asked Mr Gardiner to come to Bath from London to give Miss Lydia away, and your aunt came in support of your sister, who is staying at The Harrington in Bath until her wedding.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner are providing Miss Lydia with wedding clothes, and I wonder whether you might send her something belonging to her mother to take with her to her new home.

The arrangements are all respectably made, and I urge you to be happy that your sister is suitably settled.

I trust Bandit is continuing with his studies in comportment, though if he has regressed, I shall perhaps take him to task, if I may take the liberty of stopping at Longbourn overnight before returning to Derbyshire.

Your friend,

Darcy

At Mr Gardiner's urging, I left Bath. The gentleman made clear he must be given something to do, and my lingering made it appear the family had no confidence in his ability to see his niece married.

I managed to smooth over his ruffled feathers as to why he had not been consulted in the first place by explaining my intervention had been the decision of the moment, spurred on by the sense of urgency, the distress of the ladies at Longbourn at the notion of incommoding a beloved uncle, and by Mr Bennet's health, which seemed to collapse before my eyes at the mere idea of being required to travel .

I spent the interim in London, not wishing to leave the south until the deed was done.

It was just as well, for I had several items of business I wished to address.

I left the knocker off my door and prowled the silent, darkened halls of my Mayfair house, too taut to rest. When the express arrived from Mr Gardiner assuring me that Mr and Mrs Fields had left Bath for the Midlands, I shot like an arrow out of London and landed aquiver at Longbourn.

It would be impossible to describe the heady sensation of emptiness and anticipation, of raw, unqualified vulnerability that stirred within me.

From head to toe, I vibrated, much like a caterpillar awakening in a cocoon as a creature unknown that must now break into the world.

I sensed my moment of destiny hovered on the horizon, and I went to meet it with painful eagerness. Long gone was the ennui of months ago.

Longbourn welcomed me like a warm blanket, and my heart swelled to the point of bursting to be so sweetly ushered out of the cold.

Even the sight of Bandit running pell-mell down the stairs, bumping the bannisters, and stumbling over his own adolescent paws in a mad rush to greet me flooded me with joy.

Miss Bennet came to me and warmly gave me her hand, and Miss Mary's greeting was so grateful for my support of her family that she melted me into a puddle of goodwill.

I then met Catherine Bennet, who is called Kitty at home, and who did not quite know what to make of me.

But she curtsied elegantly, and then, I turned to Elizabeth, who looked me in the eyes and smiled such a pensive, wistful smile as to cause my heart to trip over itself, bump into my ribs, and break into shards.

I drank tea in my favourite chair, and in broad, optimistic strokes, I reassured them with regard to their youngest sister's future.

On the subject of why I went to Bath instead of their father, I merely said I had been stubborn and overbearing because I objected to him travelling in such awful weather.

My coach, I told them, had been mired to the axles in mud and ice four times, and once, we were forced to wait two hours to be pulled out by a passing carter.

This gross exaggeration served to relieve their anxieties over Mr Bennet.

We ate a savoury dinner of game pie and apple tart, and the evening passed unremarkably.

My company was so familiar as to be considered almost an extension of the family, which was just as I wished it to be.

The ladies were learning a fashionable card game Miss Kitty brought back with her from Bath, and I watched them, content to sit by the fire with Bandit, who had been given a joint to chew to keep him occupied.

I sensed Miss Bennet had questions for me she could not ask in front of her younger sisters, so when they retired, I did not at once jump up to follow them. By necessity my hostess was required to remain behind, and her sister as well, stayed for the sake of form.

“In truth, sir, how did you find our sister?”

“Once she got her wish to be wed, Miss Lydia was much chastened by the reality. The notion of marriage is perhaps romantic for very young ladies, but to sign herself over to the power of a man so recently met, to be thrust into the role of wife and mistress of a house in a place unknown to her, daunted her a little. However, Mrs Gardiner helped her reconcile herself to her new situation, and I left with a degree of hope she will settle comfortably.”

Elizabeth and I glanced at one another. She knew I withheld more distressing facts.

Our eyes broke apart and then locked again, and I searched her face, imparting with my own expression, a sincere, reluctant apology that I did not have believably happier news for her.

She took a fortifying breath and nodded once in acknowledgement that Lydia’s future was set in stone and must be put behind them.

Miss Bennet perceived none of this silent exchange and swallowed my reassurances



whole.

“And my father, sir?” she asked. “Pray, do not out of consideration for my feelings spare me the truth as to how he fares in Derbyshire.”

This was a much more interesting subject, and I struggled to arrange my countenance into a mask of innocence when I assured her of her father’s wellbeing.

Indeed, when I went on to tell her he had become a great favourite with my sister and even more so to her companion, I could hardly keep from chuckling aloud.

Under Elizabeth’s sharp, watchful scrutiny, I managed a convincing end to my report by claiming, “I hardly have to entertain him at all, he is so much a fixture of complacency at Pemberley and so easily pleased.”

