







# Pax, the Canine Cupid

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Sometimes it takes a dog to lead you to love.

To Elizabeth Bennet, a three-mile walk to Netherfield paled in comparison to the struggles she would face at Netherfield. Not only would she have to endure Miss Bingleys withering stares and haughty pronouncements, but she would also be forced into proximity with Mr. Darcy. Still, Elizabeth would endure anything for her ill sister, Jane.

To Darcy, the price of keeping his one true friend was high, but worth it. After all, he had become quite adept at dodging Caroline Bingley, Charles older sister, who seemed unable to comprehend the revulsion in his eyes. Darcy's bigger problem was that the intriguing Miss Elizabeth had come to care for her ill sister. Miss Bingleys shallowness only highlighted Elizabeths captivating spirit, drawing him towards her despite the insurmountable expectations of his family.

The absence of Elizabeth Bennet is a catastrophe of the highest order for Pax, a massive, furry dog whose love for her is boundless. During his visit to Netherfield Park in search of Miss Elizabeth, Paxs encounter with Mr. Darcy proves pivotal. Darcy, initially taken aback by the impressive canine, soon finds himself charmed by Paxs loyalty and intelligence. Through a series of endearing and often humorous incidents involving Pax, Elizabeth and Darcy begin to see each other in a new light, their misunderstandings gradually giving way to mutual respect and affection.

Though their love seems poised to blossom, the charming but deceitful Mr. Wickham threatens their budding romance. Will Pax be able to protect his mistresss happiness from the villains wicked plots and manipulations, which threaten to destroy the fragile hope of true love?

**Author Note:** This novella delves into the question of how the story of Pride and Prejudice would unfold with the addition of Elizabeth owning a dog. For those who love a quick, feel-good romance with the added bonus of found family and a giant, endearing fluff muffin, this story is a must-read. Brew a steaming cup of tea, pile a plate high with cookies, and settle in for a cozy treat.

**Total Pages (Source):** 10

## Chapter One

A knot of nerves threatened to consume Elizabeth, and she did not like it. If this resembled what her mother often referred to as her “poor nerves,” Elizabeth regretted not being more sympathetic. The stress of worrying over her sister while deflecting Caroline Bingley’s barbs was wearing her down. Taking a deep breath of the fresh morning air, Elizabeth tried to relax enough to dispel the tension in her muscles. She wiggled her shoulders in an attempt to work out the kink that had firmly lodged itself between her shoulder blades. As much as she dearly loved Jane and would never have left her to suffer at Netherfield alone, her efforts to aid her sister had been a trial so far. She hoped the slight respite outside would help her gain some of her equanimity before she returned to Jane. It was of no surprise that she and her sister had found themselves at Netherfield. It was just like their mother to orchestrate an occasion for Jane to socialize with a man, only to have it go awry in the most remarkable way. Sending Jane on horseback to Netherfield when it was sure to rain could only end badly, but her mother had thought it a brilliant idea despite Elizabeth suggesting otherwise. Because, of course, if Jane was forced to spend more time at Netherfield than just her invitation for tea, she would be able to get Mr. Bingley to fall in love with her. The thought had never crossed Mrs. Bennet's mind that Jane's tendency to fall ill easily would have dire consequences, leaving her bedridden with a fever instead of socializing with Mr. Bingley in the parlor.

Elizabeth had walked to Netherfield as soon as she learned that Jane had indeed fallen ill. The distance of three miles didn't matter to Elizabeth; she would go to great lengths to ensure the care of her loved ones. Elizabeth was glad she had done it, for she had found Jane to be quite ill indeed, and her care was nearly nonexistent. Miss Bingley's lack of attention towards Jane did not go unnoticed by Elizabeth, especially

when compared to the noticeable amount of attention her sister received from Mr. Bingley.

It seemed that Mr. Bingley had been the only one happy to see Elizabeth upon her arrival and was swift to ask that she convey his well wishes for Jane's quick recovery and wellbeing. With a hopeful smile, Elizabeth wished for Jane and Mr. Bingley's budding romance to unfold naturally, free from unnecessary meddling by their mother or Miss Bingley. Jane deserved to find love with a good man.

Inhaling deeply, Elizabeth let out a sigh tinged with longing, allowing herself to briefly ponder the blissful sensation of being cherished by someone like Mr. Bingley. She didn't feel any bitterness towards her sister for her good fortune; they were merely different people. Elizabeth was well aware that her stubborn personality hindered her chances of finding love.

In an effort to shift her focus, Elizabeth stretched her body and allowed her thoughts to wander freely. Oddly enough, it occurred to her that Caroline Bingley reminded her of her mother in some ways. While her mother was not intentionally cruel, she seemed to have some of the same misconceptions about class and what it meant to be genteel. Mrs. Bennet often said that Elizabeth was too fond of flouting convention. Yes, she had not hesitated to dirty her skirts to care for her ailing sister, but Elizabeth believed that was in keeping with the principle, if not the letter, of belonging to the propertied class. She was proud of being a gentlewoman, even if she viewed the role differently than others did. Elizabeth tried to remind herself that her mother had not been born to the life she inhabited, nor had Miss Bingley.

Fanny Bennet was only a solicitor's daughter and though she tried to ape the manners of the world she had risen to, she did not understand the deeper things of the position. Her mother could only see the posturing and parties, not the underlying responsibilities that came with her position as a landed gentleman's wife. Sadly, Mrs. Bennet would not know what noblesse oblige was if it smacked her in the face with a

parasol.

Generosity and caring for others over oneself meant a lot to Elizabeth. She would always be grateful to her Aunt Madeleine for taking her under her wing and helping her to learn about the world she faced as a gentleman's daughter. Orphaned at a young age, Madeleine was raised with her cousins at a modest estate in Derbyshire. Madeline Gardiner had married for love and despite the fact that she had technically married down, she still behaved as a gentleman's daughter should.

It was her aunt that had taught Elizabeth that if you could help someone, you should. In fact, you had an obligation to do better by the world because you could. Honor, generosity, respectability, and responsibility were Elizabeth's touchstones. Admittedly, she sometimes had difficulty with the concept of respectability, but that stemmed from how different her view of respectability was from that of people like her mother and Caroline Bingley.

It was apparent to Elizabeth that Caroline Bingley, like her mother, did not quite understand what it meant to be the mistress of an estate. She had a sick guest and yet she spent her time ignoring and deriding her. That was entirely putting aside her treatment of Elizabeth, also a guest, albeit an unexpected one. The way she treated them both was an utter disgrace to her position.

Tilting her head back, Elizabeth soaked in the soft morning light. Even though most of Netherfield's courtyard was still painted in creeping shadows, she had managed to find a well-lit spot to absorb the glory of the rising sun. She would need its strength for another day of barbs. She had never perfected—nor had she wanted to—adopting Jane's serene appearance. That did not mean she wanted the people who seemed to be intentionally provoking and insulting her to know that she was affected by their words.

Elizabeth was drawn from her reflections by a small impact against her calf. Startled,

she directed her gaze downwards and immediately spotted a small smudge marring her dress and the culprit, a dirt-streaked stone, perched against her boot. Did that small stone just hit her? And more importantly, where did it come from?

Eager for escape, Darcy hurried out the door before Miss Bingley discovered him. It had been a simple matter to offer rewards to any footmen who kept him informed of her movements within the house. Thankfully, with their help, he was usually one step ahead of her. When the footman had told him that Miss Bingley had risen early in order to corner him over breakfast, he had gulped down his coffee, grabbed some buttered toast, and bolted. It was always good to have reliable men watching his back where that woman was concerned. He smiled as he headed for the side door through one of the seldom used drawing rooms. He would walk around the building through the courtyard and then saddle his horse for a ride.

Caroline Bingley often searched for him, attempting to persuade him of her suitability as his wife. Sadly, his rebuffs meant nothing to her. Darcy had always tried to be polite but relatively cold towards his friend's sister. It was becoming readily apparent that his current method of discouragement was not working. After two years of dodging her unwanted advances, he was more than ready for it to end.

Bingley often apologized for how his sister hounded him, but nothing he said to his sister seemed to dissuade her. Darcy was starting to wonder if he should just be blunt about how he felt the next time she tried something. It would not be the polite thing to do, but it might be the only thing that would stop her pursuit. Sighing, he wondered if telling her she would never make him happy in marriage would even matter to her. It was only Pemberley she wanted, after all.

Perhaps telling her he would certainly refuse to allow her the leeway she would want to be happy in marriage would work better. No wife of his would ever behave as she did as mistress of an estate, not if she wanted to live at Pemberley instead of a cottage at the far reaches of civilization. He fought a smile, thinking that the final nail in her

coffin would be when he told her he would never allow her to stay in London for the season because he thought her petty harping and gossiping ways were shameful. Would that be too much, though? He did not want to destroy his friendship with Bingley. Regardless of his worries, Darcy felt he may be forced to act.

At the very least, he would have to speak with Bingley about his sister once again. The way Miss Bingley was treating the Bennet sisters during their stay was atrocious. Regardless of her feelings on the matter, as the mistress of Netherfield, it was her responsibility to treat them with care and consideration. He knew that Caroline Bingley mistakenly believed her behavior with the Bennet ladies would degrade them and simultaneously make herself shine in his view. She could not be more wrong. As it was, the thought of Miss Bingley hurting the two gentlewomen because of him turned his stomach. Darcy could not allow her to continue to play that game, not if he could help it.

Making it out the side door and into the little garden there, he felt his shoulders lose some of their tension. He took a moment to breathe deeply. It would not do to become out of sorts. A Darcy was always in control of his sensibilities. It had been his father's constant admonition. Taking a small bite of his pilfered toast, he chewed slowly, letting his mind wander while he walked. Did Bingley not understand how badly his sister was behaving? Darcy was lending Bingley a hand because of his lack of knowledge in estate management. He was most likely also unaware of all that went into being the mistress of an estate. Darcy decided Bingley's ignorance was going to have to end, as his sister was taking her petty behavior too far.

Shoving his last bite of toast in his mouth rather inelegantly, Darcy tried to convince himself that his concern had nothing to do with Miss Elizabeth and her enchanting eyes. Nor was it the way she could hold her own against the petty actions of Miss Bingley without employing cruelty in response. Or her well-read mind and ability to participate in well-reasoned arguments. Gritting his teeth, Darcy forced his mind away from the dangerous path it was traveling.

Miss Elizabeth Bennet was not for him. No matter how much his heart desired something else, he couldn't escape the expectations that came with being a Darcy. Though it seemed that no matter how many times he told himself that, he was drawn toward her impertinent smiles, dancing eyes, and brilliant mind. Miss Elizabeth was a siren song of everything he had ever wanted in his life, but had been told he would never have.

His inability to get Miss Elizabeth out of his mind, despite his best efforts, was proving dangerous. He seemed to lose his vaunted control when he was around her. Just the night before, he had come upon her in the library and wanted to speak without a care for any consequence of being alone with her in the room. Noticing that she was holding a book on Plato, he desperately wanted to ask her opinion of the relevance of Greek philosophers in the modern era. He knew that her response would be well thought out and delightful no matter her opinion, and he wanted to watch the facets of her mind sparkle as they discussed the subject.

The desire to know her better and watch her shine had confused him. It was so incongruous with his typical caution around women that he reacted badly. Instead of the intellectual debate he wanted to participate in, he had said something terse. Darcy had watched her eyes shutter, effectively extinguishing the happy sparkle she always had. He had done that; he had hurt her. Trying to look for the best in the situation, it occurred to Darcy that if she was angry at him, he would not be in danger of breaking both their hearts.

Stopping on the path, Darcy toed a stone with his boot. Yes, he was angry at Miss Bingley for her actions, but he was no better. It did not matter that he kept behaving badly to Miss Bennet to protect them both; the ends did not justify the means. Running his hand down his face, Darcy bit back a curse. He was going to give himself another megrim. The last time that had happened, he had behaved even worse, calling Miss Elizabeth tolerable and behaving rudely to everyone in town. He could not let things progress that far, not while she was staying at Netherfield. Who

knew what he might do? Kicking the stone in frustration, Darcy watched in horror as it flew towards the courtyard and right at Miss Elizabeth, who had just walked through the arbor.

Knowing instinctually that the stone had to have been propelled from somewhere, Elizabeth cast her glance around and tried to find the source of the projectile. It was a greater surprise to spot Mr. Darcy staring at her, his eyes wide in apparent horror. Her building anger deflated when she realized how comical he looked.

The always-poised-and-perfectly-presentable Mr. Darcy would probably blush if he knew how he presented himself at that moment. Not only were there crumbs on the corner of his upper lip, but his mouth was agape, and the whites of his eyes seemed to be growing by the moment. Tilting her head, Elizabeth found herself oddly pleased to see his imperfection at play. Perhaps he was more human than he tried to appear.

Willing to put him out of his misery, Elizabeth said, “Good morning, Mr. Darcy. How are you this fine morning?” The clear signs of regret on his face moved Elizabeth to forgive him for his mistake. Being petty served no purpose.

Mr. Darcy seemed to come out of his frozen stupor, first snapping his mouth shut and then opening it quickly to say, “Miss Elizabeth, I must apologize most earnestly. I had thought no one out and about when I kicked the stone.”

Narrowing her eyes slightly, Elizabeth was curious to note his improved manners, so different from his rudeness the night before. Was it possible that he was more of a morning person? “I am uninjured, and I doubt my dress is worse for one small stone. I am not some wilting violet after all,” Elizabeth reassured him.

She watched in confusion as Mr. Darcy closed his eyes at her words. It was as if her words had wounded him somehow. She waited while he ran one of his large hands down his face, inadvertently dislodging the crumbs in the corner of his mouth. It

seemed that Mr. Darcy was pondering more than just his momentary lapse of judgment. Kicking a stone while walking alone was not some horrible action, so what had him so lost in thought?

Mr. Darcy dropped his hand to his side and sighed. "I find myself regretting my actions this morning, Miss Elizabeth."

She was growing worried now. What had the dower man so out of sorts? Stepping closer to him, she almost reached out, but after hesitating she merely said, "I have kicked many a stone in frustration. Do not worry overmuch over something so inconsequential."

Oddly, her words seemed to offer no comfort, only pain. When he visibly winced at her words, Elizabeth felt her latent compassion rising to the surface. Sure, he had insulted her at the assembly and been cold and sometimes rude since her arrival at Netherfield, but he was distressed. Elizabeth's conscience wouldn't let her stand by and watch him suffer without taking action. She was about to ask him what was wrong, but a crashing sound coming from the direction of the nearby woods captured her attention.

Turning to face the disturbance, Elizabeth tried to puzzle out the sound of something careening through the underbrush at speed. Was that a bark? Narrowing her eyes once more, she noted movement in the brush right before Mr. Darcy's large back blocked her view. Was he trying to protect her from whatever was approaching?

Darcy quickly scanned the area. The wilderness that ran along the side of Netherfield was full of obstructive underbrush. Darcy had once thought the dense foliage harmless, but now he doubted his previous supposition. Anything could be lurking unseen and, at that moment, something rather large was coming their way at speed.

His analytical mind started shifting through possibilities. The sound was too large to

be something like a fox or a badger. When flickers of gray appeared between the leaves, Darcy moved in front of Miss Elizabeth, determined to protect her from the approaching threat. Was that a wolf? Of course not, Darcy mused, shaking his head at the stupidity of the fleeting idea. It could not possibly be a wolf. They had been extinct in England for decades.

Breaking through the last of the woods, the beast came into the open. Whatever it was, it was very wolf like. It was large and hairy with a lope that ate up the distance between them at an alarming rate. A pink tongue hung out the side of a gaping maw, showing off rather sharp teeth, and Darcy braced himself for an attack.

“Pax!” Miss Elizabeth shouted, and he realized she had been peeking around him. Before he could react, she boldly stepped around him and confronted the beast, standing tall with her hands firmly planted on her hips. With a commanding tone, she questioned, “What are you doing here, you naughty boy?”

Darcy feared that he was about to watch her be mauled in front of him, but instead, the large animal cowered before her. It took a moment for his mind to process that the thing covered in wiry hair must be a dog, albeit an enormous one. Had she just called for peace in Latin? Was he her pet?

In astonishment, Darcy watched as the lanky beast crawled on his belly towards Miss Elizabeth and then finally rolled over onto his back, exposing his belly to be rubbed. If not for his size, he would resemble his aunt Lady Matlock’s little dog when he begged for treats. Darcy cleared his throat to ask Miss Elizabeth something, but in the end could not decide what to say. He was still struggling to make sense of all that had transpired within the span of only a few moments.

“Don’t you act like that,” she cried. “You are a bad boy. What will Johnson say when he notices you missing from Longbourn’s stables?” Making a tsing sound, Miss Elizabeth only hesitated for a moment before dropping to her knees and scratching

the animal's exposed belly.

Eyebrows lifting in surprise, Darcy watched the joy that flitted across Miss Elizabeth's face. It was obvious she loved the large dog and if the way the animal wiggled was any indication, the feeling was mutual. He loved dogs and had often thought that when he married, he would hope to choose a woman who loved them as well. Darcy had actually thought of having a kennel full at some point in the future. However, he knew not every woman would be tolerant of having dogs underfoot in the house. In fact, he had met many women who were uneasy with dogs, even small ones, but here was Miss Elizabeth, playing and cooing with the largest dog he had ever seen.

Why was the world conspiring to show him how exactly perfect Miss Elizabeth was for him? Didn't the universe know of the expectations placed upon him from a young age? His future marriage would be determined based on family connections, disregarding his personal desires. Wasn't it?

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### Chapter Two

Elizabeth froze in place as soon as she realized how she was acting in front of the normally severe Mr. Darcy. She was on her knees, in the dirt, rubbing Pax's belly. Her skirt would certainly be covered in dirt and decaying leaves when she stood. Drooping slightly with the realization, Elizabeth sighed. She knew that Jane was really beginning to like Mr. Bingley and here she was giving the worst impression to his closest friend and adviser.

As if he sensed her anxiety, Pax returned to a sitting position and proceeded to lick at her blushing cheek. She could not help but smile at her dog's willingness to console her. Scratching at his wiry hair, Elizabeth still grimaced when she heard Mr. Darcy speak from behind her. "May I assume this grand animal is your dog?"

Unable to catch any inflection in his voice, Elizabeth worried he was trying to hide his distaste for her behavior. Swallowing thickly, she managed to say, "Yes, this is Pax."

The dog's ears perked up upon hearing his name, and his tongue flopped out of his smiling mouth. Pax could be so comical, and she long ago realized he knew what he was doing. Tucking her chin, Elizabeth knew she could never be upset with him, though she was becoming disappointed in herself. Was her mother right in saying that her failure to think before she acted would ruin her sister's chances? She could just picture the look of disdain on the handsome face of Mr. Darcy as he watched her sit in the path's dirt. Taking a breath, she held it for a moment before blowing it out through pursed lips. She would somehow have to fix things. Elizabeth already knew Mr. Darcy felt poorly about her and her family. She could not let her actions hurt

Jane's chances of finally finding a love match.

Forcing herself to turn and look up at him, she prepared for the worst, but was surprised by what she saw on Mr. Darcy's face. He was smiling. Though his eyebrows were raised, he had a soft look in his eyes and his lips were quirked in what appeared to be an amused expression. She didn't know he was even capable of such an expression.

Moving to stand, Elizabeth was taken aback when he offered her a hand to help rise to her feet. Who was this smiling stranger? Thoroughly confused, she accepted his help while at the same time trying to free her skirt of the leaves and dirt it had collected. Pax, her large shadow, moved to her side, leaning into her as was his custom. He placed his head under her hand, eager for her to scratch behind his ears. He was so large that sitting or standing on all four legs, she did not need to lean over at all to pet him.

Tilting his head, Mr. Darcy commented, "He is such an unusual animal. I have never seen his like before." Leaning slightly forward, Mr. Darcy seemed to study Pax closely. Elizabeth admitted to herself that her dog was a distinctive animal, not only for his size. His coat was gray but streaked liberally with random black and white hairs. Notably, he did not seem to have fur like most dogs. The texture of his coat was more like hair. The dog's penetrating gaze implied a keen intelligence. In fact, Pax watched Mr. Darcy study him, seemingly aware of the man's interest, and the large dog seemed to study Mr. Darcy right back.