“Oh? How delightful to hear of him happy!” Miss Bennet said, but as soon as her smile flashed, it faded into hesitation. “He is not becoming too comfortable, sir? Perhaps I should not have encouraged?—”

“Should he never leave my house, we would be well pleased. However, I hardly expect him to stay past spring. Pray, be easy on Mr Bennet’s account. He is happy where he is for now, and we are happy to have him for as long as he likes.”

“Must you leave in the morning, Mr Darcy?”

This surprising question, spoken abruptly, almost intemperately and out of context, came from Elizabeth.

“I had planned to stay only one night here,” I replied tentatively. What is she about? Does she wish me to stay?

“But will you not want to rest your horses a little longer? At least a day more—perhaps until the rain passes?”

She turned to enlist her sister, who then took up her cause. They had no trouble at all convincing me to linger at Longbourn.

By instinct alone, I woke early and rang for Carsten. I asked for my old boots and warmest coat. I knew, in spite of the heavy mist that rose from the wet ground, I would be stepping out of doors to take Bandit for a walk.

Nary a word had been spoken between us, yet Elizabeth and I had an assignation. She was before me, waiting impatiently in the hall with a cloak and velvet calash while Bandit scampered like a fool at her feet.

We did not speak even as I took the lead. We broke out of the warmth of that old Tudor manor and forced our way into a silent, grey landscape. My companion was once again distracted and deeply pensive, and I knew she struggled to speak of something uncomfortable to her.

I had no choice but to be patient, though the waiting was agony.

Nor could I adequately gauge her thoughts.

She had put the hood of her cloak up and denied me access to her eyes.

We walked for an exceptionally long time in this attitude of smouldering anticipation, and I began to wonder whether we were once again going as far as Oakham, now shrouded in fog.

When Bandit began to slow his pace, I knew we had gone too far and must turn back.

“I would like to know what troubles?—”

“What are your intentions with regard to Jane, Mr Darcy?” She interrupted me as though she only needed me to break the silence to explode into her burning question.

I stopped in my tracks while my mind momentarily reeled. Her face, now before me in glorious proximity, came into focus. I had mistakenly thought she was perplexed, irate over one of my ineptitudes, or worried over her youngest sister’s folly. But what I saw in her expression was pure misery.

I took her hand and stepped closer. “I intend to make her my sister,” I said gently.

A sob escaped, her face crumbled, and though she tried, I would not let her turn away from me.

“I have never yet spoken these words, Elizabeth, not even privately to myself. I wanted your ears to be the first to hear me tell you of my constancy, of my regard, of my irrevocable devotion. To say I love you would be to cruelly lessen what I feel.”

She threw her arms around my neck and held me so fiercely, I struggled to breathe. “But why are you weeping, love?” I whispered in her ear, and she cried even harder.

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I wrapped her in my coat and chuckled at her adorable loss of composure, her storm of relief, the release of feelings I did not know she harboured.

She could not have spoken a clearer declaration to me, and when she was spent and sagging in my arms, I held her more gently and with a chuckle, I teased the last of the tears from her eyes.

“Did you think I loved Jane, you idiot?” I brushed a few strands of hair off her cheek before I kissed it.

“You wrote her a letter,” she said irritably into her handkerchief. “And I came upon you in the parlour before you left for Pemberley, making her promise to write with her hand in yours.”

“I made her promise to write to me should she have need of me. I care for her as much as I care for my own sister. And though she did promise, it was you who wrote and not to me.”

She wiped her eyes, took possession of my arm and said, “Would you believe me if I told you I prayed that letter would fall into your hands?”

“It did. Your father handed it to me in a moment of despair.”

“I am glad he did.” She slanted a quick glance at me before looking up and squinting at the clouds. “Will you marry me, Mr Darcy?”

“My word, but you are abrupt, miss. Are you asking whether that is my intention, or

are you in fact making me a proposal of marriage? ”

She looked away as though annoyed, but I sensed the trepidation beneath her bravado. I could not help but smile when she sniffed and said, “I believe I am telling you what I expect of you, sir.”

“In that case, does Easter suit? I have written to my cousin, who is with his regiment on the Continent, to request he get leave for that time.”

She looked at me in a flash of surprise. “Does he know that we are to marry?”

“I did not know myself until you told me so just now. On hope alone, I asked him to come, because I want him to stand up with me.”

“And had I refused you?”

“I would have needed him to console me.”

“Perhaps you might try not to have an answer for everything,” she said.

“I could but no. I mean to stun you whenever possible, which I expect will be at a rate of one to twenty.”

“Do I stun you so regularly?”

“I have often left here dazzled, blinded, burnt, and insensible. You are a bolt of lightning, my love.”

“I am the least comfortable sister, I am afraid. The neighbourhood will be shocked and disappointed at our news. Any day now, they expect to hear that you are to marry Jane, who is a great favourite with everyone.” She stopped abruptly, her face fell, and

I smiled to think I could read her as easily now as she had always read me .