Pax was very protective of Elizabeth and, though rarely aggressive, many people, including men, found him intimidating. Especially when he studied someone. Elizabeth trusted him not to hurt Mr. Darcy. Even back when that older Lucas cousin had threatened her after losing a game to a girl, the worst that Pax had done was to grab the teenager by the wrist and draw him away from Elizabeth. Pax had stood between the boy and Elizabeth and made sure the boy knew any action on his part

would be met with swift and violent retribution. She could still remember the sound of his growl. Pax was Latin for peace, and the dog was completely capable of enforcing it.

After studying Mr. Darcy for a time, her beloved dog approached him, tail wagging, despite the fact that he normally always stayed at her side when there were strangers present. Not only did he approach Mr. Darcy, but he also began nuzzling his hand, looking for pets. The traitor.

Mr. Darcy's deep voice held a tone she had never before heard it carry when he said, "Hello there, Pax. Did you come here from Longbourn looking for your mistress? You must be a very loyal companion." Scratching behind the dog's large floppy ears, he actually grinned. "You should not blame her for leaving you, though. She had to come care for her sister. Her loyalty, like yours, is a very admirable trait."

With that comment, Pax did something even more unusual. He very carefully got up on his hind legs and, placing his front paws on Mr. Darcy's shoulders, began licking the man's face. Elizabeth's mouth fell open. Her dog only ever did that with her! This was the man who, until today, she thought had a heart of stone. He was cold and unfeeling, insulting not only herself but the entire Meryton community. Mr. Darcy thought he was above them all.

What was happening? Pax was normally an excellent judge of character, and yet he was showering Mr. Darcy with affection. It was obvious that he saw something in the man, something that she could not see. Did he have food in his pockets? Pax never begged other people for attention, but it was the only idea that came to her that did not end with the thought that she had completely misjudged Mr. Darcy.

If her dog liked Mr. Darcy that much, perhaps she could stop ignoring that little voice in the back of her mind that kept saying she would probably never meet someone able to debate so intelligently ever again. Not to mention the voice that pointed out the

way his dark brown hair curled on his forehead. Despite his reserved demeanor, there was no denying that the gentleman possessed a striking handsomeness that captivated her.

Elizabeth shook her head, berating herself for allowing such foolish ideas to enter her mind. She was at Netherfield to care for her sister, not to dwell on impossible daydreams. There was no point in pursuing the impossible. She would have to double her efforts to help Jane recover so that she could return home and leave the impossible behind at Netherfield.

Darcy found the way that Pax could look him in the eye while standing on his hind legs unsettling. Miss Elizabeth's dog was an enormous creature, but he seemed to know his strength. The move could have easily knocked him down had the dog wished it, but Pax was careful with him. It had been some time since Darcy had his face washed so thoroughly by a dog. Part of him wanted to giggle like a little boy, but he knew he could never protect himself from such an opponent and hoped he did not taste too good.

"I do not know if I should be angry at you or him. He never does that with anyone but me," Miss Elizabeth admitted, her tone teasing despite her narrowed gaze.

Mr. Darcy could only marvel at the image of Miss Elizabeth, who was rather petite, being treated in the same manner by her enormous dog. Mr. Darcy could only say, "Then I will look at his behavior as an act of friendship, though the realization of my own relative size compared to Pax is rather daunting."

"Yes," Miss Elizabeth agreed with a grin, "I am so used to his size that I sometimes forget that not all dogs are larger than I am." Snapping her fingers, Miss Elizabeth called her dog back to her side. "Pax, leave the poor man alone. He does not need your help grooming himself."

With one last lick, Pax reluctantly hopped back from him and returned to Miss Bennet's side. Free of the dog's weight, Darcy breathed a small sigh of relief. Pax could certainly be overwhelming up close, not that he begrudged the animal. He was a friendly dog, that was for sure. Watching Pax nuzzle Miss Elizabeth, Darcy said, "I do not begrudge him a little affection. The genuine nature of dogs is something that never fails to amaze me; they always express their true feelings without hesitation. Unlike humans, they don't feel the need to put on a facade of liking you."

Miss Elizabeth's eyes danced as she said, "I do not know. I am sure if you had a nice juicy steak, there would be many a dog willing to sit pretty for such a treat, whether they liked you or not."

Letting loose a bark of laughter, Darcy amended his earlier comment. "You are right. Dogs will be honest as long as their bellies do not influence them unduly."

"Are you sure you do not have any bacon from breakfast in one of your pockets?" Elizabeth asked with a playful smirk. "It might explain why he likes you so much."

"No, no bacon," he assured her, silently hoping she could not tell how that smirk unarmed him. "I do not know why, but most dogs like me," he added with a shrug.

Miss Elizabeth's gaze went to his shoulders, and her jovial features dissolved into a worried frown. Darcy looked down, trying to see whatever had disturbed her. "Pax has left paw prints on your shoulders. I am so sorry about that. He probably got very muddy on his journey from Longbourn."

Darcy brushed at the large paw prints halfheartedly. "Do not worry about it. I will just change my jacket after I come back in from my morning ride. I must give my valet something to do, or he will get bored."

His joke elicited a warm smile from Miss Elizabeth, her eyes sparkling with mirth.

Yet her expression turned to one of embarrassment as she rediscovered the dirt on her dress, prompting her to hastily brush at it. He was surprised when she said, “I do not know what came over me kneeling in the dirt like that when I saw Pax. My mother is forever scolding me for my thoughtless behavior. I would hate for you to think that all the Bennets are so uncouth. Jane is always so much more mindful of acting like a true lady.”

Shaking his head, Darcy could not quite understand Miss Elizabeth’s train of thought. He quickly responded to her statement, anxious to put her at ease. “I saw nothing to criticize. You did nothing but greet an old friend.” Losing the strength of his smile, Darcy became lost in thought, remembering how happy he always was to see his dog whenever he had been away. Locking gazes with Miss Elizabeth again, he added, “I will admit to similar behavior when I returned home to Pemberley and my own dog would come to greet me.”

“Would? Did you lose your pet, Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth spoke, her voice soft with compassion, and Darcy wondered if she was familiar with the pain of losing a beloved pet.

Remembered pain drew his mouth into a hard line for a moment before he said, “Yes, it was not so very long ago that my dog, Rex, died. It is only lately that I have been thinking of finding another companion.” As Darcy spoke, he could have sworn Miss Elizabeth’s eyes had gone misty for a moment. Was it the early morning light playing a trick on him?

Miss Elizabeth confirmed his guess when she said, “I can understand the hardship. Was he the very king of dogs, as his name would imply?”

Mr. Darcy’s face split with a smile as his mind filtered through so many happy memories of his time with Rex. He had thought his dog was large, but now, seeing Miss Elizabeth’s magnificent beast, he knew otherwise. “I certainly thought so when

I named him at nine, though he would never compete with Pax here for size.”

Patting Pax’s enormous head where it hovered near her waist, Elizabeth laughed. “Few could. I have been told he is large even among his litter mates and breed.”

Silence seemed to grow between them for a moment, as if they had both forgotten that they did not converse easily together until they were halfway through their conversation. Eventually, Elizabeth cleared her throat. “Well, I should take Pax around to the stables. Hopefully, they will tolerate Pax staying there well enough. Now that he has found me, there will be no getting him to leave until I do.”

“I was going there myself. I had hoped to go on a morning ride while...” Darcy knew he could not politely finish that sentence. It would not do to tell Miss Elizabeth that he was avoiding Miss Bingley. “Why don’t we walk there together? How do horses normally respond to Pax?”

“I think they typically view him as an odd, horribly deformed, hairy cousin that should be accepted in the herd.” As she chuckled at her small joke, Darcy’s senses were awakened by the delightful sound, which filled the air with a joyful melody. It was a melody that he knew he had to hear again. Miss Elizabeth continued, “Pax is used to spending time in the stables with horses when I am not available to shadow.”

As they made their way to the stables, Darcy’s mind raced with how he could make Miss Elizabeth laugh again. All of his ideas evaporated, however, when a crooning voice broke the comfortable silence. “Oh, Mr. Darcy, you are always up and about bright and early,” Miss Bingley said as she approached. Cringing, Darcy instinctively moved his arms behind his back so that she might not latch onto him, while maintaining a certain amount of distance between the two of them. The sight of the woman up so early and dressed in yet another garish orange outfit, complete with an abundance of lace and swaying feathers, left Darcy confounded. Miss Bingley was normally one to be abed much later than the rest of her brother’s household.

While he was trying to come up with a response to Miss Bingley's non-question, she started speaking again, but Darcy paid no attention to her words because Pax had caught his eye. Pax appeared to be watching Miss Bingley's actions closely. He moved stealthily on enormous, yet delicate, paws creeping closer to the woman. Darcy wondered what the dog might be thinking. Was he trying to protect him from Miss Bingley?

Miss Bingley's intense focus on Darcy's face, or possibly the way she was fluttering her eyelashes, made her completely oblivious to Pax's movements and Miss Elizabeth's presence. Darcy glanced over to Miss Elizabeth, only to see her completely unconcerned by Pax's behavior.

Meanwhile, Miss Bingley continued to complain about the lackluster gardens at Netherfield. Finally taking a breath, Miss Bingley glanced briefly at Miss Elizabeth before cooing, "Really, Mr. Darcy, you do not have to waste your time with pathetic hangers on who cannot keep up their appearance. Why not take a walk with me along the paths here? It is a poor excuse for a garden, but I am sure the company will more than make up for it." Her attempt to step forward and grab his arm was thwarted by Pax, who had strategically positioned himself to impede her progress.

Stumbling, she glared down at the dog and attempted to shove him out of her way. Only the dog was far too large to be easily moved. With a grateful smile, Darcy's hand caressed the dog's hair, and giving him an appreciative pat for his protective stance. Miss Bingley was less appreciative. "Why is this unmannerly beast here?" she screeched. "Mr. Darcy, I will have him removed immediately."

Miss Bingley grabbed a fist full of Pax's hair from the scruff of his neck and began tugging. Pax looked up at Darcy before looking back at Miss Bingley and yawning, completely unmoved. Miss Elizabeth coughed and Darcy wondered if she was hiding a laugh before she said, "Miss Bingley, Pax is not easily swayed from his decision to protect those he likes. Besides, you are likely to get your dress dirty."

Her attention diverted from Pax, Miss Bingley let out an annoyed “hurmpf” before remarking, “You! You wretched woman! I should have known your pet would be just as terribly ill-mannered. You arrived without invitation, so of course your great beast would do the same. Can you not see that you are not welcome here?”

Unfazed by the attack, Miss Elizabeth coolly responded, “I can easily tell by the incivilities that you have leveled towards my sister and me that you wish us to leave. Believe me, the moment Jane is well enough to return home we will, but I will not endanger her health by leaving any sooner. Maybe if you had given Jane the necessary assistance upon her arrival, when she was drenched to the bone, we wouldn't find ourselves in such an uncomfortable state.”

With a flushed face, Miss Bingley huffed in frustration and made yet another futile attempt to separate Pax from Darcy. In her struggle, she lost her footing and fell unceremoniously into the dirt. Pax's tail thudded in amusement as he leaned down and began to sniff about her head. Frustrated beyond measure, she heaved herself up and bolted back into the house with a wail, her dirt-streaked appearance not escaping Darcy's notice.

With his tail wagging and tongue lolling to the side, Pax stood and eagerly looked up at Darcy. Chuckling, Darcy ran his hand through Pax's wild mop of hair, happy to reward Pax for his valiant attempt to protect him from Miss Bingley. Finding the need to say something, Darcy turned to Miss Elizabeth. “I am honored to have Pax's loyalty. He was very well behaved despite Miss Bingley's provocation, and I have enjoyed his company.”

Smiling widely, Miss Elizabeth answered, “Pax is very protective of those he likes.” Looking in the direction that Miss Bingley had hurried away, she remarked, “It appears that he wasn't particularly fond of Miss Bingley.”

“Perhaps it was all the feathers?” Darcy was happy to hear the laugh that his

comment prompted as he continued to walk with her toward the stables. Soon enough, he was introducing Miss Elizabeth to the head groom. Though surprised at seeing a dog of such a size, the groom was more than happy to allow him to stay in the stable with his other charges for the time being. Before they knew it, it was time for Miss Elizabeth to bid him farewell.

“I need to go change out of this dress and check on Jane.”

Chagrined at not having been courteous enough to ask about her sick sister, Darcy said, “I should have asked about her earlier. How is Miss Bennet faring?”

“I think her fever came down some in the night, but I fear it might be some days before she is fully recovered. Thank you for asking.”

“Do let us know if you or your sister should need anything at all.” Darcy paused to ponder a moment. He did not want to be rude, but he wanted to make sure that the maids helping the Bennet sisters were compensated for the extra work. He decided the best way was to simply ask her about them. “Which of the maids have been helping you and your sister? I am sure one of them could help you with that dress while you are here.”

Darcy watched in fascination as a blush spread across Miss Elizabeth’s cheeks. What was she blushing about? “Oh, we do not have a maid per se, but everyone has been kind to bring the things that I have requested. Mary packed me plenty of dresses in the trunk she sent over. I am sure I will have something to change into. Once I get back to Longbourn, my maid will see to it. Do not worry.” With a quick curtsy and a loving pat on her dog’s head, Miss Elizabeth went on her way, disappearing into the house.

Tilting his head, Darcy pondered her statement. Had Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst refused to assign the sisters even one maid between them? Was this lack of

consideration and common courtesy evidence of their ineptitude or spite? Judging from the earlier argument, it would seem that it was the latter. Frowning, Darcy forced himself to accept his horse's reins from the groom and offer his gratitude for his swift work. Deciding it was only fair to let his friend savor his morning coffee before confronting him with the problem that was his sister, he elected to go for a ride beforehand. Miss Bingley's reign as mistress of Netherfield was going to be at an end if he had anything to say about it.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 9, 2025, 6:58 am*

### Chapter Three

Elizabeth made it back to her room and leaned back against the door as soon as she closed it. She could not decide how she was supposed to feel at the current juncture. She had knelt on the ground to play with Pax in front of Mr. Darcy. As a result, her dress needed a good cleaning, and she did not know if she should be humiliated, relieved, or intrigued by their encounter.

She knew she had not acted the part of the lady, but oddly enough, Mr. Darcy did not seem put off by her behavior. Quite the contrary, he had seemed to unwind the longer they interacted. He had been in a bad mood at first; he had kicked that stone at her unknowingly, after all. While she had no idea what he might have been upset about, it did not really matter. He had apologized and even moved to protect her from Pax when he had thought him a threat.

Elizabeth was left pondering the fact that Mr. Darcy was a true gentleman, despite his normally cold and severe disposition. His first instinct was to protect her and when she had behaved in such a fashion as to fall to her knees and play with her dog, he had not even blinked an eye. A woman like Miss Bingley, or any other woman of his set, would have most likely fainted dead away at her behavior. Moving to the small chair beside her bed, Elizabeth collapsed into it, landing in an unladylike heap. How was she to reconcile all the contradicting aspects of Mr. Darcy that she had been presented with?

Fact one, he had insulted her and ignored everyone at the Meryton assembly. Fact two, he had been acting oddly around her ever since she had arrived at Netherfield. She had interpreted his behavior as further proof of his being haughty, but would a

haughty man have acted as understanding as he had that morning? Fact three, Pax obviously like Mr. Darcy, who was, she suspected, a dog person. Could a person who Pax liked be all that bad? What was happening?

Elizabeth found herself suddenly looking at Mr. Darcy in a new light—a confusing light. Sighing, Elizabeth pulled her mind from contemplating Mr. Darcy. She had a sister to care for. She would worry about puzzling out the handsome gentleman some other time. Elizabeth looked down at her dirty skirt and went to the bellpull. She would need some help changing, and then too Jane would need tea and something light to eat this morning. Elizabeth knew that if Jane continued to eat next to nothing, her recovery would be sluggish, so she was determined to tempt her into eating a substantial meal. She greatly anticipated the possibility of escaping Netherfield and the company of Miss Bingley. Her confusion about her interactions with Mr. Darcy only heightened her eagerness to depart.

The long ride had not helped cool his temper as much as Darcy had hoped. Patting his horse's neck affectionately, Darcy nodded to the groom who had come to see to Agilis. "He could probably use a good rubdown."

"Do not worry, Mr. Darcy, I will take care of him." Reaching up, the young man scratched at one of Agilis's ears, a grin on his face. Then nodding to Darcy, he turned, leading Agilis away to be rubbed down and cared for. It reassured Darcy that the young man so obviously loved animals.

Facing the house, Darcy rubbed the side of his nose. He knew he could no longer put off speaking with Bingley about his sister. Drawing his shoulders back, Darcy took a deep breath, knowing it was best to face the coming conflict head on. He was almost glad that he would soon have it done with.

Walking confidently, Darcy made his way into the house and into Bingley's study, where he hoped his friend would be. He did not want to have to go searching for him

and risk finding Miss Bingley instead. Only opening the door, he found something that he was not at all expecting.

Having changed out one orange monstrosity into a cleaner one, Miss Bingley was complaining, “It is not to be borne! The beast attacked me, ruining one of my best morning dresses.”

Bingley took a slow sip of his morning coffee before letting out a sigh. Then, he studied Caroline and asked, “But where did the animal come from, Caroline?”

Tilting her head, Miss Bingley snorted inelegantly. “I do not know! I am not the keeper of animals. I am the hostess of this dilapidated estate. All I know is that Miss Elizabeth had something to do with it.”

“I have not had nearly enough coffee to deal with this nonsense. You certainly do not seem to be injured, and I doubt Miss Elizabeth would have some monster on hand to attack you.” With his coffee cup in hand, Bingley took another swig.

In a display of frustration, Miss Bingley stomped her foot and declared, “You may doubt as you please, but it is essential that we remove Miss Elizabeth and Miss Bennet from Netherfield and put an end to their underhanded scheming.”

Deciding to step in and help his confused friend while confronting Miss Bingley at the same time, Darcy stepped forward and cleared his throat. “Your sister was not attacked. She fell while trying to shove a very large dog.” While Miss Bingley spun around with widened eyes, Bingley smiled to see Darcy there.

Darcy watched in fascination as Miss Bingley’s face morphed into a smile as she replied, “Despite Mr. Darcy's perspective, Miss Elizabeth had absolutely no justification for introducing her unruly pet to Netherfield and causing such chaos.”

Leaning up against the doorjamb, Darcy countered by saying, “Pax followed his mistress here of his own free will and has been happily settled in the stables with the horses. In fact, he has already made friends with the stable hands.”

“Did no one think to ask my opinion before he showed up?” Miss Bingley asked.

Chuckling, Bingley interjected, “It sounds like the dog made the trip on his own.” Looking at Darcy, he asked, “Is he really that large?”

Darcy nodded with a smile, knowing that his friend was just as fond of dogs as he was. “He is the largest dog I have ever met.”

Likely upset at being ignored, Miss Bingley seemed unable to hold back her annoyance any longer and blurted out, “Well, it is highly inappropriate for him to be here! It is inappropriate for any of the Bennets to be here. I only invited Miss Bennet over for tea, not the week, and yet we keep getting more of them! I am the hostess of Netherfield, and I want them gone!”

Feeling the weight of the situation, Darcy mustered the courage to speak up. “Even if she harbored negative feelings towards the person, a responsible hostess would set aside her emotions and dedicate herself to tending to a sick guest, doing everything within her power to make them feel at ease. I must express my doubts about your sister's suitability as your hostess on an estate,” he said.

“How can you say that?” Miss Bingley questioned, her eyes widening in apparent shock. She reached out towards him but only grasped air.

Her mouth snapped shut when Darcy stared back at her unflinchingly before turning to Bingley and saying, “Did you know that she never assigned a maid to either of the Bennet ladies? I had thought her snide remarks and constant need to put their family down were bad enough, but to not provide the basic courtesy of even a shared maid.”

Turning to Miss Bingley, Darcy glared. “Providing a maid to a guest, especially a sick guest, is only the most basic of tasks done by the mistress of the house.”

Opening his mouth and then closing it, Bingley drew his lips up tight, forming a crinkle in his chin. Eventually he opened his mouth again, this time saying, “What do you have to say for yourself, Caroline? Do you feel that you are being a good hostess?”

Now that got her attention, and she seemed to lose some of her vigor, but she did not back down. “Do not be ridiculous. I have been an exceptional hostess. Don’t you like the meals I have arranged since we have arrived?”

“Planning meals is not the crux of being a hostess, at least not in the country.” Bingley said this with a certain amount of authority that Darcy did not recognize.

Rolling her eyes, Caroline snapped, “What do you know about it, Charles? You are only interested in finding your next angel. Who I might add should not be Miss Bennet. She is completely insipid and has none of the connections you will need in a wife.”

“I can almost guarantee that had your roles been reversed, and you were ill at Longbourn, Miss Bennet would have ensured that you had a maid there to look after your care.” As Bingley finished speaking, a twitch began in his tightly clenched jaw muscles.

Caroline took her favorite position, with her nose in the air and her disdain wrapped about her like a cloak. “As if I would ever deem grace that estate with my presence or have the gall to get sick while visiting someone.”

Narrowing his eyes, Bingley stood and pressed his fists into the wood of his desk. “Did you or did you not provide a maid for each of the Bennet sisters, as is the only

acceptable action as the hostess of an estate?"

Making a sound that somehow resembled a scalded cat, Caroline slapped her palms down on the table and leaned right back into her younger brother. "Why should I enable those two grasping social climbers?" she growled. "I doubt Miss Bennet is even really ill. If they want a maid so badly, then they can both go back to where they belong."

Realizing that Bingley was really getting nowhere with his shrew of a sister, Darcy decided it was time to speak up. "Bingley, I thought you had called Mr. Jones, the apothecary, to see Miss Bennet. Did you not?"

Bingley's response was swift. "Why yes, I did. Mr. Jones confirmed that Miss Bennet was quite unwell and should not be moved until well after her fever receded. He assured me that though her illness is not life threatening at this point, it could get worse if she was forced to travel home unduly, even if by carriage."

Darcy could see the exact moment that Miss Bingley realized how she had behaved in front of him as it filtered across her face. From his perspective, it seemed as though she didn't even register her brother's words, as if they didn't exist in her world. She was too preoccupied with strategizing how to present her actions in the most favorable manner. Contempt and scorn changed to concern and deference in a blink. Miss Bingley dropped her aggressive posture and the angry lines on her face disappeared so quickly that he idly wondered if it had hurt her face to change character so swiftly.

Adopting a demure pose, Miss Bingley simpered, "Mr. Darcy, I apologize for allowing my brother to bring up private matters while you are present. Charles, we really should not be boring him with such insignificant matters." She finished her comment with a blindingly false smile in Darcy's direction, and he had a hard time not rolling his eyes at her.

He did not want to put her on her guard just yet, so he tested the waters by saying, “That is where you are wrong, Miss Bingley. I came to Netherfield to help your brother learn how to become the master of an estate. This is just the sort of conversation that aligns with that purpose.” Darcy watched as his words seemed to seep into Miss Bingley’s mind. He could almost see her thoughts as they chased after one another, trying to find a solution to the problem that she had created. It was obvious that she was not willing to give up on making herself look good.

Bingley was studying his sister as well as he settled back in his chair. “In fact, Caroline, I have recently realized that there are several things that, as the current master of this estate, I have been remiss in keeping track of. Before we get into those matters, I would like to circle back to the Miss Bennets’ lack of maid.” Pausing for a moment, Bingley tapped his fingers on the desk in succession. It was a habit Darcy was familiar with. Bingley was thinking deeply of something, and Darcy wondered if it was the same thing that he had realized as soon as he learned that a maid had not been provided. Opening his mouth, he asked, “Upon Miss Bennet's arrival, soaked from the storm, did you extend the gesture of providing her with a maid, a room, and a change of clothes to help her dry off?”

Miss Bingley’s eyes widened only slightly at her brother’s question before simply saying, “No.”

Darcy tilted his head. Did she think that by providing the shortest and least helpful answers that she would not incriminate herself by her obviously cruel actions? Darcy was not disappointed when he heard his friend reply, “And how did you feel that not seeing to your invited guests care would contribute to proving yourself an excellent hostess?”

Mouth pressed into a hard line, Miss Bingley hesitated before once again smiling at Darcy as if she already had Darcy on her side. “It was Miss Bennet who chose to arrive looking like a drowned rat. I was not unaware of her plot to garner sympathy. I

was resolute in my decision to thwart her relentless efforts to further manipulate her way into your life. Seeing to her care in such a way would be the equivalent of rewarding deceit. I am sure Mr. Darcy knows how important it is to remind people of their proper place.” This time, when Miss Bingley looked at him with a smile, he did roll his eyes. “I did not expect her to pretend to fall ill.”

Eyes narrowing, Bingley snapped at his sister. “I have already mentioned the fact that Miss Bennet is indeed ill. Your continued denial of such is not helping your case.” It was obvious to Darcy that his friend was growing tired of his sister’s game. “When Miss Bennet was forced to stay the night, did you, at that point, provide a maid and clothes to change into?”

Brushing at an imaginary speck of lint on her dress, Miss Bingley said, “Any of the maids were available to provide assistance had she summoned them. It is not as if I forbade them from helping her.”

“But you did not assign a maid for their sole use. Meaning that any maids that have helped them had to do it between their normal tasks, giving them extra work.” Bingley continued trying to push his point home.

Darcy considered both siblings. It appeared to him that Bingley was finally understanding just how petty his sister truly was. Miss Bingley, on the other hand, was digging her heels in. She would not back down until she had dug her own grave, so to speak.

Unaware of just how precarious her position was, Miss Bingley gave a simple, delicate shrug of her shoulders and said, “I suppose.”

Knowing that it was time to change tactics, Darcy said, “How are the tenants faring? Have you checked on any of them?”

“Why should I ever demean myself by visiting tenants ?” Miss Bingley’s voice rose as she spoke and ended in a shriek.

Having become tired of the back-and-forth, Darcy stepped away from the doorjamb and said, “Because, Miss Bingley, that is the responsibility of a good mistress of an estate.”

“Surely not! You must be joking, Mr. Darcy. Surely there must be someone else that sees to such menial tasks.” Miss Bingley began to laugh but her humor quickly faded into nothing.

Two years of dodging the woman’s unwanted advances had worn Darcy’s tolerance thin. The time had come to force her to confront the harsh reality of her position in the world and in his life. Opening his mouth, Darcy allowed her to see his contempt for her actions in his countenance. “It is evident from your lightheartedness that you have no comprehension of the role of an estate’s mistress, which is just one of the factors that would prevent me from ever considering you as my wife. Yes, I have heard all your hints, and I have seen how you have tried to show off what you see as your accomplishments. I am not, nor have I ever been tempted to consider you as my future wife. In fact, had you ever attempted to compromise me, it would not have gone well for you. I know what you are about, but until now I have been too polite to point out that you know not the first thing about being the mistress of an estate. Not only that, but you are vicious and cruel, two qualities I abhor.”

Darcy watched as the truth of his gaze and his words sunk into her one-track mind. She seemed to realize that trying to impress him would get her nowhere and simply glared at him with her hands on her hips. “I will have you know that I went to one of—”

“Yes, I know you went to a seminary, but I will tell you this. It taught you nothing of importance to me. You learned only gossiping and petty posturing.” It seemed that

once let go, the floodgates of Darcy's frustration were wide open. He could not tolerate her any longer. Looking to Bingley, he said, "It seems that you have a discussion to have with your sister about household matters and I do not think I can keep a civil tongue if I stay here much longer. Besides that, I am hungry. I skipped a proper breakfast because I did not want to have to deal with your sister and her taxing ways. If you need me, I will be in the morning room. I am sure that you will keep her occupied long enough for me to eat in peace."

With a nod to his friend, Darcy left the room, shutting the door behind him, not really caring to hear the details of the explosion that was about to happen. He walked down the hall, eager to get to the coffee and sustenance that waited for him there. It had already been a long day, and it was not even noon.

Elizabeth wrung out the cloth in the basin and placed it back on her dear sister's fevered brow. The room was silent save for the sound of Jane's labored breathing, and the lack of other sounds only seemed to increase her anxiety about Jane. The soft knock on the door had Elizabeth turning to greet the visitor, grateful for the interruption of her downtrodden thoughts.

A young maid stood in the doorway. She bit her lip for a moment before she said, "Hello ma'am. Mr. Bingley has assigned me to help you and your sister. I have been freed of my other responsibilities, and I can help you with anything you may need."

Elizabeth was quite relieved to have the help. She had been nodding off in the chair in Jane's room as she cared for her the night before and she could use some rest. Not to mention it would be helpful to have someone else in charge of meals and helping with things like her soiled dress from that morning. "Thank you so much for agreeing to help. Jane is not well at all, and I am sure she would do better with more than just my help." Offering the maid a smile, Elizabeth asked, "What is your name?"

The maid gave a quick curtsy and said, "I'm Molly, Miss."

“Well, Molly, would you know how to go about seeing a dress that needs laundering?”

“Oh sure, Miss, I can take any laundry you may need help with and see to it myself or there is another maid who is a right master at dealing with stains and the like.”

Looking over at Jane, who was sleeping fitfully, Elizabeth patted her hand and got up, gesturing for the maid to follow her through the sitting room to the room that was provided for her. The dress in question was laying across the bed that Elizabeth had roughly made that morning. It wasn't that badly mussed, but it would have to be cleaned before she could wear it again and Elizabeth knew that it would be easier to deal with before the stain set. Looking at Molly, she blushed and explained, “I went on a walk this morning and well, one thing led to another, and my dress became soiled.” The maid back at Longbourn that helped her and Jane was used to her dresses returning from walks slightly mussed. Elizabeth had been with her maid Susan long enough to know that she found her habits enduring, but she would hate to give Molly the wrong impression.

Molly, however, proved herself unflappable and kind as she replied, “That is nearly nothing at all. I can take it now if you like and hopefully you may have it back by tonight or tomorrow.” Carefully folding up the dress, Molly then asked, “Are you needing anything to care for your sister? Tea or water, perhaps? Or have either of you had breakfast?”

“I asked the maid who helped me change to bring up tea and a little something when she had the chance, but I know how busy things can be at an estate this size. Hopefully, I can get Jane to stomach a little something, at least. I dislike how pale she is getting.” Elizabeth glanced back towards the doors she had left open between the rooms.

“Don't you worry, I will see to the dress and getting you both some tea and

something to eat.” Molly bobbed a curtsy and with a nod to Elizabeth, she made her way out of the room, off on her way to see to their needs.

Elizabeth felt some of the tension in her ebb away as she walked back through the sitting room and to Jane’s side. It had been a struggle to do so much for Jane without help. Not that she would balk at the task or complain. Elizabeth loved Jane and knew that she would do the same had their positions been reversed. As much as she wanted to scold Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst for their lack of common courtesy, she did not. It was not her place, and she did not want to create more drama in the house than there already seemed to be.

Removing the cloth from Jane’s forehead, she wrung it out in the nearby basin once more and dabbed at her face and neck for a moment. Then wringing it out, she placed it back on her forehead. All of this she did on instinct, not truly thinking about her actions because her mind had decided to go back to thinking about the puzzle that was Mr. Darcy.

Mr. Darcy had learned only that morning that Miss Bingley had not provided a maid for Elizabeth and Jane and suddenly a maid appeared. He would never overstep his authority and ask a maid to see to them, so he must have spoken with Mr. Bingley. She wondered how that had gone.

It all made her more confused. On the one hand, Mr. Darcy seemed to have a tendency of being cold and aloof, but on the other hand, he realized she did not have something she needed and immediately set things to rights. And her dog liked him. Pax liked him a lot. Just who was the true Mr. Darcy? And if he was actually this thoughtful and considerate man who her dog loved, why did he behave in such a contrary manner at other times?

Jane forced herself to open her eyes despite the floaty feeling that persisted. It only took a glance around the room to remember that she was not at home in bed. Her

sluggish mind supplied her with the memories to put the pieces together. She had ridden to Netherfield and become soaked. Without the proper care that she would have expected, she had quickly become chilled. The rest of her time became vaguely fuzzy. She had sent a note home and eventually Lizzie had appeared. Between the weight pressing down on her chest and the headache and chills, it was simple for her to realize that she was rather sick.

She observed her sister as she sat in the chair beside her bed. Really, she was too tired, and her throat was too sore to speak, but that did not stop her from wondering what had her sister so pensive and confused. There was something about her look that made Jane think it was not her own ill condition that had Elizabeth out of sorts. Sadly, Jane did not have the energy to think about it for long. She was quickly drifting back to sleep, telling herself to inquire about it later.

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### Chapter Four

Darcy ran a comforting hand along Agilis's neck, feeling the warmth of their morning run still coursing through his veins, and acknowledged that it was time to return to Netherfield. He pulled on the reins to turn Agilis back the way they had come with a sigh. Darcy took a deep breath, feeling the crisp air fill his lungs before slowly exhaling through pursed lips.

On the one hand, he was happy that Caroline had backed off from her pursuit of him. The confrontation from two days ago had shattered any illusions she had about a possible future with him, or at least he hoped it did. At least she was no longer hounding him as he went about his day.

His biggest concern was the fact that Miss Bennet seemed to be recovering. Normally he would be happy to learn something of the like, but if she was better, it meant that she and Miss Elizabeth would soon return home. There was something about their impending departure that he resisted, as he enjoyed the opportunity to talk with Miss Elizabeth and didn't want it to come to an end so quickly.

For some reason, this unnerved him. Darcy had never had a desire to spend more time with a woman before and yet here he was wishing for more time with Miss Elizabeth Bennet. There was just something about the way she held her own in a debate that entranced him. It was just so unsettling, and he was not exactly sure what he wanted to do about it.

In no time at all, Darcy had arrived at Netherfield, his ruminations having gotten him nowhere. Dismounting, he handed the reins off to the stable hand with a "Thank

you.” Then, spotting Pax dozing in the hay near the tack room, he asked, “How has Pax been settling in?”

The young man grinned as he looked over at the large dog, his voice filled with cheer as he said, “Oh, just fine. You could almost mistake him for a foal the way he interacts with the horses. I had heard Miss Elizabeth rarely went anywhere without him, but I had yet to see her enormous shadow as the townspeople sometimes refer to him.”

Curiosity stirred in Darcy. So, the town knew of her giant shadow. He supposed that was good. “It sounds like Pax is well known in the area.”

Nodding, the groom brushed a lock of sandy brown hair out of his eyes. “Oh yes. Miss Elizabeth is the active sort, always out and about on walks, seeing to various aspects of the Longbourn estate and its tenants. She may not always have a groom available to walk with her, but she almost always has her shadow there to see to her safety. I do not think there is anything he would not do for his lady.”

Thanking the stable hand again, Darcy went to go sit in the nearby garden. The weight of confusion burdened his mind, causing him to avoid the main house and any potential conversations. Darcy found a spot on a stone bench to settle, his eyes staring blankly into the distance as he pondered, until he felt a wet nose nudge his hand.

Darcy looked at Pax with a smile and asked, “Did you come find me, Pax?” He couldn't help but notice the dull thud of Pax's tail against the leaf-strewn ground. It seemed the dog was happy to see him.

Figuring that Pax would be a good confidant, he said, “What do you think, Pax? I am just not used to wanting to spend more time with a lady. Should I go against my instinct and try to spend more time with Miss Elizabeth?”

Confusion flickered across Pax's face as he tilted his head, as if trying to make sense of the question. Darcy couldn't help but chuckle, amused by the dog's reaction. It was clear that Pax had no qualms about being around the opposite sex, and he was quite eager to spend time with Miss Elizabeth. It seemed that Pax wasn't the most reliable source for advice on staying away from Miss Elizabeth.

“But what about the fact that she will be leaving soon? Just last night, she said that Miss Bennet was greatly improved. Should I try to draw closer to her when I know that she must leave?” Darcy questioned.

In response, Pax huffed and then, getting up, moved a few feet away, only to huff again before looking up at one of the windows. Curiously, Darcy followed the large dog, his eyes scanning the windows to see what had caught his attention. There on the second floor, Miss Elizabeth was standing by one of the windows. Instead of looking out the window, she appeared preoccupied with taking care of Miss Bennet.

Darcy's attention was completely consumed by watching Miss Elizabeth until Pax nudged him towards the building. Catching his balance before he fell off the bench, Darcy complained, “It is not that easy, Pax. She will be leaving soon, and I have never before found myself in the position of wanting to pursue a woman. Besides, as much as I like her, our contrasting social circles are hard to ignore.” Pax’s only response was to nudge him again.

In response to Darcy's inaction, Pax sighed, suggesting that he doubted the validity of Darcy's reasoning. While Darcy knew that he was imbuing the animal with more reasoning than was possible, he couldn't shake the sensation of being silently judged by the lanky beast. Pax had diligently followed Miss Elizabeth's scent for three miles, indicating that he believed she was worth every ounce of effort.

Darcy was confronted with the uncertainty of whether or not he shared the same sentiments as Pax and, if he did, what steps he would take once she bid farewell to

Netherfield.

Once Elizabeth had the extra help provided by Molly, it had seemed as if Jane had recovered at a swift pace. The meals that she spent in company with Mr. Bingley, his family, and Mr. Darcy had improved as well. Once Mr. Bingley realized his sister had failed to fulfill her responsibility of providing a maid, a noticeable shift occurred in the Bingley and Hurst family dynamic. This, in turn, caused the previous atmosphere of petty cruelty and backhanded compliments from the sisters to stop altogether. It was a near miracle.

If Miss Bingley did not at all look happy with her current position in the family, Elizabeth did not mind at all. With the more conducive environment to care for her sister, time seemed to fly and not crawl. Thus, Elizabeth found herself enjoying a pleasant breakfast with Mr. Darcy the morning that she would return to Longbourn. Further down the table, Jane's cheerful laughter mingled with the clatter of dishes, creating a joyful atmosphere.

“I am glad that your sister has recovered so well,” Mr. Darcy said, his tone sincere as he spoke from across the table.

Smiling at him over the rim of her teacup, Elizabeth responded, “Me too. Whenever she or Kitty catches a cold, I always worry. They seem more fragile than my other sisters. Once we get back home, she will still need to take care of herself.” Taking a sip of her tea, she watched her sister smiling at Mr. Bingley for a moment. “Despite everything, Jane is grateful for the chance to spend time with Mr. Bingley.”

Mr. Darcy picked up a piece of toast, its warm, buttery aroma filling the air as he spread a generous layer of marmalade on it. Taking a bite, he observed Jane and Mr. Bingley engaged in animated conversation before saying, “I have never seen my friend so captivated by a young lady before—he hangs on her every word. I wonder what they are discussing.”

Grinning, Elizabeth said, “My sister may not be as interested in intellectual pursuits as I am, but she is quite versed in many topics. They could be talking about anything from the concerns of the tenants to the last opera she saw in London. I am just glad he seems to return her feeling with equal measure.” Elizabeth paused to savor another bite of her food before bringing up another topic. “Speaking of conversation topics, have you heard about the proposed corn tax?”

“Actually, I have,” Mr. Darcy replied with a smile. “While I understand that many gentlemen farmers and landowners are in favor of implementing the tax, I disagree with the notion that it will benefit the general population. What is your opinion?”

Happy that she had hit upon a topic that they could both enjoy discussing, Elizabeth finished chewing her bite of eggs so that she could respond. She knew that she would not be able to enjoy such intelligent conversation once she returned home. “Considering the possibility of a few consecutive poor harvests, the corn tax could easily turn into a significant problem.”

Darcy, his mind still full of indecision, followed the ladies out to the carriage as they said their farewells. It wasn't lost on him how Pax's eyes kept flickering between him and Miss Elizabeth, making him wonder just how intelligent the dog really was. Was Pax able to perceive his uncertainty through his body language?

Despite his distraction, Darcy felt a surge of tingling sensations in his hand as he reached out to aid Miss Elizabeth into the carriage. In that moment, he was consumed by a wave of sensations, and his gaze locked on the intriguing woman who sparked a strong desire to know her better. Nudging him in a happy manner, Pax seemed to say goodbye before jumping up into the carriage unaided and settled in next to his mistress. The carriage started rolling away before he could even prepare himself for the reality of it, leaving him behind without a clue on how to proceed.