“I have spoken of all this to your sister. She assures me of her regard and nothing more, and also of her imperviousness to the speculations of your neighbours. Our news will not injure her. And more to the purpose, when at the lowest point in my life, I went to your father to tell him I had raised expectations that I must out of duty satisfy, he refused his consent.”

“What?”

“He would not allow me to marry on principle alone and maintained his eldest daughter only held me in esteem. He claimed to have rethought the institution of marriage, and he believes that more is required than mere equity between parties. As for the wild expectations of your neighbours, you have him to thank, for he made a great show of saying farewell to Sir William Lucas and showing me off as though I were already his son.”

“Oh Papa!” She chuckled. “But that is just as he used to be.”

“Do you mean a devil? If so, then I assure you, he is fully restored to you.”

She leaned her head against my arm and sighed, echoing my own deep contentment. After a moment, she lifted her face and looked at me appraisingly. “Tell me what you will not tell Jane about our father.”

“He is violently in love with my sister’s companion.”

“What? No. He cannot be! ”

“You may believe that if you like, Elizabeth.”

“And does she return his regard?”

“Increasingly. He is capable of making her laugh, of listening to her with the intensity of interest that is his considerable gift, and when that fails, he has only to hint at some frailty to elicit the lady’s compassion.

And, if that were not bad enough, he has become a fatherly figure to my sister and makes himself so agreeable to her that Mrs Annesley cannot help but look upon him with admiration for his kindness. Did I not tell you he is a devil?”

She briefly resorted to her handkerchief to hear such sweet accounts of her father, and said, “For better or worse, he sounds fully recovered, and oh, how glad that makes me! But really, Mr Darcy, I have never heard more shocking news. Are we to have a new mama? You might have tried to be a better chaperon.”

“I was too busy thinking of how I could steal his daughter’s heart while he was otherwise occupied. Have I managed it, my sweet Xanthippe?”

“You may not insult me by referring to me as a notorious shrew and expect me to feed your vanity, sir. I fell, I admit, but reluctantly and with the bitterest resentment. How dare you make me so miserable, so tormented with such feelings of loss and of longing while trying to be happy for my sister. You, Mr Darcy, not my sainted Papa, are the devil. ”

“Is that so?” I laughed. She had given me permission to act the part assigned to me, and like any self-respecting devil, I kissed her far longer and with a great deal more erotic indulgence than I ought to have.

Only when she shivered, from pleasure, a chill, or both, did I think to return us to Longbourn. Poor Bandit’s tail dragged low to the ground, and on the stoop, I said to Elizabeth, “We are, the three of us, as wet and cold as the day we met.”

“I see you have worn old boots this time,” she murmured. “Will you speak to Jane?”

“If you would like.”

“This is the most missish thing I have ever said, but I believe I would like to lie down for half an hour. I wept too hard, I am far too happy, and you have put me through a horrible ordeal, Mr Darcy.”

“You would not have wanted me to engage your interest in the usual manner, would you? Poetry and parlour visits, sighing over your stitches, and?—”

“Hush,” she said, putting a gloved finger on my lips. “Such insipid courtship would have disgusted me.”

“I am sorry you suffered, Elizabeth. But why did you want me to prolong my visit?”

She shrugged. “I wished you to come to the point with my sister so I could extinguish all hope. I thought I would die of pining for you.”

“Truly, I did not know you had come to care for me. But you must own that you put me through worse. What was I to think when I left here at the holidays without a single look from you?”

“I was trying to douse my passion for you, sir,” she said coldly, prompting me to steal a kiss to warm her lips.

She pulled away and said with the hint of a smile, “Enough! I am frozen and befuddled into allowing liberties and confessing things I never should. Might you take Jane’s poor dog to the kitchen?”



### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the interim between our understanding and the date of our wedding, I spent an additional week at Longbourn.

Upon hearing Elizabeth and I would marry, Jane Bennet let out a squeak of joy and embraced us both.

Mary surprised us all by bursting into the most affecting tears, and only then did we understand that having seen her mother die, she had been worried about their future when their father inevitably followed her.

She felt secure again, and perhaps her view of their tenuous situation was the most realistic, given the gravity of Mr Bennet's despondency when I first made his acquaintance.

We drank punch made by Mr Hill, and I kissed each of my new sisters on the cheek, even Kitty, who still regarded me as a suspicious anomaly.

Such was my happiness to acknowledge my enlarged family that I even allowed Bandit to caper around my legs and jump on my waistcoat while barking out his enthusiasm.

Elizabeth and I had formed the habit of walking, and we continued that liberty, which allowed us to be alone.

We spoke of everything between us with the exception of Lydia.

Elizabeth, I was pleased to notice, had the delicacy not to press me on this subject.

I had no desire to impart the sordid details, and in a strange way, I felt protective of the poor girl's privacy.