Elizabeth sighed and rubbed at her aching forehead as her mother continued another

one of her rants after what had almost been a pleasant dinner. Of course, their mother thought that they should have stayed longer, and Jane should have come back engaged. Elizabeth's arguments that Jane was seriously ill and not socializing with Mr. Bingley had done nothing for her mother's nerves. She had vented her frustration to Elizabeth, blaming her for ruining all her carefully crafted plans of making Jane arrive at Netherfield soaking wet. In her mind, Elizabeth had somehow prevented Jane from ensnaring the wealthy Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth, for her part, tried not to be angry with her mother's callous disregard for Jane's health.

After all, she knew below the surface of her mother's fretting that she loved her girls and knew of no better way to see them provided for. Her father had never found the focus to reassure his wife of little understanding that they would not, in fact, be thrown into the hedgerows.

She had only recently come to realize that both of her parents had their flaws. For the longest time, she was so close to her father that she could not see what he was not doing. He was not saving for his daughter's dowries or actively working towards building better futures for them. They did not get to have a London season, practically their only chance at marriage, because he did not like London and could not be bothered to arrange something there. He had no interest in seeing them well married. In effect, he had left his family to their own devices. When she was a child, she had fun doing and learning what she wished and had not seen the error in his ways, but now she saw the danger.

Jane, for all her beauty, was still unmarried. Her problems were twofold. First off, the war with the little tyrant left them with a dearth of eligible young gentlemen. Then too, the need to find someone to provide for all of her sisters and mother in the event of their father's demise had left her waiting for a type of man that rarely came to their sleepy little hamlet. As much as their mother talked of Jane's beauty saving them from the hedgerows, this Mr. Bingley was the first man to have the amount of money that would satisfy her. Her mother had discouraged several men whom she had not

deemed good enough for her beautiful daughter.

If their mother spoke of Jane's beauty catching a husband twice a day, she mentioned Lydia's liveliness just as much. It was that exact liveliness that worried Elizabeth the most. What her mother might see as liveliness, Elizabeth saw as unchecked foolishness. She knew that Lydia saw no reason to allow guidelines and rules for behavior to stem her fun. She foolishly expected the men she heedlessly flirted with to follow the rules of gentlemanly behavior, even if she didn't follow the rules set up for gentlewomen. If something did not change soon, Lydia's brash ways would ruin them all.

In the week since she had come home with Jane from Netherfield, things had become more complicated with the visit of their cousin Mr. Collins and the arrival of the militia in Meryton. In an effort to escape from the current chaos and her mother's latest rounds of complaints, Elizabeth had taken Pax on a long walk to check on some of the tenants on the outskirts of Longbourn land. As much as she loved her family, sometimes she needed a break and the opportunity to sort out her thoughts while all on her own. She certainly had plenty of things to think of after having spent time at Netherfield.

She still had not completely sorted out how she wanted to view Mr. Darcy. Though she had not come to any definitive conclusions, she had stopped viewing him in such a negative light. She had decided that any man who had brushed paw prints off his shoulders in such a carefree way could not be horrible.

Ignoring her mother's strident voice, Elizabeth decided that she would have to sneak out early the next morning and go for a walk. She needed the clear air and space to sort through her thoughts away from her family's craziness. Surely a nice walk would help her settle her mind.

It was impossible for Darcy to tell whether the situation had improved. While Miss

Bingley, in her spite, had stopped her foolish pursuit of him, she was now sulking and complaining, which was almost worse in its annoyance. Mrs. Hurst, who had taken over as hostess, really was not much better than her sister. While the food served was just as thought out and fancy for a country estate menu, it seemed to be the only skill the sisters possessed. There was no hint that she was doing any of the other tasks that needed doing.

This led to the fact that Bingley was entirely overwhelmed and downcast. Having decided that he would do the work of an estate owner properly, he had thrown himself into the effort. He was meeting with all the tenants and seeing if they had what they needed for winter as well as seeing to the repairs and the like that were necessary in the usual course of time. This meant that he was doing the master and mistress jobs and growing ever more exhausted.

At least he had taken the suggestion that he should lean more fully on the housekeeper. She was a capable woman who knew what she was about and reminded Darcy of his own housekeeper back at Pemberley, Mrs. Renyolds. It had helped to take some of the strain off his friend's face, but it was evident that the vibrant zest for life he once had was slowly fading away. This worried Darcy, but he had yet to discern how exactly to help him. Darcy decided to go search out Bingley, who had disappeared after dinner had finished. Hopefully, he could help solve Bingley's problem.

He entered the room with only a precursory knock before saying, "I have an idea. What if I invite my sister and Mrs. Ansley to come to Netherfield. Mrs. Ansley is well versed in running household and can, if you are interested, take over running things so you can focus on just the master's responsibilities?" Seeing that Bingley did not look convinced, he added, "We could say that it is because she is teaching Georgianna how to manage things on an estate smaller than Pemberley."

With a quick gesture, Bingley ruffled his hair, causing it to stand on end and giving

him a slightly disheveled and wild look. Dark circles under his eyes hinted at his exhaustion. Sighing, Bingley said, "Caroline and Louisa may complain, but as they are refusing to do what they should, they really can have no say in the matter. I feel compelled to urge them to return to London, where Caroline can take part in the season and, with any luck, find a suitable match, thereby resolving my predicament."

Darcy nodded in agreement before saying, "Also, if I may add, you really need to get a good night's sleep. You look absolutely exhausted."

Bingley lay his head on the desk before him with a groan, mumbling, "I know I am not getting enough sleep, but I have been trying to read up on the books you gave me after I head up to my room. I feel like I am failing in my attempt to manage Netherfield properly."

"Bingley, you are just starting out, of course you do not know everything. Despite learning from my father for years before his death, I still made mistakes when I took over running Pemberley. It is a learning process," consoled Darcy.

Picking his head up from the desk, Bingley said, "I suppose you are right."

Chuckling, Darcy said, "Whether I am right or wrong, you are too sleep deprived to tell the difference right now. Why don't you get to bed early, and we can come up with a more thorough plan tomorrow?"

Pushing himself up from his seat behind his desk, Bingley nodded. "You are right, I should get to bed, and we can come up with a plan tomorrow. The only plan that I could come up at the moment would be to ship my sisters off to Scotland if they refuse to go to London."

"Don't underestimate that idea," Darcy laughed. "I believe it will remain valid come morning."

### Chapter Five

Elizabeth let out a deep sigh and inhaled the crisp autumn air, filling her lungs. The aroma was invigorating and one of the many reasons she loved the season. She was glad that she had made the time to get out of the house and away from the hustle and bustle of all her family members. There was just something about taking in the peace of nature that helped her to shed unwanted anxiety that seemed to be piling up at home.

Her carefree walk stopped when she bumped into Pax. Normally, he walked at her side completely in tandem with her motions, the perfect walking companion. However, this morning he had stopped and was blocking the well-worn path she knew so well. Observing him, she could see the finite movements in his ears and nose. Was there something out there?

Glancing around, Elizabeth could only see the nature that she expected to see. She did not see or hear anything unusual, but she trusted Pax's instincts. Though after she waited a while only to have nothing happen, Elizabeth tried to walk further down the path, only to be once again blocked by her enormous dog. What was out there, and why was Pax so concerned?

Pax looked back at her when she once again tried to move forward and huffed in seeming frustration. Running her hand through his wiry fur as he leaned into her, Elizabeth fought her rising anxiety. She might have succeeded in calming down if she had not heard a twig snap in the distance. Straining her eyes towards the sounds, she eventually spotted a flash of red, and her mind instantly went to the militia officers who should have been miles away going about their duties, whatever they may be.

As the sound moved closer, Elizabeth knew that there was nothing she could do but wait. Pax would not let her move further down the path and she did not want whoever it was to come up behind her if she turned around and went back to Longbourn Manor. And so she waited, hoping that her dog's worries were unfounded. Though her furry companion was a complete pushover when it came to belly rubs, that didn't mean he couldn't show his size and teeth when necessary. After all, he was named peace for a reason.

Putting jam on his toast, Darcy smiled to himself. At least he could eat his breakfast in peace without worrying about being ambushed by Miss Bingley. Taking a bite, he took a moment to savor the flavor of the marmalade as it burst brightly on his tongue. He was brushing the crumbs off his cheek when a sound had him looking at the doorway.

Bingley mumbled a groggy greeting of "Morning Darce," as he entered the room.

Darcy watched as his friend stumbled over to the coffee and poured himself a cup and began drinking it black. It looked like Bingley had forsaken his usual cup of coffee with cream and sugar for a more potent blend. "You look exhausted, Bingley. Didn't you go to sleep early last night?" Darcy asked, noticing the lines etched on his friend's face.

Bingley made a face as he took a gulp of the dark drink and shuddered. Darcy managed not to laugh at his tired friend's antics as Bingley went back to the side table and added in some cream and sugar. With his now lightened and sweetened cup of coffee, Bingley slumped in a chair across from Darcy and said, "Good to know it's not just me feeling it. Otherwise, I would have thought I had only imagined being able to feel this worn."

Darcy was quick to ask, "What kept you from sleeping this time?"

Running his hand through his already mussed hair, Bingley said, "I was just up late last night reading one of the books you suggested. I had thought that it might lull me to sleep, but it did not help. My worries made it difficult for me to relax and fall asleep. There is just so much I did not know about the responsibility of land ownership, and I am finding myself overwhelmed."

Darcy could easily remember when his father had become ill and then quickly died, and he suddenly had to take over more than he was ready for. Voice soft, Darcy said, "I well understand that feeling. If it is any help, my sister and Mrs. Ansley should arrive within the fortnight. My cousin is on leave, and I went ahead and asked him to come as well. He might not be a landowner, but he knows people and would be more than happy to help you out where you might need it."

What Darcy did not say was that when he realized that the militia was in the area, he worried that his sister might just encounter Wickham. It was only recently that he discovered, through one of his informants, that Wickham had been seen donning the colors of the militia. The likelihood that Wickham would be in the area while his sister was on her way to Hertfordshire was low, but he wanted to take care.

In order to keep Wickham in check, Darcy decided to invite his cousin Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam along, knowing how much he wanted to confront the bludger. That way, if Wickham or anyone else for that matter stepped one inch out of line, he could be taken care of. With his status as a colonel and the son of an earl, Fitzwilliam would have power over Wickham, who had unwittingly placed himself within his jurisdiction by enlisting in the militia.

Bingley waved dismissively in the air while drinking the last of his coffee. Then, frowning into the empty cup, he said, "I have always liked your cousin. He is a jolly chap, though with all he must have seen, I do not know how he does it." Getting up, Bingley went back and poured himself more coffee.

Quirking an eyebrow at Bingley's desperate need for energy, Darcy cautioned him. "As much as you might need the coffee, you are going to make yourself sick if you do not eat something as well."

Bingley nodded his head and, after putting his cup down, he grabbed a plate and piled it high with all his favorites. For a time after Bingley sat back down at the table, they both ate in companionable silence. Pausing between bites, Bingley said, "We received an invitation to an engagement dinner at the Lucas house. I know my sisters will choose not to attend, but I was wondering if you would want to go with me."

This comment froze Darcy with his fork halfway to his mouth. He had promised himself that he would try to do better with the people of the community. Darcy knew that he should go but there was the question: would Miss Elizabeth be there? Could he navigate the delicate balance of kindness without raising false expectations for either of them? Seeing Bingley's hopeful expression, Darcy quickly said, "Yes, of course. I am sure it will be nice to mingle with your neighbors."

Bingley nodded and then went back to eating. Darcy meanwhile tried not to worry about the upcoming interaction with Miss Elizabeth. He ate almost mechanically, not tasting his food at all. His mind was already wondering down a dangerous path when Bingley suddenly declared, "I miss the Bennet ladies."

Darcy could not help but agree with his friend, though he would never feel comfortable saying as much. He knew duty demanded that he should not be as fixated on her as he was. At least he had stopped being so rude around her before she left. Putting his fork down, Darcy said, "I will admit that they were both pleasant company." It was both true and safe enough to say.

Bingley snorted. "Pleasant company? When compared with my sisters, they are elegance personified." Bingley fiddled with the tablecloth for a moment before saying, "I think Miss Bennet might be the one, Darcy."

Looking at Bingley over the rim of his coffee cup, Darcy debated what he should say. He had seen his friend's attraction to Miss Bennet but there was more to making a match than attraction. Wondering if his friend actually felt more than he usually did Darcy took a sip of his drink before saying, "I have seen you fall in and out of puppy love before Bingley, so you will excuse me when I have cause to doubt you when you say that."

A slight blush spread across Bingley's cheeks, and he cleared his throat. "I know I have not exactly acted with discretion when it came to my crushes in the past, but it is different this time."

"How so?" Darcy asked and, while finishing the last of his eggs, curious to hear Bingley's answer.

The corner of Bingley's mouth quirked up in a half smile before he said, "I could not really explain it well enough; I do not think. I can only say I feel different when I am with her. When I talk with her, I want to be the kind of man she deserves. She makes me want to be a better person. The type of man who is strong enough to shield and protect her from the cruelties of the world."

Darcy looked at Bingley in utter confusion. Leaning forward, he said, "Bingley, you may have come from trade, but you often rub elbows with lords and ladies. What is with this attitude? You are a cheerful person who is always kind to those he meets. You know her mother has been hunting for a wealthy enough husband for Miss Bennet since she put her out at fifteen. I question whether she deserves someone as good as you." Leaning back, Darcy thought he had spoken well until he saw the anger flash in Bingley's eyes.

Frowning at his friend in a way that Darcy recognized as a reprimand, Bingley said, "Do not be so stuck up, Darcy. You know that I have been weak in the past. I have let my sisters walk all over me until recently. Standing up for myself is not something I

typically do, as I tend to opt for the path of least resistance. I think it is one of the reasons I am struggling so hard with estate management. To fulfill this role, I must assertively guide and direct others, ensuring they understand their tasks. I have no experience doing it and I am second guessing myself.”

Knowing he was treading on unsteady ground, Darcy said, “You could reach higher than Miss Bennet. If you choose someone with better connections and a large dowry, it could help build your legacy.” It was only right that he pointed out to Bingley’s options. Right?

Rolling his eyes Bingley responded by saying, “Darcy, you know I would never be happy with a cold and calculating relationship so favored by the ton. I need love and affection in my life.”

“Yes, but does she love you?” asked Darcy.

“That is why you court a woman, Darcy, to unravel the mysteries of her heart, or perhaps to intensify the emotions that already exist.” Bingley’s voice carried an odd chiding tone, as if he recognized that Darcy was clueless when it came to matters of the heart.

Suppressing his amazement, Darcy questioned, “You are planning to court her?”

“Yes, and I am hoping to ride over to ask her father for permission sometime soon. I am just waiting to get things here in better order. Like I said, she makes me want to be a better person, a person in control of his own life and taking care of his responsibilities.” Sopping up the last bits of food on his plate with some toast, Bingley added, “Well, I am done. What say you and I go to my study to review a few things?”

Darcy nodded absent-mindedly while he wiped his mouth. Was it possible that Miss

Bennet was good for Bingley? She was a gentleman's daughter, after all. He could do much worse, and it wasn't as if Bingley was going to rush into anything. He was planning on seeing where her feelings lay. Despite his struggles, it seemed as if Bingley was in a good place with a bright future before him. So why did Darcy feel like he was missing out on something amazing while his friend was finding it?

A few swift strides had them arriving at the study and moving to sit on either side of the desk. Getting comfortable in the chair, Darcy asked, "How do the ledgers look?"

Looking down at the stacks of paper in front of him, Bingley lost his smile as he said, "I have been able to sort through some of it without issue. For example, the expenses from the stables and grounds seem fairly straightforward and everything adds up nicely. The household accounts, on the other hand, are a nightmare of poor math and confusion." Fiddling with the stack of papers in front of him, Bingley continued, "I have my sister to thank for the issues there. Her ability to add long columns of numbers seems on par with my penmanship."

"That does not bode well for her future household." Commented Darcy. Really, what had that school she went to actually taught her? Grabbing the stack of papers in the corner, Darcy flipped through it, checking the sums as he went. Math had always come easy for him. Numbers were orderly, and unlike people, they rarely confused him.

"There is so much that I have to go back and verify and correct. It is overwhelming." Dropping the pages in his hands with a sigh, Bingley added, "I never should have let Caroline bully me into allowing her to run the household. This is going to take hours to correct, won't it?"

Darcy could not think of a way to be more encouraging, so he stuck to simple and true. "Yes." He quickly saw that his curt response had not helped matters, so he added, "But do not worry about it too much. I will be here to help you with it."

Bingley's silence concerned Darcy. He could tell his friend was thinking hard about something and he wished that there was something that he could do to help take away the pained look on his face. Thinking back to when he took control of everything after his father's death, Darcy recognized how Bingley had been there to help him see that there was still light in the world. He helped him get out of his head when he needed to step away from everything that had consumed him. He would always be grateful for how he had helped him, but Darcy worried he could not return the favor.

Bingley was the one that saw the joy in a room full of darkness. That was not a skill that Darcy possessed. He was skilled at watching out for people trying to take advantage of him. He was good at staying in control and doing what was expected of him. How was he going to help Bingley as he struggled with this new endeavor? Worry for his friend had Darcy watching Bingley closely, so he saw when he seemed to make a decision.

Pushing back the papers in front of him, Bingley sighed, and scrubbing at his face, he groaned. Then, looking up at Darcy, he looked him straight in the eye and said, "What would you say if I told you I do not know if becoming an estate owner is for me?"

Brows drawn together in concern for the despondency he saw in his friend, Darcy said, "Bingley, what are you saying? Are you thinking that I will not stay your friend if you are not a landowner? That is utterly preposterous. You know I do not care for the posturing that so many of my peers do. You are a good man, a wonderful friend, and that will not change whether or not you have a piece of land tied to your name."

"But you know it is what my father wanted for me. Most all my family, in fact, have wanted this for me. Both my sisters would go mad if I even hinted that I would not become a landed gentleman."

Shaking his head, Darcy responded in earnest. "Why would that affect my

relationship with you? I want to see you happy. If you will not be happy with an estate, then I do not want it for you. I know it is what your family wanted, but it is your life, and you have the right to live it in a way that will bring you joy. Really, if your family truly loved you, then they would want your happiness more than some piece of land and prominence.”

Bingley leaned back in his chair, his eyes widening a bit as he said, “I am actually surprised that you would say that.”

“Why wouldn’t I want you to be happy?” Darcy was almost hurt that his friend would not think that he would want the best for him. Hadn’t they spent enough time together from first at school and then after? Bingley had been there for him when his father had died, and Darcy had done the same when Bingley’s parents had died in that carriage accident. Did Bingley think he was that shallow?

“I know you want me to be happy, but Darcy, you are always so fixated on what your family wants for you.” Bingley’s voice was full of a tired concern that held true even as he said, “I almost thought that you would want me to obey my family’s wishes as well.”

Sitting forward, Darcy asked, “What do you mean?”

“Take, for example, your vaunted control. You must always be in control because it is a Darcy trait that your father demanded of you. I know you castigate yourself for losing control of yourself or a situation, but Darcy, you are only human. While it is good to keep a cool head and not lose your temper, you are also allowed to enjoy yourself or get upset.” Bingley began tapping on the table. Thumb, then his other fingers in order all in a uniform speed that Darcy was familiar with. For a moment, Darcy did not know what to think. He had never allowed himself to think of anything his father taught him as wrong. His father was a good man who wanted good things for him and the tenants of Pemberley. Why would he ever question him? Bingley’s

voice drew him out of his confused thoughts when he said, “There is also the way you are going about searching for a wife.”

“My search for a wife?” Darcy felt odd and was only capable of parroting back to Bingley. How had a conversation about estate ledgers gone so far afield?

## Page 6

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### Chapter Six

It took a while for Wickham to realize that there was someone blocking his path. He was not yet recovered from the long night of rather too much of the local brew. Despite the assumed fun he had the previous evening, the lingering headache and memory loss made him almost regret his choices. So it took him a moment to realize that the woman with the rather large dog in front of him was one of the pretty Miss Bennets.

She was not the oldest and most beautiful of the sisters; she was the fiery one. He had always found the most enjoyment in pursuing fiery women like her. What was her name? Elinor, Eliza, it was something with an E, perhaps? Elizabeth! That was it. He looked at the sky before approaching her. Though pressed for time, Wickham understood the value of laying solid groundwork when it came to women who thought they were intelligent.

Once he had walked a few feet away from her, he stopped and gave one of his most gallant, practiced bows. He had long known it was his manners that opened doors and allowed him liberties with the ladies. He smiled at her despite the look her dog was giving him and said, “What a pleasure to see you, Miss Elizabeth. How do you fare this fine autumn morning?”

When Miss Elizabeth did not immediately respond to him with joy, Wickham studied her. She had one of her hands lost in the fur of her great, lanky beast. Her expression was not as receptive as he would have liked, but it was not something that would stop him from his game. It only made it more fun. Eventually, she smiled and said, “Good morning, Mr. Wickham. I did not expect to see you on my father’s lands this

morning.”

Knowing it would not do for him to tell her the truth Wickham fell back on his old standard saying, “Oh well, as someone cast aside by the one person who should have been my friend and my support, I have been forced to take up the occasional odd job to augment my funds as an officer in the militia.” There he was sure that her natural compassion would look right past why he was somewhere he should not be, to the fact that he had been poorly misused.

As he anticipated, Miss Elizabeth asked, “Who has treated you so poorly? You have always seemed jolly and proud of your position in the king’s militia. I would have never known that you were struggling for funds and support.”

“I am not certain you would much know him. Mr. Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire keeps to himself and is often cold and unyielding to those he sees as below him. Coincidentally, he is in the area. Have you met him?” Wickham was certain his old friend would not have presented himself at all well in the current company. He never did.

Miss Elizabeth nodded her head with a slight air of confusion. She said, “Yes, I have been having a rather hard time puzzling him out.”

Perfect! Wickham smiled at her expression. Now all he had to do was to slip her a little more of his sad story before he left. “He is a hard one to understand. Fitz and I grew up together, but our relationship turned sour sometime after his father also sent me to school with him. He did not like the fact that his father loved me, his godson, as well as he did. Things became worse as we continued to grow older. Our pursuits growing more and more different, he refused to even acknowledge me when he was out and about with the people who called him friend. Still, I never would have thought that he would end up treating me so poorly.” He let his story end in the middle, knowing it would make her want to know more. It was even mostly true.

Their pursuits had diverged when they went to school and Darcy had eventually stopped acknowledging him. He was too much of a stuck-up prig to acknowledge such a wastrel. Being sure to keep his face looking hurt and somber, he tried taking a step closer so that she could see the way he could make his eyes water at the next part. Only his movement seemed to anger her dog. The moment he took a step, a menacing growl emanated from the dog's deep chest, causing Wickham to freeze in his tracks.

Looking down at her dog in alarm, Miss Bennet scolded, "Pax, one would think you had reason to take offense at Mr. Wickham if you continue in such a manner." Running her hands soothingly through his coat, Miss Elizabeth spoke to him in a tone too low for Wickham to pick up before she looked back at him. "I am not sure why Pax is acting so. He is normally friendly unless I am threatened in some way. Please, go on with your tale." Miss Elizabeth nodded, her hands still moving in her dog's coat.

Being sure not to make any threatening movements that might anger Miss Elizabeth's monstrosity, Wickham said, "Things came to a head shortly after old Mr. Darcy's death. I loved the man like a father, especially as he had looked after me so well once my father, his steward, had died. Mr. Darcy had promised that I would be well provided for, but when it came to fulfilling his father's request, the current Mr. Darcy allowed his bitterness to keep him from acting honorably. Fitzwilliam Darcy found a loophole that allowed him to deny me the living that his father had promised me. It would have been an enjoyable life, seeing to the needs of the Kympton flock. Alas, it is no longer my destiny. I shift for myself and if I have any hope of providing for the family I wish to have one day, I must find ways to put extra aside little by little. It is not what my godfather wanted for me, but it is the lot his son has left me to." When his speech was done, Wickham thought it had gone well despite the fact that he was uncertain Miss Elizabeth had seen the way his eyes watered.

Watching Miss Elizabeth, he took note that she had tilted her head, apparently lost in

thought. He waited patiently for her to say something compassionate, as the ladies always did. Seeing his look, Miss Elizabeth smiled blandly. “I am glad you have found a means of supporting yourself in the militia, though you might consider the regulars if you want to help the nation and need more ready funds. I have heard that the pay is better.”

Wickham blinked. That was not the kind of compassionate expression he was looking for. Was she the kind of person who tried to look for the best in a situation? This was going to take more time and effort than he had originally thought. He was about to draw closer to her so that he could try to get the response that he wanted, but stopped when he heard another growl. It was the kind of growl that could be felt in the hairs on the back of his neck.

The dog looked at him with danger in its eyes and Wickham knew he would get nowhere with the angry animal at her side. He would just bide his time. She did not have the animal with her all the time. Given a little more time at the parties he was being invited to, he would slowly plant seeds of manipulation in her mind, poisoning her thoughts and swaying her towards his cause. She would be ripe to pluck soon enough and, in the meantime, he was sure that there were plenty of other women willing enough. Possibly even the youngest of the Bennet girls, she seemed empty headed enough.

Wickham gave her dog one last annoyed glance before saying, “Well I have duties to attend to back in camp so I must be going. I will see you another time, Miss Elizabeth.” He finished their meeting with another unnecessarily ornate bow, and giving her dog a wide berth, hurried on his way. As soon as he was out of sight, he increased his pace, dropping his casual stride for a more hurried jog. He was not quite certain what the consequences of being derelict were, but he did not want to find out.

Elizabeth turned her head and watched Mr. Wickham go. Pax did the same, moving around Elizabeth to stay between her and the man that she had thought was a

harmless flirt. When he was finally out of sight, Elizabeth continued on her way, eager to get to the cottage of Widow Murphy. She had no desire to go all the way back to Longbourn with Mr. Wickham about. Elizabeth no longer trusted him, not with the way Pax had reacted to his presence.

Looking down at Pax, Elizabeth was overwhelmingly grateful that he had been with her and had made his displeasure known. She knew in her heart that he would protect her from the threat of Mr. Wickham, but she could not shake the feeling of wanting to reach the safety of other people. Elizabeth did not like the thought that kept popping into her mind that Mr. Wickham could easily circle back around through the woods and surprise her. She would be safe once she got to the cottage close by.

Mrs. Murphy lived with her grandchildren, and they saw to a small flock of sheep that provided some of Longbourn's needed wool. She was a kind woman who, despite her gnarled hands, could spin and weave. She was teaching her one granddaughter to take up the valuable trade. Both of Mrs. Murphy's grandsons, though sweet and kind, were rather large and could be intimidating if they chose to be. Perhaps she would ask one of them to escort her back to Longbourn?

Keeping her hand on Pax and growing confident that he would once again warn her of Mr. Wickham's approach, Elizabeth dropped her gaze to her feet. She was now even more confused about Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy. When she had first come across Mr. Darcy, he had insulted her. Mr. Wickham, on the other hand, had flirted. In no time at all, she had decided that Mr. Darcy was uncivil and above himself; she saw no reason to try to like him. Mr. Wickham was easy to like and though he flirted more than she liked, she did not think he meant anything by it.

If Mr. Wickham had told her his tale of woe before Pax had reacted so badly to him, would she have believed him? She might have had she not seen with her own eyes just how much Pax liked Mr. Darcy. His actions, seeing to the aid she needed back at Netherfield, had shown him to be an honorable gentleman. So it was not only the

sound of Pax's rarely used growl that had instantly made her wary. Both had caused her to regard Wickham's words with suspicion. Why would he share such a story with a practical stranger that could do nothing to help him? What was his intention?

Pax certainly did not think his intentions towards her were good and Elizabeth trusted her dog more than Mr. Wickham's pretty words. It was obvious that he knew Mr. Darcy and he would not have lied about a connection that she could decipher so easily. So where was the lie?

"Every season you force yourself to attend society gatherings in the marriage mart, searching for an acceptable wife. Someone of high society with connections to the highest people in the land and a large dowry. And every season you are miserable. You know any of the women at those events that your family would be happy to introduce as Mrs. Darcy would not suit you."

Slumping back into his chair, Darcy found it hard to speak the words he knew he must. His voice weary, he said, "You know my position has certain demands that come with it, Bingley. My family has certain expectations." Darcy faltered as he spoke, why did saying that hurt so much? It was merely who he was. It was an intrinsic part of his life. Almost trying to convince himself, he said, "Besides, I must marry well, or it could affect Georgianna's chances at a good marriage."

Leaning forward, his eyes slightly narrowed, Bingley said, "Didn't you just say that if my family loved me, they would want my happiness more than land or prominence?"

Somehow, Darcy felt as if he was about to have the rug jerked out from under his feet. Despite that feeling, he answered honestly. "Yes, I did."

"How does that not hold true for you as well? If your family truly cared about your happiness, they would be delighted with any woman you presented that brought joy and love into your life." Bingley maintained his eye contact boldly speaking to Darcy

in a way that he had never done before. It left Darcy wondering if these were thoughts he had held for some time but had not felt equal to expressing them. “As for Georgianna, I know you want her to be happy in marriage more than anything. Do you truly believe she would be happy in the kind of marriage you expect to have for yourself? Or would she be happy knowing you sacrificed your happiness? Have you ever considered the possibility that the men who would be deterred from marrying your sister based on your wife's identity are precisely the kind of men you wouldn't want her marrying, anyway? A man that superficial would not be her equal, nor would he really care who it was that he married only her money and pedigree.”

It took a moment before Darcy realized that his mouth hung open in shock. Where had this insightful Bingley been hiding? Instinctively, Darcy knew that he would have to analyze all that his friend had said at another time. There was simply too much in that one brief speech for him to unpack at that moment. Even without delving into all the feelings and doubts he had unleashed; Darcy had a feeling his life was about to change forever. Swallowing thickly, Darcy closed his mouth only to open it again and say, “Your insights have given me much to ponder, and I am grateful to you for shedding light on these crucial matters. I am left wondering about where all this is coming from. In all our years of friendship, I have never heard you speak so strongly to me about issues of the heart.”

“When I told you this morning that I wanted to become a better person, this is part of what I meant. For a long time, I have kept my concerns to myself because I did not want to make your life more complicated than it already was. Like I said, I have always gone for the path of least resistance. Taking up the reigns of Netherfield has forced me to realize that has not actually helped anyone. My sister was never happy despite getting her way in things and me allowing her to act as she wished only enforced her poor behavior and put a happy match that much farther away from her.”

Darcy thought he might like this more thoughtful Bingley, even more than the jovial one that acquiesced to everything. The desire to speak up overwhelmed Darcy, and he

confessed, “I never truly grasped how much you concealed.” Wincing at the thought that he had not been the best of friends to not see how much Bingley was hiding, he continued, “For future reference, any time you feel the need to say something of the sort, please feel free to do so. It's probable that everything you've said is precisely what I needed to hear.”

Bingley's typical grin flashed across his face as he said, “I am glad to hear it! I have no intention of reverting, though I might need you to remind me if you see me slipping back.” As he finished his thought, his smile slowly faded into a chagrined grin, revealing a glimpse of how conscious he was of his old behaviors.

Nodding, Darcy agreed with Bingley. “Yes, old habits can be hard to break.” Studying his friend, Darcy tried to direct their conversation back to its original direction. “Are you really wanting to give up on owning an estate?”

With his elbows propped on the desk, Bingley rested his chin on one of his palms, his voice filled with uncertainty as he said, “No, I do not think so. Though I am not as certain as I was before I learned how hard running an estate was. I have decided to spend an entire year working at Netherfield before settling on any permanent decisions.”

Nodding thoughtfully, Darcy said, “I think that is a solid plan. Any new endeavor will be hard as you learn the ropes. Who knows, you may grow to enjoy it. Besides, right now you are taking over two roles that you do not know. If you married a woman who knew what she was about, you would only to deal with half as much work.”

“You know, I am now wondering how much training Miss Bennet has in being mistress of an estate.” Bingley adopted a goofy grin, much like what he had on his face when Darcy had walked in.

“Yes, I can see the direction your mind is taking.” Darcy smiled at his friend in return. A thought struck Darcy out of the blue, causing him to ask, “Was there any particular reason you thought to bring up my search for a bride?”

Grin only widening, Bingley said, “Darcy, I have known you for years. Miss Elizabeth may not have known what you were about, but I saw the way your eyes followed her. I know she would be perfect for you, but I also know that you wouldn't act until you let go of your family's prejudiced beliefs.”

Darcy knew his bemused expression was highly entertaining to Bingley when he could not seem to hold back his chuckle. Rolling his eyes, Darcy sighed. Looking down at the desk and all the stacks of papers, Darcy saw an escape to his embarrassment. So he asked, “Do you want my help with the ledgers, or have you changed your mind in favor of visiting Longbourn to ask Miss Bennet how skilled she is at managing household accounts?”

“Ha... Ha...” Bingley rolled his own eyes before saying, “Fine, spoilsport. Can you suggest a starting point for fixing the household ledgers?”

When Elizabeth knocked on her door, Jane let her in, knowing that her sister needed to talk. Elizabeth had not been herself at all that whole day and now that night had fallen, Jane had half expected her to show. Elizabeth crawled wordlessly up to the head of Jane's bed, curling around one of her pillows. Jane stayed by the door, knowing that Pax would soon follow his mistress into the room. Sure enough, Pax silently padded into the room and Jane shut the door just as quietly. As soon as she turned around, Pax nuzzled her hand in greeting.

Scratching behind his ears, Jane said, “Hello there, Pax. Have you been a good boy today, taking care of my sister?” Jane smiled when he softly woofed in reply. He was a wonderful dog and had been sticking to her sister's side like glue. Something had happened that morning. Most likely on her sister's walk to check on some of the

rarely seen tenants. Jane watched as Pax moved to lie in a rather large ball by the crackling fire.

Turning her attention back to her younger sister, Jane moved to her side and crawled up into the bed next to her. Elizabeth still had said nothing after several minutes, but Jane knew she could wait her sister out. While Elizabeth was hot and passionate, Jane was cool and patient. It was one of the reasons they had bonded so closely as sisters, besides being so close in age. They complemented each other, and despite their differences, they saw and understood each other.

Eventually Elizabeth sighed and said, “I saw Mr. Wickham on our property today. I was out near the Murphy cottage.”

Reaching out, Jane smoothed back her sister’s hair but still did not say anything. Jane stayed quiet because she knew that if that was all there was, her sister would not be so conflicted. So she waited.

“Pax did not trust him. He prevented me from going down the path before I even knew he was there. When he moved to draw closer to me, Pax growled at him. An actual growl, not like he does when he is playing.” Rubbing her face into the pillow, Elizabeth sighed and still Jane waited.

Her voice muffled by the pillow, Elizabeth said, “I thought he was a harmless flirt, but the moment I felt Pax’s hackles rise, I began to doubt him, doubt myself.”

With the root of the problem exposed, Jane felt confident in saying, “Do you feel more disturbed by the revelation that Mr. Wickham may be deceiving everyone or by the realization that you trusted him, and he is proving himself unworthy of your trust?”

“I feel so foolish.” Elizabeth rolled over onto her back, and after sighing, continued to

speak. “Mr. Wickham told a story about how Mr. Darcy denied him a living out of spite. Jane, I think if it hadn't been for Pax, if the memories of my time at Netherfield hadn't been so fresh in my mind, I would have believed him. I would not have seen any reason to doubt him. The way he spoke was so earnest and sincere, but with Pax's warning, I could see the holes in his story and see that he was lying. My original instincts about the man were completely off the mark. What unsettled me the most was that his lies made me doubt not only him but also my own judgment.”

Nodding silently, Jane could see how that would throw her sister. She had always had a strong confidence in her ability to read others and in their small community of mostly honest people, Elizabeth was more than capable. It seemed, though, that the wider society they were experiencing might be concealing wolves in sheep's clothing. “Neither of us has much experience with practiced liars. It is only to be expected that you would be uneasy finding one in our midst. I can attest to feeling a certain amount of pain when I realized Caroline Bingley was not who she presented herself to be.”

Sitting up, Elizabeth looked at Jane, her previous worries forgotten as she looked at her sister, exclaiming, “Oh, Jane, I am sorry you had to learn that about her. I know you hoped she might grow to be your friend.”

“You tried to warn me, I know. I just hoped that she would prove herself to be a better person beneath her prickly exterior.” Squeezing Elizabeth's hand, Jane offered her a wan smile. It was just like Elizabeth to forget her own concerns if there was someone she felt the need to protect or comfort. “When she saw that I was wet and shivering but did not even invite me to sit by the fire to dry out and become warm, I knew she was not the person I hoped her to be.”

Elizabeth sighed and leaned into Jane. “Perhaps we just need to remember that sometimes, underneath someone's prickly exterior, there lurks a nasty interior. Or even worse, there can be an evil interior hidden behind a pleasant facade.”

Smiling, Jane leaned back into her sister. “Too true.” They had often spent their evenings together talking about the issues they faced in their small lives. They both understood that going to either of their parents with their problems was out of the question. The girls knew that their mother and father were both very selfish people at heart. Mr. Bennet would make light of any worry or confusion while Mrs. Bennet would somehow make it about herself and go into a fit of her nerves. So, Jane and Elizabeth depended on each other.

Eventually Jane interrupted the silence by asking, “What did you mean when you said your memories of Netherfield? While most of my memories of Netherfield are rather hazy, it seems that you have something about our time there that you have not told me of.”

“I spent most of my time caring for you, but I interacted with the Bingley’s and Mr. Darcy at meals and the like. For a time, all my interactions with Mr. Darcy reinforced my opinions about him. He was abrupt and cold even when we interacted, and it made me think my original judgment about him was correct.”

Tsking at her sister, Jane said, “Are you still holding one ill spoken comment against him? You know, I do not think he looked at all well that night. He would not be the first person to speak out of turn when feeling poorly.” Jane chided Elizabeth gently.

Huffing slightly, Elizabeth continued, “Yes, well, I did still feel put out, and I felt justified in being so miffed because his behavior never seemed to improve. But then something changed. It was while I was enjoying a short morning walk that I unexpectedly bumped into him, and I couldn't help but wonder if he was hiding from Miss Bingley.” The pair began to giggle at the comment and their memories of Miss Bingley’s so obvious pursuit of the unwilling gentleman. After a pause to catch her breath, Elizabeth said, “We had been talking when a sound in the woods alerted us both to something moving towards us quickly. Instantly he moved between me and the approaching thing.”

Jane knew that there was nothing more dangerous than a fox in the local woods. So that could only mean one thing. With a sigh, she said, “I have a feeling I know what was coming.”

“Yes, it was Pax come searching me out after my prolonged absence, but he did not know that. Mr. Darcy tried to protect me.” Elizabeth stopped talking and Jane turned her head to watch her sister. Observing Elizabeth’s confusion, Jane let her sister process her thoughts, simply waiting for her to continue. Soon enough, she said, “You know how I interact with Pax, especially if I have been away from him for any reason. In no time at all, I was on my knees petting him. Then it dawned on me what I must look like. There I was in the dirt, not acting like a lady at all. Immediately all I could think of was what he must think of me, but when I looked up at him, I saw that he did not hold me in contempt or anything of the sort. He acted like it was nothing at all and even said he would have done the same with his own dog.”

“I can see how several parts of that situation might confound you.”

“That isn’t even the oddest part. The odd part is that Pax likes him. I mean, really likes him. He went over to get pets and then put his paws on his shoulders and started licking his face!” Elizabeth looked over at Pax laying on the floor near the fire. As if sensing her attention, he thumped his tail without even opening his eyes.

“Was he frightened of Pax at all?” asked Jane, curious to hear how the quiet Mr. Darcy handled such a large dog showing his affection. Many people were afraid of the huge animal despite his normally gentle nature.

“While he was, I think, startled to have a dog be able to look him in the eye, he was not afraid. I believe he really likes dogs. Then, as we parted, he asked about you and us not having a maid helping us came up. Within hours, a maid was made available for our use. And now I do not know what to think of him at all. Is he the man that insulted me or the man who Pax absolutely loves? Is he the man who is cold and

distant and at times argumentative, or the man who stood in front of me when he thought there was danger approaching? I really do not know what to think of him.”