I confessed to my love the weight of expectations and responsibility that sometimes staggered me, the pressures of a society I did not enjoy, and my silent desperation to be confined and burdened by such wealth and position as made me the envy of the world.

She listened with deep understanding, which I returned when she told me of her grief at watching Jane sacrifice her future to the tireless management of an entailed house and caring for its silently grieving occupants.

The sisters had indulged in no joy, surviving on circumspection, on serenity, and order.

The veneer had been calm, but they had privately suffered deeply conflicted feelings of both loss and relief that their mother and younger sisters were no longer present to mortify them.

Upon all these encumbrances fell the shadow of their father, who was stricken with remorse and had become but a shell of himself.

I wondered whether this was a ritual of courtship— this canvassing of the worst of our life experiences.

For us, it was cathartic to redistribute our cares onto two sets of shoulders instead of bearing them alone.

Once our troubles had been understood and shared, we returned to our programme of

mutual harassment that was our particular form of lovemaking.

One morning, when the sun made a brief appearance, we went to the river, stood on the grassy bank, and stared at the water below us. We laughed to recall our meeting at that very spot, and I swept my hand downward towards my feet and said, “You have never yet complimented my new boots, madam.”

“I have not yet been able to look at them,” she said archly.

“Oh? Do they remind you that you ruined a perfectly good pair for which you were not remotely sorry? Are you only now feeling appropriate remorse?”

“On the contrary. The shine coming from that direction has burnt my eyes. I still see spots, having only glanced down to avoid stepping in mud.”

“But you will agree that I appear taller and more interesting?”

“Oh indeed. You are positively swollen with conceit and walk with a peculiar little strut. I am reminded of a rooster who is showing off his spurs.”

“You may wish to retract that observation, since it casts you in the role of the dowdy, plain-feathered hen. ”

“Goodness. You are sharp-witted this morning.”

I laughed and kissed her hand. “Shall I retract my spurs, love?”

“By no means. I begrudgingly bestow upon you one point and must now score twenty of my own.”

I pulled her close and spoke tenderly into her ear. “When did you begin to love me,

Elizabeth?”

It was her turn to laugh. “Should I tell you, you will not believe me.”

“I only believe half of what you tell me in any case, so by all means, speak.”

“When you barked at me with your finger pointed towards your coach, I fell violently in love with you then and there.”

“So soon? My word, and for such a cause. I had never been so enraged by a woman in my life.”

“You have a commanding roar, sir. I confess, I was thunderstruck.”

“I am thunder to your lightning.”

“If you resort to poetry, I shall push you in this river and ruin your boots all over again.”

I spent the rest of our time together making up deplorable rhymes about her beauty and goodness that disgusted her delightfully.

“Will we always laugh?” she asked me almost wistfully at the door, where our chuckles faded into tenderness .

“I doubt it,” I said, kissing her fingers. “When I leave for Pemberley tomorrow, I shall not be laughing.”

“Nor I.”

“Will you come with me?”

I was then forced to concede that being wealthy was not always a burden.

In the space of two hours, I convinced the Miss Bennets of the merits of travelling in style to Pemberley for a brief holiday.

Elizabeth would never admit it, but she was on fire to see her new home.

Jane longed to see her father, Mary was willing to see anything new at all, and Kitty, upon learning she would not be sent back to Bath, decided to adore me and support my every suggestion.

When I said that Bandit could sit on the box with Reese, or if it were miserably cold and he was inclined to behave, he could sit at his mistress's feet, the matter was decided.

In no case would I allow him to be left behind, fearing the animal would die of accidental strangulation when left to the care of those forced to cope with his mischief.

Very early in the morning, before the trunks were stowed and in the midst of the interminable flurry required before any journey of length, Elizabeth knocked softly on the door of my little room.

"I have somewhere to go before we leave," she whispered. "Will you go with me? "

I struggled into my greatcoat as quickly as I could, and at the door she took my hand and pulled me out into the wind.

We went silently, as we have before, but on this occasion, rather than pounding heavily with suspense, my heart beat a contented joyful tattoo.

Soon we were in the churchyard, confronting Mrs Bennet's gravestone.

Elizabeth looked at me, amused, apologetic, and slightly embarrassed before pulling me forward and saying, "Mama, this is Mr Darcy, and we are to marry soon."

Her voice breaking caused me to pull my handkerchief out of my pocket, and when she took it, she graced me with that peculiarly endearing expression redolent of both laughter and tears.

She turned back to the grave. "I will have you know, Mama, that Mr Darcy is very rich," she said, chuckling as she blew her nose. "He is rumoured to have ten thousand a year."

"Closer to twelve, but I do not generally speak of it," I said humbly.

"There, you see? I will be settled far more than merely comfortably. We will positively drown in luxury, and I am sure Mr Darcy will find rich and handsome husbands for all my sisters. I do not know if Jane told you, but Mr Darcy helped to settle Lydia respectably."

In the presence of her mother's spirit, Elizabeth seemed to swallow the last of her doubts about her youngest sister's future, and after one last dab of her handkerchief to her eyes, she spoke resolutely.