Jane could not have kept the smile off her face if she tried. A brooding, handsome man had tried to protect her sister from an unknown threat and treated her with unexpected kindness. That same man had liked her dog, and Pax had surprisingly liked him as well. Then Mr. Darcy saw to Elizabeth’s comfort and care. There was no doubt in Jane’s mind that though he was very awkward about it, Mr. Darcy cared for her sister. Jane heartily approved.

She had always known that Elizabeth would be blindsided by love someday. Oh, Elizabeth had always promised to never marry without love, affection and respect, but Jane had always suspected that her sister never really thought she would find it.

Perhaps it had found her instead.

## Page 7

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### Chapter Seven

Elizabeth walked into the Lucas home with Jane at her side. Hopefully, the evening would go well. It turned out that Mr. Collins had come to seeking a bride. Though any hopes that he had in regard to Elizabeth were completely overwhelmed by his fear of her dog. Well, that and the fact that apparently Lady Catherine would never countenance a lady keeping such a dog as a pet. The ensuing comments by Elizabeth saying what she thought about Lady Catherine de Bourgh had sent him straight from the house and into the receptive arms of the Lucas family. The only person who had been upset by this had been, of course, Mrs. Bennet. Elizabeth's mother had been sent into tirade after tirade. To say that she was put out with Elizabeth was an understatement.

When they were invited to the Lucas home for Charlotte and Mr. Collin's engagement dinner, Elizabeth was not surprised that her mother had an attack of nerves that prevented her from attending. Though Elizabeth was uncertain of how she felt about her dear friend being trapped with such a man for the rest of her life, she knew that Charlotte was thrilled with the match. She could not find it within herself to take the light out of her friend's eyes by saying that she thought Charlotte would only find discomfort and embarrassment married to Mr. Collins. So Elizabeth greeted her friend with a smile and a hug.

Pulling back from Elizabeth, Charlotte smiled. "Thank you for coming, Lizzie." Lowering her voice, she continued, "I know that this is not the type of match you would want for yourself or even for me, but I am so happy to have your support. Despite what you may think. I have every hope of having a happy life with Mr. Collins."

Squeezing Charlotte's hands in her own, Elizabeth blinked back tears. "Charlotte, you are one of my dearest friends. You know I only want your happiness."

Linking her arm through Elizabeth's, Charlotte drew her into the room. Mr. Collins and Sir Lucas stood in the corner, engrossed in animated conversation with grand gestures on a subject that clearly interested them. It dawned on Elizabeth that she should have realized that they would get along so well. They had many similarities, both enjoyed sharing anecdotes, and both were prone to verbosity.

Catching Elizabeth's gaze on her fiancé and father, Charlotte said, "Yes, Mr. Collins is very much like my father. He may not be the intelligent man you may be drawn to, Lizzie, but he is enough for me." Across the room, Mr. Collins saw Charlotte and smiled at her, not even taking note of Elizabeth. Smiling back, Charlotte said, "He is affectionate in his own way, and I know he does not have a cruel bone in his body. I will be happy."

"Then I am happy for you." Elizabeth felt a true smile stretch across her face. Charlotte was perfectly capable of charting her own life course, and it seemed that it was possible that Mr. Collins would work out for her.

"Now," Said Charlotte, "What is the latest on Jane and Mr. Bingley?"

Elizabeth laughed merrily. She would miss Charlotte when she left for Kent. At least when Jane married Mr. Bingley, she would be a little closer to home. Rolling her eyes at herself, Elizabeth focused on staying cheerful. It was not the evening to worry about Charlotte and Jane marrying and leaving her alone. She would consider that in the middle of the night when she could not sleep.

Darcy tried not to hyperventilate as the carriage drew closer to Lucas Lodge. After his conversation with Bingley a few mornings ago, he had realized that Bingley was right. The marriage he had been attempting to force himself into was not the kind that

would ever bring him true happiness. He realized that Georgianna would face an even bleaker fate than he would in a society marriage arrangement. By marrying according to his own preferences, he could filter out the least suitable suitors for his sister.

He had been doing a lot of thinking in the last few days and after two sleepless nights; he had finally decided that there was only one thing that he could do. Darcy would have to pursue Miss Elizabeth. That, however, left him with a big issue.

He was more familiar with fleeing from female attention than trying to solicit it. Since he was in Cambridge, he had become prone to fading into the background. It had been a way to avoid compromise and, more importantly, avoid that which he did not truly understand. There was not one time in his life that he could remember ever being the pursuer, not the pursued.

In what felt like no time at all, Darcy found himself walking into Lucas Lodge and greeting his host and hostess and congratulating them on their daughter's engagement. All the while, he was trying to find Miss Elizabeth in the gathering of people.

As if drawn by a magnet, Darcy spotted her and was drawn across the room and to her side. For a moment, he hovered there, watching her converse with her good friend, Miss Lucas, but then she smiled at him and said, "Mr. Darcy, it is good to see you and Mr. Bingley have arrived. I was afraid you might be late and that would never do, not when I am sure Jane is eager to see Mr. Bingley."

Darcy found himself responding to her comment by replying, "Bingley is not the one in the family who is fond of being fashionably late."

The widening of Miss Elizabeth's eyes as she caught the humor in his comment and the smile that played about her lips settled in Darcy's heart like a glowing ember. He found himself admitting that anyone not wanting to spend more time around such a mesmerizing smile should be consigned to bedlam. That thought had him freezing,

though.

Was he ready to pursue Miss Elizabeth without hesitation? Because that was what a woman liked her deserved. She deserved for the man who loved her wholeheartedly, without any concerns about what society might think about her place in the world, and despite his desire to fulfill that role, he remained uncertain if he could be that man.

Elizabeth stepped out of one of the side doors of the Lucas' home. The sight of everyone enjoying themselves was pleasant, but the rising temperature caused by the crowd was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Bathed in the soft illumination from the nearby window, Elizabeth marveled at the vast expanse of stars overhead.

The evening was going better than she had anticipated. Charlotte was happy with her choice, and Jane was getting the chance to converse with Mr. Bingley. Her mother had chosen to stay home, sparing her from potential embarrassment. She had even had several enjoyable interactions with Mr. Darcy.

As she relished the coolness of the evening on her skin, her tranquility was shattered by the sound of a familiar voice saying, "Miss Elizabeth, what a pleasure to see you."

Biting back a sigh of annoyance, Elizabeth took a step back towards the door she had exited. Keeping her face carefully blank, she replied, "Mr. Wickham, I knew that the Lucas family had invited some of the militia, but I had not noticed you among them. Please don't feel obligated to stay with me. I don't want to ruin your enjoyment of the party. Your duties as a lieutenant must demand a lot of your time."

Though he stood in the shadows, Elizabeth could have sworn that she saw his eyes flash with anger. With a growing sense of unease, Elizabeth extended her arm behind her, her fingers fumbling in search of the door handle. She had just grazed the cold metal of the handle when Mr. Wickham bit out, "Oh, but Miss Elizabeth, I would

much rather enjoy time with you than join the party. And if I may, I wanted to caution you once more about my old friend Mr. Darcy. I saw you together, and it appears that you may have disregarded my previous warning.”

Taking a small step back so that she could grip the handle more securely, Elizabeth responded, “I know that you may have had disputes with Mr. Darcy in the past, but I have found him to be a good man, if slightly awkward. Although I find it unfortunate that you don't get along, I don't think it's any of my concern.”

Stepping closer, Mr. Wickham loomed over her, his voice dripping with disdain as he practically snarled, “Do not be mistaken in thinking that you will ever be Mrs. Darcy. He is too pompous to consider you worthy of his name. It would be wiser to take into account the attention of others, even if they hold a lower social status than the grand Mr. Darcy, master of Pemberley.”

“Mr. Wickham, I understand we haven't had the chance to become acquainted, but it is crucial for you to realize that I am more interested in a person's conduct and the regard they demonstrate towards others, rather than their societal position. I hope you understand that any perceived indifference on my part is not due to your position in life, but rather your behavior.” Elizabeth was just about to open the door behind her when she felt it open on its own.

She turned in surprise, her heart skipping a beat as she saw the grim-faced Mr. Darcy standing in the doorway. There was a moment frozen in uneasy suspense and Elizabeth felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end as the two men's antagonism towards each other filled the space around them. With a lazy drawl, Mr. Wickham spoke up, his tone filled with mockery. “Darce, old friend, you truly know how to ruin a perfectly enjoyable moment. I was quite enjoying my time with Miss Elizabeth before you interrupted us.”

Affronted that Mr. Wickham would imply something between them, Elizabeth was

quick to say, “You have a rather flawed view of the word enjoyable, Mr. Wickham. I certainly didn’t find our disagreement enjoyable.”

Mr. Darcy said, “I have often found Wickham’s definition of enjoyment to be skewed.” He gallantly extended his arm, his voice filled with warmth as he inquired, “Miss Elizabeth, would you care to join me back inside? Perhaps we can partake of some of the refreshments.”

Elizabeth, with a smile she hoped conveyed her gratitude, took Mr. Darcy’s arm and turned her back on Mr. Wickham. As soon as they were inside, she closed the door firmly and locked it. She wanted nothing more than to enjoy the party without Mr. Wickham's presence.

Having noted Miss Elizabeth step outside, Darcy had kept an eye on the door. Knowing her love for the outdoors, it came as no surprise to him when he discovered that she had ventured outside, probably seeking respite from the heat of the crowd. However, when she failed to come back inside, he moved around the edges of the crowd to get to the door, wanting to check on her.

As Darcy put his hand on the doorknob, he heard a voice that filled him first with anger and then dread. Not only was Mr. Wickham in the area, but he was talking to Miss Elizabeth. Aware of the man's convincing charm, he dreaded the possibility of her buying into his web of lies.

Opening the door, he stood frozen, facing Wickham for the first time since the man had tried to run away with his sister. Darcy felt the powerful urge to attack, but he quickly pushed it down, drawing on his well-practiced self-control. It was not the time or place for a confrontation that would end in blood. More than that, Miss Elizabeth stood between the two of them and he would never want her to be hurt because of something that he had done.

Mocking as always, Wickham drawled, “Darce, old friend, you truly know how to ruin a perfectly enjoyable moment. I was quite enjoying my time with Miss Elizabeth before you interrupted us.”

Darcy had started to fear the worst when Miss Elizabeth retorted, “You have a rather flawed view of the word enjoyable, Mr. Wickham. I certainly didn’t find our disagreement enjoyable.”

Darcy watched the smug smile on Wickham’s face disappear with glee before turning to Miss Elizabeth. “I have often found Wickham’s definition of enjoyment to be skewed.” Extending his arm, his heart swelled at her obvious rejection of Mr. Wickham’s advances. He asked, “Miss Elizabeth, would you care to join me back inside? Perhaps we can partake of some of the refreshments.”

With Miss Elizabeth on his arm, Darcy couldn't help but feel a surge of happiness, causing a smile to stretch his face. His smile increased tenfold at the satisfying snick of the lock as Miss Elizabeth locked the door behind them. She was perfect. Not only did he enjoy her company, but she enjoyed his company to that of Mr. Wickham. Even his father had preferred Wickham’s company to his own. Any worries he had about her place in the world or how his extended family might treat her evaporated. It was the beginning of hope for him. Hope that there was something splendid in his future.

The night slipped away from Darcy, a rarity for someone who rarely enjoyed social events, leaving him wanting more. He spent much time speaking with Miss Elizabeth but remembered his manners and socialized with others at the gathering, feeling that he must make up for his rudeness at the assembly. By the time he departed Lucas Lodge, his mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Miss Elizabeth, and he couldn't help but wonder when he would have the opportunity to see her again.

### Chapter Eight

Remembering the recent sighting of Mr. Wickham, Elizabeth decided to stick to more traveled paths on her morning commune with nature. Taking up a stick, she began throwing it for Pax to fetch. He could certainly use the exercise. It had been a few days since they had had the chance to get out for a walk due to the poor fall weather. If it had been only cold, she could have easily endured it, but the relentless rain in combination with the cold had forced them to stay indoors.

After two days stuck indoors with her mother and sisters, Elizabeth was glad to be out and about. Pulling in the crisp, cold air of a fresh fall day always helped her to settle herself and let go of the things that bothered her. Things like the weight of her mother's disappointment and her worry over the way her youngest sisters flirted with ruination. Elizabeth needed time alone to handle the stress of her life. Oh, her life was not all that bad, but if she wanted to keep from snapping at her mother and sisters, she needed time away from them on occasion.

At least staying in had helped her to talk things over with Jane a time or two. It had not been easy to start thinking of Mr. Darcy in the light that he deserved. The evening that they had shared talking at Lucas Lodge had helped greatly with altering her opinion, of course. He had acted so differently that night. He was kind and attentive not only to her but to others. If she didn't know any better, she could almost feel a fondness growing for him. All she knew for certain was that she wished to see him again and come to know him better.

Then there was Mr. Wickham to consider. Now that she knew he was a liar at the very least, and probably more than that, she wondered how she would handle him the

next time she encountered him. Could she act as if she did not see through him? Act like she did not see him as a threat to herself and those of Meryton? She did not think so. Things had moved past that when she had spoken with him at Charlotte's engagement party.

She hoped that next time she had to face him, there would be a crowd of people nearby, providing a sense of safety as she confronted him. Because she would not be able to let his behavior slide. There were too many people who could be hurt by him to leave him be.

Turning to her ever-faithful companion, she smiled and asked, "What do you think, Pax? Should I confront Mr. Wickham outright or just quietly whisper that he is no good in everyone's ear? Gossip does have benefits in certain situations, after all."

Pax eagerly barked in response to her question, prompting her to answer, "I think you would have me confront him." Leaning down, she lovingly tousled his fluffy mop of hair and continued, "I do not have your strength or your sharp teeth to back me up, so I think I might not confront him unless I have to."

Picking up Pax's stick of choice once again, she threw it a short distance, which Pax seemed to find insulting because he was back, dropping it at her feet with a bark, in no time at all. So picking it up, she threw it farther, only to have him come charging back fairly quickly. Laughing, she said, "Come now, Pax. This walk is not all about you. This morning's goal is to assist in organizing the chaos inside my head. Thus, you need to help me. I no longer want to dwell on that vile Mr. Wickham, so I will ask you this—what do you think of Mr. Darcy?"

This got Pax to run around her in a circle in a playful manner that was odd to see on such a large and ungainly dog. Chuckling, Elizabeth countered with, "I will take that to mean that he has your approval. Do you think I should hope for more with him, or will that only break my heart?" As if sensing her sadness, Pax nuzzled her

affectionately and licked her hand with a whine.

This caused her to smile. “You are such a love, Pax. You would think that I deserve even the king himself, were he single.”

The timing of this comment was uncanny, making it seem as if Pax sneezed in direct response to what she said and showing his displeasure with her idea of marrying royalty. Leaning down, Pax nudged the stick he had brought her towards her feet, reminding her of their game. With a giggle, Elizabeth accepted the stick back from Pax and threw it again, this time so far she could not see where it went in the woods by the path. Pax lunged into the brush, bounding after the stick. He might no longer be a puppy, but he still had the goofy edge to him when playing. As Elizabeth continued walking, she did not worry about Pax; she knew that he would rejoin her before long.

“I see you do not have your large companion with you today. I thought you must walk everywhere with him.” Mr. Wickham’s voice behind Elizabeth was a great surprise and her first reaction was to wish that she had not thrown that stick quite so far. Her second thought was to wonder why, of all people, she kept running into Mr. Wickham? Why couldn’t she run into Mr. Darcy? She would much rather talk to him and try to uncover more about his complicated character than deal with someone she did not trust.

Turning to face him, Elizabeth hoped she would be able to keep her annoyance out of her voice. “Mr. Wickham, I seem to be running into you everywhere.”

Wickham’s eyes narrowed slightly as he took in Miss Elizabeth. Though she did not scorn him, there was something about her countenance that was unwelcoming. There was no joy in her expression. She was not happy to see him. He struggled to maintain a neutral expression, concealing the anger boiling inside him.

He was handsome, gregarious, and knew how to compliment a woman and make her blush. Yet Miss Elizabeth had scorned him at the engagement party he had attended with the other militia officers. There had to be something wrong with her. It was not like she had so much society to mingle with. She may not be interested in him as a marriage partner, but she should not have been averse to a little flirting. Who was she to be so dismissive of him?

He idly wondered whether he would still pursue her had she not shown such resistance. Mentally shrugging, he decided he did not really care one way or the other. He was committed to having her either way. Wickham refused to lose to Darcy. He began with something she would not be able to take the wrong way. Then he would draw her in. He was tired of waiting. "I am always eager to see you, Miss Elizabeth. We have not had the chance to talk much of late and it is always something I am eager to do."

Carefully watching her expression, Wickham was able to catch the way she froze for a moment. What was with the girl? She should at least be smiling at him. He had given her no reason to dislike him, at least not yet. Had someone told her unfaltering tales about him?

Miss Elizabeth shook her head. "Oh, do not say that, Mr. Wickham. We saw each other just the other day."

"But we did not have the chance to really talk. As much as I like your younger sisters, they do rather take my attention, when I would much rather it be elsewhere." There, Wickham thought, she would be flattered to be preferred over her silly sisters.

Instead of a smile showing up on her face, Miss Elizabeth's lips compressed into a line. "Mr. Wickham, I do not know what you are after, but I feel we talk more than enough for my tastes. I am sure that you have plenty of duties that you should be seeing to as a lieutenant in the militia. Do not feel the need to waste your time trying

to chat with me.”

What was wrong with the world? Taking a step closer to her, Wickham struggled to keep Miss Elizabeth from seeing his anger. He did not want to scare her unless he had to. Placing his hand on his chest, he tried for a sincere and wounded look. “You wound me, Miss Elizabeth. Here I am, wishing for your beauty and wit to grace my day, and you are practically dismissing me. As a humble soldier, I understand that winning the hand of a lady like yourself may be beyond my reach, but I hope that I may yet have the honor and worthiness to engage in conversation with you. After all, you know the only reason I do not have a position of greater respect is the fault of another.”

Wickham waited expectantly. It was a ploy he had used before and almost always worked on girls from fine families. Miss Elizabeth would not want him thinking that she was prejudiced against him. She saw herself as a good and kind woman, so behaving cruelly towards him would contradict her self-perception, and that's exactly how he would manipulate her.

Elizabeth was not ignorant of all the small steps Mr. Wickham was taking towards her. Though the words he said appeared to be nothing but flattery, there was something about the look in his eyes that left a gnawing feeling in the pit of her stomach. She could not decipher what exactly he was about, but whatever it was could not be good.

Did he hope to flummox her into some kind of tryst? Was he looking for money? He must know that she might be better off than many, but she did not have access to the sort of funds that would mean much to him. What exactly did he want with her?

While she knew Pax was about and would certainly come if she screamed, Elizabeth did not want to scream like some damsel from a Radcliff novel. Hopefully, Pax would show up with his stick in tow and she would somehow feel safer confronting

Mr. Wickham. As it was, she felt her vulnerability facing him alone on the lane keenly. It was not a feeling she liked.

She tried to maintain a certain amount of cool civility as she spoke with Mr. Wickham. She did not want her anger or, worse, fear to leak through. He seemed more and more like a predator on the prowl with every word he spoke. Elizabeth may have realized that her knowledge of the world was not as extensive as she believed, but she was certain about one thing—never show fear to an attacking animal.

When Elizabeth realized just how he was trying to manipulate her, her control snapped. Unable to hold her mounting anger back any longer, Elizabeth scoffed, “You saw that the only reason you do not have a position of greater respect is the fault of Mr. Darcy. However, I must admit that cannot see the truth in that statement.”

Mr. Wickham’s eyes narrowed, and Elizabeth thought she saw a hint of a flush cross his cheeks. He took a step closer to her, saying, “Are you calling me a liar, Miss Elizabeth?”

While Elizabeth considered taking a step back and moving away from him, she was too angry. So instead, she put her hands on her hips and said, “You may infer what you wish. I am only pointing out the fallacy in your statement. Even if Mr. Darcy did deny you the living, if you had taken orders there would be any number of other livings open to you. Then too, if you had applied yourself while at the school your godfather sent you to, there would be many honest professions you could have worked at. With the education you would have received, at either Cambridge or Oxford, you could easily enter the profession in the field of law. Had you done so, you might even be a solicitor by now.” Elizabeth paused to take a breath, trying to keep herself from becoming too worked up. She could see by the slight widening of Mr. Wickham’s eyes that she had surprised him by her logic. Wanting to put the final nail in the coffin of his story, Elizabeth said, “So you see, Mr. Wickham, the position you find yourself in is almost entirely of your making.”