"Now, you will want to know just what Mr Darcy's estate is like. I am sure he has one hundred rooms?—"

"Ninety-four," I said apologetically.

"Well!" she harrumphed in playful dismay, and turning back to her mother, she added in a voice of consolation, "But I am certain he has a glass house, and?—"

“Two actually. We have a glass house for both exotics and a separate orangery.”

“My word. Since I am such an ignoramus, perhaps Mr Darcy should tell us all about Pemberley. Hm?”

I then stood next to my love, and at her instigation, spoke to a block of granite about the number of windows, chimneys, and staircases at my estate.

And when Elizabeth began to stifle her chuckles into the handkerchief with which she had just finished drying her tears, I began a more full-throated and thoroughly specious dissertation about our china service, silver, where the marble had been quarried for the hall, how many dukes and duchesses had slept there, our collection of musical instruments, the last time the drapes, imported from France before the embargo, had been changed out in the principal salons, and I even went into some description of the sculpture garden much preferred by my mother.

I spoke of my French cooks, my army of servants, the enormity of my land and what-not, mimicking Lady Catherine, and gaining momentum as I embellished the staggering awe-inspiring extent of my worldly goods.

“And,” I added finally, striving mightily not to laugh at such an absurd speech, “Elizabeth will have a town carriage and a carriage at Pemberley, fitted out with gold?—”

“Blue,” she gravely corrected.

“Ahem. As I was saying, carriages fitted out with blue velvet squabs with matching spokes on the wheels. And, since I mentioned it, you may want to know about my house in town.”

“Oh, by all means, do continue Mr Darcy!” cried Elizabeth, and then we both burst

out laughing, and could only stop when by some accident we found ourselves in a scandalous embrace, exchanging fiery kisses.

Only Jane calling to us from the distance brought us back to earth, and with both of us enflamed, blushing and in general disarray, we said farewell to Mrs Bennet.

“I will take very good care of her,” I murmured sincerely at the end, touching the headstone in a kind of promissory gesture, causing Elizabeth to brush away happy tears all the way back to Longbourn.



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There at the front door, we were greeted with looks of exasperation by everyone, my coachman looking particularly thunderous for having had to force his restless team to wait on us.

The carriages were ready, and with Bandit barking madly with excitement on the box where he sat between Reese and Matthew, we were soon away in a little cavalcade of joy, heading towards, I could not help but feeling, the best days of my life.

We did not forewarn Mr Bennet of our arrival, though everyone else at Pemberley knew and participated in our deception.

I suppose we had caught the fever of mischief and wished to shock a man who always seemed impervious to surprise.

The Miss Bennets burst into the parlour after our surreptitious arrival at the service entrance, and I could not shake my amused remembrance of playing a similar prank on Miss Bingley.

“Mary? Jane? What-what? Lizzy?” He stood on shaky legs as his daughters laughingly surrounded, hugged, and kissed him.

Only Kitty hung back, but when Mr Bennet saw her, pulled her forward, and gave her a kiss, she knew she was forgiven.

She discretely blew her nose and then joined her sisters in their raillery, led by Elizabeth.

“We came because we feared you had forgotten where you live, sir. Were you going to batten yourself on Mr Darcy until summer? ”

Mr Bennet ignored Elizabeth’s question, having caught sight of Bandit.

“You did not bring that animal, Jane. Tell me this is one of Mr Darcy’s dogs with an uncanny resemblance to your own.”

“We could not leave him behind, Papa,” she said. “He would have run after the coach and gotten lost.”

“That is precisely why you should not have brought him, my dear. But come, how is it you have travelled all this way to interrupt my holiday?” He turned to my sister and her companion.

“I appeal to you ladies to overlook the intrusion of these silly girls. If we ignore them, perhaps they will go away. Let us go back to ordering your collection of feathers, Mrs Annesley.”

I had hung back during this reunion, and after welcoming the ladies, Georgiana came to stand with me.

I kissed her cheek and took her hand, and I do not think I was imagining that she stood closer to me than she used to do.

We looked fondly at Mr Bennet as he teased his daughters and was fussed over in return, and we were in an attitude of filial oneness when Elizabeth came to us.

“You are very indulgent to agree to our invasion of your household, Miss Darcy,” she said. “I wonder, is there somewhere we can safely stow Jane’s dog before he destroys something?”

In no time, the two of them walked away from me down the hall, their heads bent in eager conversation with Bandit pulled behind on his lead.

By the time they turned the corner, Elizabeth had induced my sister to laugh with her, a sound so strikingly natural I thought it was surely—it must have always been—the sound of home.

Mrs Annesley took the ladies to Mrs Reynolds to be shown their rooms, I went to the stables to assign Bandit a dedicated minder, and later we had an elegant dinner.

When I saw how Mary in particular looked wonderingly and appreciatively at the table, how she relished her sudden status as a lady of privilege, I gave up my plan of only serving raised pie and fruit tart at Pemberley.

Those homely delights I would reserve for my visits to Longbourn.

Mr Bennet and I did not speak, though we once exchanged knowing smiles. He was immensely pleased to have his family with him, and I was equally pleased to have brought them. Only after dinner, when the ladies retired from the table, did we have a moment to ourselves.

“Tell me of my youngest daughter,” he said bluntly as I poured out a glass of port for him.

“I told you everything in my letter. I am sure Mr Gardiner wrote to you as well.”

“I am not so old I need to be served pap. Neither of you said one glowing word about my new son-in-law, which leaves me to believe he is a rascal. In fact, he must be, if he resorted to Mrs Trencher.”

“Your youngest daughter is settled. That is the beginning, the middle, and the end of

the tale. Do you mean to badger me much more on this subject? If so, I believe I shall retreat to the music room where I cannot hear you over my sister's playing.

"I spoke with a chuckle in my voice, though I must say, it is marvellous to be able to speak so brusquely to another man because we are, in fact, such good friends.

He grunted and harrumphed, and I decided Mr Bennet needed to think of something altogether different.

"Elizabeth has agreed to marry me, sir."

"The devil you say!"

I laughed aloud, both at his consternation and from the deep pleasure of having secured his daughter's affection.

"I thought she would give you a better chase. I own I am disappointed, Darcy."

"In the match itself or in how easily I won her? If it is the latter that disappoints you, I would have you know she tortured me. I never could look at my boots without thinking of her, and a man looks at his boots a hundred times in a day, you know."

"Ah well, I suppose she could not hold out. Elizabeth has nursed a violent tendre for you for quite a long while now."

"Has she? Did she tell you so?"

"Good heavens, no. But she was so openly resistant to you, while at the same time always looking out the window in hopes of your arrival, I could not escape knowing it. Why do you suppose I refused to even consider making you marry Jane at the sword-point of general expectation and duty?"

“You are a brute, sir. Could you not have given me a hint? Until the moment of my declaration, I never knew where I stood.”

He chuckled. “That is a consolation, I suppose.”

“You are far too smug at my expense. Have you not suffered your own uncertainty?”

“I do not understand you.”

“Impossible. There is nothing on earth you do not understand. I left the fox in the henhouse while I was away. What might Jane say to you when you tell her she is to be unseated as mistress of Longbourn?”

The man’s demeanour of ironic self-satisfaction crumbled before my eyes. In a voice of great humility, he said, “You have no idea how I have wrestled with that question.”

“Let me be kinder to you than you were to me and inform you that Jane will be greatly relieved to return to being a young lady again. She has borne the responsibility admirably, but she does not relish her position.”

“But how would it be for my girls to see another lady occupy their mother’s room?”

“Strange at first but unremarkable in no time at all. Mrs Annesley is both wise and wonderful. She will ease them into the umbrella of her maternal concern without them knowing what happened to them. Would you like me to invite Mr Bingley to Pemberley to engage Jane’s interest and create a distraction?

He was fairly bowled over by her, you know. ”

Mr Bennet wrinkled his nose and the wolfish glint returned to his eyes. “No, no. I have someone less insipid in mind for Jane. I assume Colonel Fitzwilliam will stand

up with you?”

“How uncanny you are,” I said on a laugh, for I had more than once indulged that same notion.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Elizabeth and I married out of Longbourn at Easter. Only Richard, Georgiana, and Mrs Annesley came from my family, while the Gardiners and the entirety of the neighbourhood came for Elizabeth.

Jane Bennet produced an exceptionally tasteful and understated wedding breakfast, the only evidence of unnecessary luxury being the wedding cake made by my London cook, which had been transported with two attendants in a coach hired solely for the purpose.

Elizabeth claimed the cake garnered more attention than the bride, and to be sure, Mrs Philips was reported to have marvelled over it for weeks after it was eaten.

To our surprise and delight, Bingley came as well.

He opened Netherfield Park and hosted a good many gatherings before the nuptials.

It was during these parties that Mr Bennet threw my cousin Richard and Jane together, and I spent some time ensuring that Bingley was seated next to Kitty.

Elizabeth took us both to task for our vulgar matchmaking, but she herself constantly made sure that Mary and the vicar's brother were never far from one another.

Caroline Bingley was nowhere to be found, and no one asked after her.

The servants at Netherfield treated Bingley with something near to affection, perhaps

because he did not bring his sisters along with him, and soon after the wedding he decided to buy the place and settle permanently in the country.

My family did not much care for my match.

Lady Catherine wrote threatening to have the marriage revoked by the archbishop, and I returned her letter in pieces with a curt note suggesting she try to do so and see what it cost her.

Richard's father and mother were marginally more civil, and I did not doubt they would soon accept my choice, since I made it clear that I did not particularly care what they thought.

I had, you see, become a protégé of Mr Bennet, and learnt to care only for the opinions of those I loved.