What Elizabeth did not see was just how angry she had made Mr. Wickham but she found out when he reached out and grabbed her upper arm in a vice like grip. Leering down at her, he said, “Who are you to think you are so smart? You are a little country nobody with the merest of beauty and no dowry to speak of. Do you think of yourself so far above me that you are unwilling to flirt a little? Exchange a kiss or two? Or possibly more? Many women in your place have been more than happy to enjoy my attentions. What makes you so resistant?” Jerking her back and forth in his anger, he elicited a whimper from her at his action. Grinning when he saw her pain, Wickham pulled her closer to him, drawing her up. He forced her to go up on her toes as he glared into her face.

The tension in Elizabeth’s jaw made it difficult for her to force words past her contempt for the man. She said, “I dislike being lied to, Mr. Wickham. Between your story so full of holes and the way Pax reacted to you, I knew you were not a man to be trusted. I am no fool.” His grip on her arm was painful, and she knew she did not have the strength to pry his hand from her arm or wrench free. Where was Pax? Then she heard it, a rustle in the woods and a growl. Looking up into Mr. Wickham’s enraged eyes, she knew he was too focused on her to realize what was coming.

Laughing in a way that completely lacked all mirth, Mr. Wickham said, “You are not a fool? You are practically in the middle of nowhere with no one near to come to your aid and you have angered a much larger man who holds you in his power. If that is not foolish, I do not know what is.”

Elizabeth would never know what Mr. Wickham intended to do with his raised hand because as soon as he raised it, Pax was there clamping down on his wrist and jerking him away. In a flash of gray fur and growls, Pax had Mr. Wickham on the ground and, most likely, severely regretting his life choices.

Though the move had also knocked Elizabeth to the ground due to Mr. Wickham’s strong grip on her arm, she did not regret it. Scooting away from the mass of furious

dog and Mr. Wickham, Elizabeth sat there rubbing at her arm. While she no longer feared what Mr. Wickham might do, she did wonder what she should do next. It appeared that Pax had let go of Mr. Wickham's wrist and now had taken up a grip on his shoulder. His front paws were pressed firmly into the screaming man's chest. He would not be going anywhere, anytime soon.

Realizing that she should at least try to get him to release the horrible man, Elizabeth wearily said, "Pax, release."

The well-trained dog removed his mouth from Mr. Wickham but did not stop his growls of displeasure. With the teeth out of his shoulder, Mr. Wickham's screams turned into fearful blubbering. Pax glanced over at Elizabeth and whined, but did not move from standing on Mr. Wickham's body.

Wanting to reassure her dog, Elizabeth said, "Good boy, Pax. Thank you for protecting me."

Elizabeth let out a tired sigh, her fingertips massaging her forehead gently. Mr. Wickham had wrenched her right arm rather thoroughly, and it was beginning to ache quite badly. She knew that she should get up off the ground and dust herself off in case someone came to investigate Mr. Wickham's screams, but Elizabeth just could not make herself want to move. Was it possible to be so overwhelmed that you just could not cope?

Gazing over at Mr. Wickham and Pax, she saw that her dog was still growling at Mr. Wickham and resting his full weight on him, which was substantial. Elizabeth knew that it was a public lane, and someone would come down it eventually who could help. She only wished that it was not quite so cold.

Darcy was happy to take the crisp fall air into his lungs as he rode Agilis. The recent bad weather had prevented him from getting out of doors much, so he was glad to go

riding with his cousin. Fitzwilliam, with Georgianna and Mrs. Ansley, had arrived in a cold shower the day before. It had been horrible traveling weather, but he was thrilled to have them. He hoped to introduce his closet family members to Miss Elizabeth sometime soon. Everything within him told him she was the basis of his future happiness.

Letting their horses wander down the lane instead of going cross-country over the muddy trails, Darcy and Fitzwilliam could freely converse with each other. They had already discussed family and the happenings with Fitzwilliam's siblings and parents when Fitzwilliam said, "This is a rather pleasant area, Darcy. Bingley seems to have chosen an excellent location to try out estate management."

"Yes, at first, I struggled as I usually do among new people and places, but I quickly learned what a gem this area is. In fact, there is a lady—" What Darcy was going to say was cut off by that agonized screaming that erupted somewhere nearby.

Ever the soldier, Fitzwilliam was urging his horse forward before Darcy had time to process what was going on. Darcy spurred his horse forward, following Fitzwilliam to the source of trouble. In no time at all, Fitzwilliam turned a bend and was skidding to a halt. Coming to a halt behind his cousin, Darcy took in the sight before him in shock.

Miss Elizabeth sat on the ground, looking rather disheveled. She was staring at her dog, Pax, manhandling a blubbering Wickham. Off his horse in a flash, Darcy hurried to her side. Heart in his throat, Darcy approached her in a rush.

Though Miss Elizabeth did not seem to notice his approach, Pax did. The large dog quickly shifted his focus to Darcy, his growl subsiding and his tail showing a faint wag as he observed his approach. Though when Wickham tried to move, Pax's attention shifted back in a flash, and he snapped viciously at the fiend. His aggression made Darcy worry about what exactly Wickham had been doing before Pax had

taken him down.

Clearing his throat, Darcy couched down next to Miss Elizabeth, and asked, “Are you all right, Miss Elizabeth?” With wide eyes, Miss Elizabeth's gaze finally settled on him, as if she had been oblivious to his presence until that moment. The fear he saw in her gaze caused a fire to begin burning in his chest. It was without question that Wickham had harmed her. It wouldn't be long before Wickham learned that Darcy's benevolence had reached its end.

Licking her lips, Miss Elizabeth stammered, “I, I am well enough, I suppose. Though Mr. Wickham may need to be seen to.”

It did something to Darcy to see Miss Elizabeth so much less than her usual self.

“I take it you know this lady, Darcy.” Said, Fitzwilliam.

Looking up, Darcy saw Fitzwilliam had not approached. He was standing next to his horse and watching Pax terrify Wickham. Darcy supposed that it was an intimidating sight. Pax was a rather enormous dog, and he was very unhappy with Wickham. For the moment, though, he was just ensuring that Wickham did not move.

Nodding at his cousin Darcy said, “Though this is not the best situation for introductions, Miss Elizabeth, may I introduce my cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

Darcy studied Miss Elizabeth carefully as she seemed to realize that there was someone else there. Her hand went to her hair that was half out of its pins as she looked around. When she spotted Fitzwilliam, though, she smiled. “It is nice to meet you, Colonel Fitzwilliam, even despite the circumstances. Mr. Darcy has spoken of you before.”

Fitzwilliam gave a swift bow before saying, “I can only say that have of what he says

is exaggeration and I hope you listen to my side of the story when given the chance.”

Quirking her eyebrow, Elizabeth said, “Oh, so you are not the best of cousins and more like a brother to Mr. Darcy? I am surprised that he would exaggerate his affection for you. I had not expected that of him.”

Darcy observed as Fitzwilliam's eyes darted between him and Miss Elizabeth, before bursting into great peals of laughter. Eventually, he got his breath back enough to say, “I retract my former statement, Miss Elizabeth. Darcy is honest in all things, for I am the very best of cousins. There can be no doubt in it.”

Darcy knew instantly that Miss Elizabeth had his cousin's approval. It made him happy to know, not that he needed his approval, but it was nice to see the recognition in Fitzwilliam's eyes. He saw how perfect they were for each other in one moment. Darcy joined their conversation by saying, “Now you see Miss Elizabeth, why I did not say more about my cousin when last we spoke? He is already so full of himself I did not need to add to his big head. Frankly, I blame it on his new position as colonel. It is giving him delusions of grandeur.”

“Oh, will you stop chatting and get this animal off of me!” The yell from Wickham caused Pax to snap at him and drew the group's attention back to the situation at hand.

Fitzwilliam approached with caution, taking a step closer before saying, “This is just a guess on my part, but may I assume that the splendid beast is your pet, Miss Elizabeth?”

Smiling, Miss Elizabeth said, “Yes, that is Pax.” Upon hearing his name, Pax stopped staring down at Wickham dauntingly and looked up at his mistress, his tail wagging. She continued, “He is my great protector.”

With a smile on his face, Fitzwilliam studied the dog and said, "He seems to have done the job quite well."

Nodding, Miss Elizabeth rubbed at her shoulder in a way that alarmed Darcy. Had she been hurt? He was just about to ask when she said, "It is why he is named for peace. After all, he brings me peace of mind. With him at my side, I have little to worry about when it comes to my safety." Biting her lip, she paused for a moment as if considering something then she said, "I suppose with both of you here Mr. Wickham cannot get far, especially not in the condition he is in. Pax Off."

In a flash, Pax left his prey behind and instantly moved to Miss Elizabeth's side. Sniffing her over, he seemed to focus his attention on her right arm and shoulder, where there were a few rips in the sleeve's fabric. Once satisfied with his inspection, he licked her cheek and then lay his head in her lap with a huff.

Darcy watched it all with fascination. He was a rather remarkable specimen of a dog. Highly loyal and protective, fierce but at the same time affectionate. An idea started to form in the back of Darcy's mind, but he shoved it away for the moment. There were more important things at the moment.

As Wickham started to sit up, Fitzwilliam moved to his side and said, "Wickham, old friend. It is interesting to see you here. What have you been up to that would warrant such a rebuttal from the lady's dog?"

"Nothing, her dog just attacked me out of nowhere! It is crazy and vicious. I think it broke my wrist. It should be put down!"

While Fitzwilliam was questioning Wickham, Darcy decided to focus on Miss Elizabeth instead. He did not like having her so close to the villain. Turning to her, he asked, "Do you think you can stand, Miss Elizabeth?"

“Of course.” Miss Elizabeth stated as if there had never been any question.

Eager to help, Darcy drew closer to her and received a lick from Pax as he got off his mistress’s lap and sat back from her a bit. Moving his arm around her slender shoulders, Darcy helped support her weight as she stood. Once she gained her feet, he thought to move away from her, but she seemed to be unsteady. So, he asked, “Are you sure you are well, Miss Elizabeth?”

Scrunching her nose, Miss Elizabeth rolled her eyes and Darcy wondered if she was frustrated with her apparent limitations. She was a robust woman, fond of moving about under her own power. She said, “I’m only slightly dizzy. I am sure I will ache for a few days, but it will be no worse than when I was unseated from our horse last summer.”

Darcy was quick to reassure her, his tone gentle and soothing. “After what I can only assume was a harrowing morning,” he said, “I am not surprised that you may need some assistance.” Though a pretty blush moved across her cheeks, Elizabeth did not move away. In fact, she seemed to allow him to support more of her weight in his embrace. Standing with her nestled into his side was a remarkable sensation that he was desperate to see happen again. Though hopefully it would not take another encounter with a villain such as Wickham. Finding the need to know what exactly had happened, he asked, “Though I know Wickham lies with nearly every breath, I am left wondering what exactly happened before my cousin and I arrived. Are you up to explaining Miss Elizabeth?”

### Chapter Nine

Elizabeth took in a breath and let it go slowly. Blowing the air past her pursed lips in a determined way, she attempted to release some of her fear and anger at what had occurred before she spoke. It helped that she was nestled so comfortably into Mr. Darcy's side. He smelled of fall air and some spice that she could not identify. His presence both soothed her and inspired something within her that she could not yet identify. She would have to analyze it later, though. Mr. Wickham had to be dealt with first.

Taking another calming breath, Elizabeth said, "Mr. Wickham was not happy with the fact that I was not taken in by his lies."

"Lies! Darcy, you have to believe me. I did nothing but greet Miss Elizabeth before her dog jumped me. She is only trying to protect her dog from being seen as the dangerous menace that he is."

All eyes looked at Pax. He was at the moment sitting in the lane between Elizabeth and Mr. Wickham, looking as if he did not have a care in the world. Tongue hanging out the side of his mouth, he seemed to be smiling and looking back at Elizabeth with adoration, his tail wagging. When Mr. Wickham screeched, "He is a monster that needs to be put down!" Pax faced him and gave a warning bark. Mr. Wickham's yelp had Elizabeth almost wanting to laugh, but she only shook her head at him instead.

Mr. Darcy tighten his hold about Elizabeth before saying, "I would sooner believe the dog Wickham. I know your predilections well. The state of Miss Elizabeth alone condemns you. The fact that her dog saw the need to restrain you until help arrived

tells me just how badly you acted this time.”

Mr. Wickham had not tried to get up off the ground and had instead been clutching his wounded wrist to his chest. “Restrain! He savaged my wrist and shoulder.”

This time, Colonel Fitzwilliam spoke up. “Wickham, if that dog had wanted you dead, you would be. Now on your feet. I think it is time you finally faced the piper.”

Fitzwilliam gripped him by his good shoulder and pulled him to his feet. “I tell you, I did nothing.”

“Then why is Miss Elizabeth favoring her right arm?” Mr. Darcy’s voice was hard. Its edge seemed to be designed to cut like a knife. As she listened to him speak, Elizabeth could hear the tension in his voice and feel the rigidness in his posture. Was all of this emotion on her behalf? How had she ever thought him cold and unfeeling? Then he said, “I can see that her sleeve is torn. Just how angry did you get, Wickham?”

Elizabeth wondered if his tendency to suppress his emotions stemmed from feeling things too deeply. Did he conceal his emotions to shield his tender heart? A tiny flash of emotion seemed to respond to his defense of her. With each breath she took, the flame within her grew stronger. There was a connection between her and Mr. Darcy that she was eager to fuel. She was not sure yet what it would lead to, but she wanted to find out.

Before she could think better of it, she volunteered the information he was looking for by saying, “He was not at all happy when I told him what I thought of him and his obvious lies. He grabbed me by the arm and jerked me around a bit before Pax returned and took umbrage with his assault.” Elizabeth was quick to note the way his hand flexed on her back as she spoke of Mr. Wickham’s assault.

With a seemingly cheerful tone that betrayed a sinister undertone, the colonel remarked, "I suppose we can't just let you bleed out." Glaring at Mr. Wickham, the colonel looked over his wounds and, after a moment, reached out and tore a strip of fabric from Mr. Wickham's shirt and began wrapping his wrist. When it looked as if Mr. Wickham was going to complain, a hard glare from the colonel silenced him. Then Colonel Fitzwilliam was dragging the now silent Mr. Wickham over to his horse. Looking over his shoulder, he said, "I know Wickham to be a coward at heart. Pax must not have been with you when he approached."

"You are right. I had been playing fetch with Pax and he was out of sight chasing a stick when Mr. Wickham came upon me." Elizabeth replied, feeling slightly stupid to have allowed herself to be taken unawares without Pax at her side.

Taking out a length of rope from his saddlebags, the colonel tied one end of the rope around Mr. Wickham and Elizabeth began to wonder just what Mr. Wickham's fate would be. It seemed that Mr. Wickham was just as curious, if not more so because he said, "What are you doing? Nothing that transpired here can be foisted on my shoulders. If you try to say anything about it, I will tell everyone that I met Miss Elizabeth for a tryst in the woods and afterwards she became upset and set her dog on me when I would not promise to marry her. Besides, you know you can do nothing to me. I hold Georgianna's reputation in my hands."

This warranted a swift retribution from the colonel and Mr. Wickham found himself on his knees gasping for air. Elizabeth felt that she should have been shocked by such violence, but found she did not mind seeing Mr. Wickham harmed. He had just threatened herself and apparently another girl's reputation. A man who would sink so low did not deserve her concern.

She did, however, lean into Mr. Darcy, grateful for his strength at that moment. Observing his face, she couldn't miss the fierce glare that etched his features. But as if sensing her gaze, he looked down at her and a gentle expression replaced the

intensity. Offering a gentle smile, he said, “Do not worry, Miss Elizabeth. My cousin and I will not allow the snake to besmirch you or my sister. He has proved himself untrustworthy one-too-many times, and he has no hope of escaping consequence ever again.”

“Hear that, Wickham? Darcy is allowing me to do as I wish.” Fitzwilliam finished tying one end of the rope around Wickham’s waist before tying the other end to his saddle. With a shrug, he added, “Well, not quite as I wish, or else you would be dying slowly for the heartbreak you put Georgianna through. Instead, I get to take you to your commanding officer with the proof that you are a cheat and a scoundrel. I have proof of the debts you have left behind that Darcy has covered. It is more than enough to get you a place in any debtors’ prison I choose. Unless you would rather go to a penal colony.” Mounting his horse, Colonel Fitzwilliam smiled at Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. It seemed to Elizabeth that he was rather happy to dispense with Wickham. Though he would, wouldn’t he, if he had harmed Mr. Darcy’s sister?

Elizabeth watched Colonel Fitzwilliam tow Mr. Wickham off towards Meryton. It was an odd sight to behold. Walking behind a horse towed by a rope, shirt torn and bloody, Mr. Wickham was thoroughly bedraggled. Elizabeth could only imagine what the reaction in town would be. The last she heard of the pair before they turned the bend on the way to town was Colonel Fitzwilliam saying, “If you do not like the idea of rotting away at Marshalsea, I could be persuaded to send you to a penal colony. Have you ever heard of an animal called a kangaroo?”

As he watched his cousin leave with the man who had harmed so many people in his life that he loved, Darcy felt a certain sense of satisfaction. Wickham had fooled his father, broke his sister’s heart and attacked Miss Elizabeth. It stunned Darcy to realize that somehow Miss Elizabeth had worked her way on to the list of people he loved. It was not a very long list, but it felt so much larger with her on it.

He did not know how in a few short weeks she had become so important to him. She

just had, and he would not overlook the significance of that. Darcy knew he would have to find a way to win her heart in return. He was cognizant of the fact he was not necessarily good with words or people, but he would have to find a way.

Not two seconds after he had decided to win Miss Elizabeth's heart, he realized what an utter fool he was. Here he was waxing lyrically in his mind about the woman he loved while she was injured and in need of rest and recuperation. Rolling his eyes at his preoccupation, he looked down at her slightly dazed expression and said, "I think it is time to get you home, Miss Elizabeth."

"Yes, I suppose that is a good idea." She responded. Taking a step back from him, she looked up into his eyes for a moment before saying, "I want to thank you for appearing out of nowhere and coming to my aid. I was quite overwhelmed by everything when you arrived."

It was nice to be thanked for his actions, but Darcy found he wished for so much more than gratitude from Miss Elizabeth. Regardless, he found himself saying, "If it is within my power, I will always come to your aid, Miss Elizabeth. I find that there is nothing I would not do for you."

Watching the expression that flit across Miss Elizabeth's face gave Darcy hope that his new quest was not an impossible one. With a subtle widening of her eyes and a small "o" forming on her lips, she showed her surprise at his statement. The initial surprise on her face swiftly gave way to a wide, joyful smile that illuminated her entire countenance. Even her eyes regained their usual sparkle that she had seemed to be absent since Wickham's violent outburst.

Tilting her head, Miss Elizabeth bit her lip before saying, "Well, if that is the case, Mr. Darcy, would you mind escorting me home?"

"I believe you would have a problem on your hands if you had wanted me to let you

walk home by yourself.” Offering his arm for her to take, Darcy was happy to note that she did not hesitate at all to take his arm.

Looking around, he spotted Agilis and whistled. It was a trick Fitzwilliam had taught his horse that had proven quite beneficial. In no time at all, his horse left the patch he was munching on and came up to him, allowing Darcy to grasp the reigns, in his free hand. They began walking together in the direction of Longbourn, the two of them followed by his horse Agilis and Pax, her horse sized dog.

For a time, no conversation was necessary. They walked in companionable silence. Eventually though Darcy noticed that Miss Elizabeth had her right arm pressed firmly to her side, and she was not moving it much at all. The reminder that she was injured brought a fire to his chest that he was not used to experiencing. Darcy was not a man who normally dealt with righteous indignation that often, but he felt it when he saw her pain.

Compelled to speak, Darcy said, “Just how much is your arm paining you, Miss Bennet?”

She looked up at him, a slight blush staining her cheeks, and quickly looking away she said, “It does not feel well at all, but I have suffered through worse in my ramblings. I will admit that I may have to have Mr. Jones the apothecary look at it, as Mr. Wickham wrenched my arm quite well. Though that was partially because Pax tackled him to the ground when he went to hit me.”