The old gentleman shocked the neighbourhood and married Mrs Annesley, a lady perfectly suited to managing him, his estate, and his daughters.

Georgiana stayed with her companion for half a year and soaked up the ease and homeliness of Longbourn with her new sisters for friends and a neighbourhood of nosy and inelegant well-wishers to nudge her out of her shyness.

When Mrs Bennet, née Annesley, who was nearly forty years of age, produced a miracle in the form of a son, Mr Collins may or may not have had an apoplectic fit when he learnt of it for all we knew.

My aunt Catherine did succumb to a fatal episode of that ailment and died suddenly after a rage over a broken vase.

Lord Matlock assumed the management of Rosings on behalf of Anne, who was



perpetually unwell, and after meeting his sister's parson, had the bishop send Mr Collins on hiatus to parts unknown.

The result of this was that the poor curate of Hunsford who had been more used to penury and the rector's abuse, suddenly found himself living in improved circumstances at the vacant parsonage.

Elizabeth's youngest sister Lydia had also suffered at the hands of fate when her expectation of motherhood after first marrying Mr Fields ended in a miscarriage that left her severely ill for half a year.

It had been the severity of her condition that ultimately fostered a reconciliation with her father and a reunion with her sisters.

She has since been required to care for her husband, who has lately been ill.

And while I believe his private pursuits have likely contributed to his debility, I have never spoken this aloud.

Much of this Elizabeth and I heard second-hand in letters from our families.

We spent the first years of our marriage travelling from Pemberley to any place my wife wished to see.

We toured Wales, and Scotland, Oxford and Weymouth, Bath and Manchester.

We looked into random spots on the map, and we spent many weeks in the Lake District.

But it was the Peaks that called to Elizabeth, and often, and when we went out walking, I wore my old boots.

“But where are your shining black spurs today, Mr Darcy?” she asked me one morning. When she was being droll or teasing me, I was Mister Darcy to her.

How Elizabeth managed to be ten times more beautiful in the years after our wedding, I could not fathom. She dazzled me with her arch smile, and I struggled to think of something clever to say.

Nothing came to me, and so I simply confessed, “I prefer my old boots.”

“Surely not.”

“I shall never throw these boots away, so forcibly do they remind me to be humble. I do not deserve you, you know.”

She walked along in silence before she tossed her curls and said, “You have scored a point unfairly. Must you be so loveable?”

“You have made me so, my darling scold,” I said, playfully pulling her into a rough embrace and kissing her nose. “Have you written to Jane and Richard to secure us one of Bandit’s pups? Perhaps if I am constantly harassed by a witless hound, I shall be more interesting company.”

Elizabeth paused and some prickle of intuition told me I was about to be struck by a flash of lightning. With a peculiar note in her voice, she chuckled and said, “I have asked for two puppies, Mr Darcy. A male and a female to be precise.”

“Two? What are we to do with two absurd and witless mongrels, much less the inevitable litter?”

We stopped to catch our breath, for the path we trudged up was challenging. Behind us, the glories of the Peaks, and the valleys and fields that framed them, spread out in

shades of luxurious velveteen greens and gold.

Elizabeth stood before me in all her radiance, aglow with some secret happiness as she gathered herself to reply.

“I believe, sir,” she said, struggling mightily not to laugh at my bewildered face, “we had better set up a kennel for the pleasure of our future children.”

*Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 4:59 am*

I rose early and went to the mews for a moment of tranquillity.

We had a houseful these days what with the impending addition to our family.

Bingley and Kitty came with Richard and Jane, bringing with them a score of babies—or so it seemed to me, judging by the commotion alone.

The noise that lately came from the upper floors at Pemberley was a constant babble, punctuated by cries, screams, squeals of delight, and occasionally, deafening howls.

Mr and Mrs Bennet were also here with their youngster, a sober little owl of marked intelligence who seemed not to know what to make of the barbarians that had suddenly invaded the nursery.

They brought with them Mr Bennet's middle daughter and Mr Thornhill, a man perpetually on the verge of offering for Mary, and who must surely come to the point now that he was part of our family party.

Georgiana looked upon their prolonged courtship with a protective, irritated glare of disapproval.

She and Mary had been bosom companions, and my sister did not like the idea of relinquishing Mary to such a 'wiffle-waffle,' as she classed the poor man.

Her own suitors, of which there was a veritable parade, were equally subjected to such high standards, and I felt quite sorry for them.

But Georgiana had lived in close proximity to genuine marital felicity and had more than once sworn that if she could not sit in affectionate silence over breakfast as Mr Bennet and her former companion now did, she would rather not marry at all.

She also cited the lively, convivial atmosphere at Netherfield Park, where Kitty and Bingley hosted parties every week of the year, seeming to thrive on their mutual love of society almost as an expression of their love for each other.

And when she watched the tender, protective regard in which Jane and her children were held by our cousin Richard, Georgiana claimed she could never tolerate a man who could only offer her mere affection.

But I knew because she had once confided it, that what my sister most wished for in a match was what she saw between Elizabeth and me.

“It seems to me you have never yet spent a day in which you have not laughed together,” Georgiana had told me wistfully, “and I have seen you speak to one another in such a way and for such prolonged conferences as to make me believe you think you are the only two people in the world.”

I smiled to remember my sister’s words. Elizabeth and I had indulged in one of those prolonged conferences the evening after the last of our guests, Mrs Fields—Lydia—had arrived.

“Your sister was much changed from when I last saw her,” I said, as I sipped my wine. Elizabeth sat curled up beside me on a sofa in front of the fireplace in her room.

“Who would not be the picture of elegance draped in black satin?” she grumbled.

I chuckled, lovingly caressed her enormous belly, and said, “Are you wishing me dead?”

“Only when I waddle and creak down the stairs.”

“So often?”

She laughed and settled more deeply into my embrace. “Well, you must allow that my sister emits that worldly confidence common to happily widowed women everywhere,” she said.

“Indeed. I imagine she already has a dozen devoted followers who anticipate the end of her required mourning.”

“Oh lord, are we to entertain every sort of speculator, adventurer, and émigré Lydia can attract?”

“She is a young widow, and as such, she is destined to be a great favourite of rakes everywhere.”

“Lucky girl,” my wife said wistfully, causing me to retaliate such a horrid sentiment with a pinch.

She squealed in playful outrage before pinching me ten times in quick succession in return.

Soon, we were in a tussle of a physical nature that may not have been wise considering her condition.

But even though this was to be our first child, Elizabeth had never allowed me to coddle her as Richard had Jane.

“Hush,” I said eventually, when I realised we had been laughing at the top of our lungs for quite some time. “We are likely to wake the house. The noise from our room sounds a great deal like the nursery did earlier in the day. I have never before

heard such a din.”

Elizabeth chuckled and suggested I had better become used to the cacophony of infants, which gave me a delightfully warm feeling in my chest.

We continued to talk, albeit quietly, for another hour. We sat together, alternating between kissing and staring into the fire until there was a knock on the door.

I had been expecting this interruption, having convinced Elizabeth that breeding two of Bandit’s pups was exceedingly unwise and had acquired a fine-mannered English setter to carry Bandit’s line.

“What news?” Elizabeth asked as I read the note Carsten handed me.

“Six pups,” I said with a grin.

“Oh, I long to see them!

“Shall we go look at them?”

“So far? The stairs alone! I have never resented living in a palace more than I have lately.”

“I could carry you.”

“You could not.”

“Do you doubt my strength, Elizabeth?”

“What I doubt is whether I could submit myself to such an indignity.”

“Not to mention the appearance of frailty?” I suggested.

“God forbid!” She laughed in pure delight, a sound so precious to me my heart skipped a few beats.

“Go to sleep,” I said, helping her to settle into her pillows.

“Will our puppies be as insensible as Bandit?” she asked sleepily.

“Never fear, love. Our dogs will be unruly, and our children will be devils,” I said in a whisper. She grinned, and only after I offered to bring the pups to her in a basket when they had opened their eyes, did she finally fall asleep .

“Good morning, sir,” said the head groom, pulling me out of my amused recollections.

I greeted him and went to the loose-box where Biscuit lay thumping her tail in an affectionate greeting. My dog stood up as I came close, causing her pups to tumble pell-mell off their teats and into the straw.

“That was not so well done, now was it?” I murmured as she came over to kiss me properly on the chin.

“Your mate is napping in the library just now and has not asked after you at all, the dolt,” I said, picking up each of her pups, looking them over minutely, and stroking their tiny, velveteen muzzles.

Biscuit sniffed at each representative of her litter as I held them, and in a few moments, settled herself back down to the business of motherhood.

“Carry on,” I murmured, ruffling her ears. “Your nursery is certainly quieter than mine will ever?—”

“What an affecting scene!” Elizabeth cried, having tiptoed up behind me to catch me



in the act of cooing at a dog.

“Elizabeth! What are you doing? Did you come all this way alone?”

“By no means. Half the house fluttered around me as I lumbered down the stairs. If I had stumbled, at least three footmen and two maids would have cushioned my fall. But, make way, sir. I long to see these little sausages. And dear Biscuit. How is it you look none the worse for wear?”

I brought a stool forward so my wife could sit and properly fuss over our new pups. At last she looked up at me with a rueful glint in her eye and said, “Husband, how is your back?”

“Strong enough to carry you, if that is what you are asking. Are you feeling frail this morning, love?”

She chuckled and then winced. “Not particularly. But if you do not carry me up to my bed, I am afraid I shall give birth to your child in a kennel—oof!”

Before she could finish speaking, I had scooped up my wife and was halfway across the yard, exercising the commanding roar for which she has often teased me. Thus, our family life began—in the midst of my shouts, the barking of dogs, and Elizabeth’s enchanting laughter at the spectacle we made.