The image that she conveyed with her words had Darcy’s heart stuttering in his chest. The mere thought of Miss Elizabeth experiencing such violence at the hands of his childhood friend made him ache. He had to clear his throat before he could speak around the lump that had taken up residence there. Eventually, he said, “You will never know how much I wish I had arrived soon enough to prevent his actions.”

Tossing her head in denial, Miss Elizabeth said, “You are not responsible for his actions, Mr. Darcy. From what I understand of your relationship, I am sure you have counseled him in the past about his behavior and he did not listen.”

He could not help but say, “But-” only to be cut off by Miss Elizabeth speaking over him.

“No.” Giving his arm a squeeze, Miss Elizabeth said, “Think no more of it, Mr. Darcy. It is in the past and Mr. Wickham will soon no longer be a problem the people of England shall have to deal with. Especially if what we heard of the colonel’s comments holds true.”

Darcy sighed. He supposed it was true, but he knew that he would not find it easy to let go of the knowledge that Wickham had hurt her. Deciding that it was best to concentrate on her and not his anger, he said, “After I accompany you to Longbourn, I will go into town and ask Mr. Jones to see to you.”

“Oh, I am sure my arm is not as bad as that. If I am careful, I am sure I will recover soon enough.” Darcy could see the way that Miss Elizabeth’s nose scrunched as she spoke. It struck Darcy that many of the people he knew that acted as caregivers to others, himself included, disliked being cared for themselves. It was interesting to know that she fell into that category.

Darcy stopped and looked Miss Elizabeth in the eyes and said, “Let me.” After a moment searching her gaze, he whispered, “Please, if I may not be angry on your behalf, at least let me see to your care.” Standing so close, he couldn’t help but notice her eyes dilating as he spoke, as if his words had a physical effect on her. Perchance it would not be as hard to win her heart as he had thought at first.

Darcy swallowed convulsively as he watched her lick her lips and say, “I suppose you can summon Mr. Jones to Longbourn, but I cannot promise to be the best of

patients.”

Forcing himself to face the path before him, Darcy kept his gaze on Longbourn in the distance. As they walked in silence, Darcy couldn't help but notice how their movements seemed perfectly synchronized, as if they were connected by an invisible thread.

Soon enough they found themselves at Longbourn's gates and Miss Elizabeth turned to face him. “As much I know it would be rude to turn you away here, if my mother sees you escort me home in this condition, she will cause us both any number of problems.”

“I will bow to your superior wisdom of your mother. How will you explain your condition?”

Waving him off, Miss Elizabeth said, “My mother is quick to think I am clumsy. I will let her believe I fell.”

As Miss Elizabeth spoke about her mother, Darcy couldn't help but notice the slight pursing of her lips, indicating something pained her. Although he desired greater insight, he recognized that delving into the complexities of her relationship with her mother was not suitable for the present circumstances. So instead he said, “Well then, I will go now and ask Mr. Jones to come to see to your shoulder. Tomorrow, when Bingley visits your sister, I might have to accompany him, just to ensure your recovery.”

Nodding, Miss Elizabeth blushed. “Then I will expect you. After all, I would not want you to worry.”

Darcy couldn't help but be drawn in as he watched her standing at the gate, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, her eyes gleaming with a sparkle that defied the

morning's challenges. She captivated him with her very presence, yet Darcy knew that it was time to leave.

He took a step backwards, trying to will himself to move away from her. Darcy knew what he wanted to say, but he knew it was a horrible idea. He took only a few steps before retracing his path back to her side, his face contorted in discomfort as he rubbed at it and let out an audible groan. Mumbling under his breath, he said, "This is such a bad idea," his words barely audible. Then, taking a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, and he declared, "Miss Bennet, I know this may be rather premature, but I find myself craving your smile more than my next breath. Is there any way I could ever hope you would allow me to court you?"

Her breath caught in Elizabeth's throat. Had he just said what she thought he said? This had certainly been the morning to end all mornings. Her enjoyment of the crisp morning had first been interrupted by the callous disregard of her person by Mr. Wickham. Then she was rescued by her dog, Pax, only to have Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam to come upon her in the aftermath.

Now, Mr. Darcy, her contradictory Mr. Darcy, was asking for the chance to court her. The man was so contrary. First, he insults her, but then wins over her dog. He saw to her needs at Netherfield and let her see a different side of himself at the dinner at the Lucas home. He only had to go and ask to court her. A wealthy, handsome gentleman wanted to spend time in her company so much that so that he wanted to court her. Her, Elizabeth Bennet, the impertinent daughter, he wanted to court her.

Why did his words affect her so? Had she ever been affected by any words nearly as much? She did not think so. It seemed that Pax was unhappy with the length of time she was taking to process everything, and he nudged her forward, forcing her to catch herself on the gate.

Peering up at Mr. Darcy as he waited for a response, she could see just what his

honesty was costing him. Despite his stillness, there was a palpable tension in the way he held himself. As if it was taking everything that he had to hold himself together in his suspense. When her gaze met his, Elizabeth was overwhelmed by the intensity of hope that radiated from his eyes, leaving her momentarily breathless.

“Mr. Darcy, you utterly confuse me. You call me tolerable one moment, then I find that my dog loves you. Once you shed your uneasy display around strangers, I learned just how much I enjoy conversing with you. Can you comprehend the immense pleasure I derived from pitting my intelligence against yours? You did not view me as an aberration, but rather an equal. And now you ask to court me?” Elizabeth stopped speaking, horrified to find that her face was wet with tears. Not only that, but Mr. Darcy looked panic-stricken. In an attempt to calm herself, Elizabeth placed her fingers on her quivering lips before finally finding the courage to speak. “There is more than hope, Mr. Darcy. The thought of being courted by you fills me with delight. How else can I ever hope to fully puzzle you out?”

Mr. Darcy’s eyes went from panicked to jubilant in less than a blink. Blessing her with one of his rare full smiles, he said, “I do not know, Miss Elizabeth. I already know it could take a lifetime before I learned all of your marvelous facets.”

“Well, we will start with a courtship. Our lifetimes will see to themselves soon enough.” Elizabeth bit her lip after she spoke. It was quite possible that she was falling in love with the best man she had ever met, even if they had not had the best start. She knew that reality and the worries of the day would crash back down on her soon enough. Her arm still ached, and she half wondered what would happen to Mr. Wickham and how it would affect the community when they discovered his inclinations, but her worries were for another time. For now, she would bask in the joy of the moment.

Heart in his throat, Darcy restrained his desire to grab Miss Elizabeth to his chest despite the gate between them. Feeling as if he had been gifted the most precious

thing imaginable, he could not help but grin at the woman of his dreams. Eventually, he managed to find the means to say, "I will speak with your father when I come to check on your recovery." It wasn't the most articulate response he could muster, but overwhelming happiness left him at a loss for words.

When Miss Elizabeth merely smiled and nodded, he felt relieved that she was not upset by his lack of poise. They stared at each other for a moment as neither of them wanted the moment to end, but soon enough Miss Elizabeth laughed, stopping their frozen behavior. Wrinkling her nose and smiling in a way that lit up her eyes, she took a step back from the gate and turned to go into her house through what appeared to be the door to the kitchen. She gave him one last look with her hand on the handle before smiling and slipping inside. Once she was out of sight, Darcy turned back to his horse and mounted. Taking the lane toward Meryton, he urged Agilis to a canter. He had an apothecary to find.

### Chapter Ten

Elizabeth carefully navigated the slippery trail, feeling each step as she walked, while Pax padded softly behind her. The recent weather had once again been wet and gloomy. It was one of the reasons she hated winter and late autumn; it did not give her enough time out of doors. Stopping at the bench at the back of her family's garden, Elizabeth sat down with a sigh. She did not like feeling so despondent. She preferred her cheerful self, but it she had left when Mr. Darcy had.

Mr. Darcy had needed to leave Netherfield to take care of some business in London for a time, and she missed him desperately. Poking at some pebbles with her toe, Elizabeth contemplated how odd it was to have so much of her life change in such a short period of time. In the two months since she had stayed at Netherfield to care for Jane, Elizabeth had less than one month of getting to know Mr. Darcy and three weeks quietly courting him before he had to leave. How had she completely lost her heart to another person so quickly? How could she miss a person so much that had not even been in her life not even three months ago?

The fact that she missed Darcy was only made worse by having to watch her Jane and Mr. Bingley plan their future together. In the three weeks she spent getting to know Mr. Darcy better, Mr. Bingley had proposed to Jane. As much as she loved her sister, it was hard to watch her sit with Mr. Bingley as they planned their future together. She wanted that for herself with Mr. Darcy.

Sadly, Jane seemed to know that something was wrong with Elizabeth, and for a time, she worried that Elizabeth did not want her to marry Mr. Bingley. While Elizabeth had convinced Jane that she fully supported her chose of husband, Jane was

still worried about her.

So here she was, avoiding the loving couple and her mother. Perhaps it was not wise to keep their courting such a secret. At first everything was so new and fragile she had wanted to protect her connection from the exuberance of her mother. But now her mother lectured her daily on how horrible she was to be envious of her sister. Jane was beautiful, after all, and deserved all the happiness that came to her. If Elizabeth had wanted to get married, she should have tried harder to catch Mr. Collins.

When Pax nuzzled at Elizabeth's hands, she scratched behind his ears absentmindedly. Trying to stave off loneliness, Elizabeth tried to imagine what she might say to Mr. Darcy when he returned. He would have to be caught up on all the happenings in his absence.

First off, Charlotte had married Mr. Collins and moved to Kent. The ceremony had been nice enough, and Charlotte had promised to write. She had, in fact, asked Elizabeth to come visit in the spring. Would Mr. Darcy be entertained by the fact that Elizabeth had not known how to answer her question? If things went as Elizabeth wished, they would be married by the spring and though they might visit Rosings in the spring, it would not be as Charlotte's guest.

Then there was the change in the town. When they had heard about the truth behind who Wickham really was, all the town families had closed their doors to the militia. There were many daughters about town unhappy that there were no longer any handsome young men available to flirt and dance with.

Of course, Lydia refused to believe that her poor Wickham could not possibly behave so poorly. She pitched such a fit about it that their mother was forced to do something. Elizabeth had never thought she would see the day that her mother would actually act against her favorite. When her kind words to her daughter did nothing to stop her horrible behavior, Mrs. Bennet finally put her foot down. In her mother's words, "Her beautiful young daughter would not be throwing her life away on a poor

foot soldier.” The row had been epic, but Lydia was back in the schoolroom and Elizabeth could not be happier.

Besides the way she handled Lydia, Elizabeth’s mother had not changed much, despite her oldest daughter’s engagement to Bingley. She had merely moved her worries and hopes on to her another daughter. Oddly enough, the daughter that she showered her attention on was Mary. This was another thing that Elizabeth was happy about. Mary was thriving under the attention and had actually begun wearing lighter colors. She would like to think that Mr. Darcy would be just as happy as she was about the changes in her family.

Many of the conversations they had shared had been about their families, the differences, and the similarities. Elizabeth held onto the belief that beneath their conversations lay a glimpse of how they could one day create a harmonious family.

Realizing that it was too cold to simply sit in the shade, Elizabeth got up from the bench and moved on. Leaning down, Elizabeth rubbed behind Pax’s ears as he walked at her side. She knew her time in the outdoors was drawing to a close, as winter’s icy grip still clung tightly to the land. She was becoming chilled, and knew she would have to go inside soon, but it was worth it to have a moment to herself. To not have to pretend that her heart was somewhere in London without her.

Darcy walked quickly down the slick path, catching himself as he almost fell. Rolling his eyes at his blunder, he forced himself to slow down. It would not do to harm himself or his package in his haste. Still, it was difficult; he had been away from Miss Elizabeth for far too long and his impatience to see her was gnawing at him.

When she finally came into view, Miss Elizabeth was looking away, apparently taking in the scenery before her. Something about her stance was off. Her shoulders were slumped and something about the way she stood made her seem subdued. She did not seem like his Elizabeth. His Elizabeth, he liked the sound of that. Hopefully she would too.

Pax took note of his presence almost immediately, and his tail began to wag enthusiastically. Before Darcy could decide if it would be best to go to her or wait for her to notice him, Pax took it out of his hands. When Pax nudged Elizabeth, tail wagging enthusiastically, she looked around and spotted Darcy standing there.

The way Elizabeth's face lit up with joy upon seeing him sent a powerful surge of emotion through him, resonating at his core. How could he have that much power in someone's life? That his mere presence could bring her so much joy amazed him. Opening his mouth to say something, he realized he could not speak. There were too many words in his head and feelings in his heart to sort it all out. How to say what he felt and not end up sounding like a fool?

Elizabeth closed the distance between them in several long strides. Suddenly standing within arm's reach but not touching. Seeing his hesitation, or inability to speak, Elizabeth smiled at him in a knowing way, saying, "I had not hoped you would be back so soon."

Finding himself able to speak, Darcy managed to say, "I managed to complete the tasks I had set before myself in record time. I had no desire to stay away from you, not when your mere existence calls to me like a siren."

Elizabeth's lips pulled into a quick, impish smile before she replied, "I will admit that at the moment, I do not feel like a siren. Your absence in my life left a gaping hole that I didn't realize would ache so intensely. I have missed you immensely."

Darcy hated the idea of Elizabeth being in pain for any reason. He was glad that he had a solution to the pain of their separation in mind. "Then I am glad I was able to return as swiftly as I did." Pax disrupted the second thing he was going to say by his excessively curious inspection of the lidded wicker basket at his feet. Leaning down, Darcy ruffled the gentle giant's fur and whispered, "That is a surprise, Pax. Do not give me away."

Elizabeth seemed to notice her dog's interest and looked at Darcy, her eyebrows raised in question. "I had not thought that you would bring me anything back from London."

Looking down at the basket, Darcy prayed that the idea he had would work as he thought it would. Taking a deep breath to bolster his courage, Darcy began, "I am uncertain quite how to explain my thoughts, but it is not a gift for you. Though I welcome you to make use of it in someone else's stead, for the time being." Picking up the basket, Darcy held it in front of him.

Eyes narrowing, Elizabeth tilted her head as if she was trying to puzzle what he had said out. She asked, "Who exactly will I be holding this gift for? Do I know them?"

Darcy shook his head in denial, answering, "No, you have not met them." Darcy struggled not to smile. He could see the cogs in Elizabeth's mind turning as she attempted to solve his riddle. Wanting to continue with the game, Darcy said, "Actually, I do not know them either."

Hands on her hips, Elizabeth asked, "Are they male or female?"

"Yes," came Darcy's grinning reply.

Twisting her lips up into a pout that made Darcy want to trace the line of her jutting lower lip, she asked, "Are you implying that you want me to watch over a gift for a person who is a stranger to us both? A person that is either male or female, possible either?"

Feeling the strength of his grin stretch his face, Darcy only said, "Yes."

Elizabeth took a step closer to him. She rested her hands on the lid of the basket, saying, "Why would I want to watch over a gift for someone so unconnected to me?"

Complied to whisper his last hint, he intoned, “Well, I never said that they were unconnected to us, and I suspect you would love them and have no issue with the task.”

Elizabeth stood frozen, her mind racing as she absorbed Mr. Darcy's words, following the path his clues had laid out. The gift was for someone neither of them knew, but not unconnected. Possibly male or female. Someone that he thought she would love. Mr. Darcy had also said them, so there was a possibility that they were talking about more than a single person.

A sudden suspicion hit Elizabeth like a flash of light, and her fingers flexed convulsively on the wicker beneath her fingers. Her suddenly pounding heart did not make it easy to say, “Would it be accurate to say that the person or persons I am to hold this gift for will need some time before they are old enough to have use of it?”

Elizabeth was fascinated by the way she could read the hope shining in Mr. Darcy's eyes. He was so unlike the man she had first met back at that assembly. This was the man she had come to know in all their interactions. Mr. Darcy was a kind man at heart, but it was a heart that he had endeavored to protect with stony stares and haughty demeanor. Elizabeth was ecstatic that he had learned that he could smile with her, to be himself and at that moment; he was smiling for all he was worth.

He seemed to note her understanding and with a nod said, “Well, I would hope for their being able to enjoy the gift sooner rather than latter but there is no certainty on any timetable.”

Now nearly certain that she knew what Mr. Darcy spoke of, if not at all aware of what was in the box Elizabeth glanced down at the oddly eager Pax before saying, “Well then, I suppose I should see just what object you have brought me care of.”

Placing her hands near the base where his were, Elizabeth prepared to take the basket only to have Mr. Darcy caution, “Take care, the basket is rather heavier than it looks

and I would hate for you to damage its contents.”

Elizabeth nodded her understanding, but in that moment, she felt a jolt of electricity shoot through her hands when Mr. Darcy's fingers grazed against hers as he released the basket. Gasping at the sensation, Elizabeth gazed up at Mr. Darcy taking note of the way his eyes seem to widen. It was nice to know that she was not the only one to react to the encounter.

Though she would have wished to stare longer into his smoldering gaze, Elizabeth quickly became distracted by how heavy the basket really was. Realizing she could not peek inside while she was holding the basket, she knelt on the cold ground and placed the basket before her.

Pax quickly inspected the basket all over, tail wagging so much that it seemed as if he was wiggling his whole body. When he tried to nose open the lid, Elizabeth chided him gently. “Pax, it is not your present. You silly boy,” Pax whined but settled down to lie next to the basket, though his tail never stopped wagging.

Opening the lid with nervous fingers, Elizabeth peered into the basket and could not help but gasp at what he had brought her. No wonder Pax was so enthusiastic. Inside the basket, wrapped in a soft nest of a pink blanket, was a puppy. Reaching out, Elizabeth scooped up the puppy despite the nap it seemed to be indulging in. “Oh my, aren’t you precious?” Holding the waking puppy to her chest for a moment despite its size, Elizabeth snuggled with it. A quick glance told Elizabeth that it was a little girl and began trying to come up with possible names. Though soon enough, she held the baby out to Pax to inspect. “Look, Pax, you have a new friend.”

Pax instantly began licking and smelling the baby all over. Though she seemed to be frightened of the much larger dog at first, it was not long before she began sniffing at the other dog in return. Elizabeth looked down at the puppy that filled her arms. No wonder the basket was so heavy the puppy already rivaled the size of several full-grown dogs that she knew. It did not take Elizabeth long to realize that the new puppy

was very similar to Pax. They both had the same lanky form and giant paws, not to mention the shape of their heads was nearly identical. Looking at Mr. Darcy, who had knelt on the ground next to her, she asked, “Wherever did you find her, Mr. Darcy?”

“You told me that Pax had been a gift from your uncle and that he had obtained him for you on his wedding trip to Ireland. We had begun corresponding with one another shortly after we began courting. I had let him know I wanted to get another dog like Pax, and he put me in contact with the breeder he had found Pax at. One of things I was doing in London was meeting with your uncle and obtaining this little lady.” Reaching out, Mr. Darcy scratched the puppy behind her ears. Continuing, he said, “Despite her size, she is only ten weeks old. I have a feeling that she will rival Pax in size soon enough.”

Inspecting the puppy more closely, Elizabeth realized she was wearing a small collar, and that something was tied to it with a length of pink ribbon. Glancing at Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth abruptly remembered the riddle she had been playing with Mr. Darcy. The joy she felt at discovering the puppy had completely wiped it from her mind.

Glancing back at Mr. Darcy with wide eyes for a moment, she quickly focused on releasing whatever it was from the puppy’s collar. The knot had been tied very securely, and it took a while for her to undo it with the tips of her nails. It was not made easier by the squirming bundle, but soon enough Elizabeth found herself in possession of a beautiful ring in the palm of her hand.

Taking the ring from where it rested in Elizabeth’s palm, Darcy held it up in front of him and said, “Despite the brevity of our acquaintance, the intensity of my feelings towards you far exceeds anything I’ve ever known in the twenty-six years prior to meeting you. Getting to know you over the last several weeks has allowed me not only to see you more clearly, but myself as well, and what I have seen continues to take my breath away. You have become like a fire in my veins that I do not want to live without. I cannot see a book or a sunset or even a tea tray without thinking of you and wondering what you would think of it and how much I would enjoy speaking to

you of it.” Placing his palm in hers, Darcy allowed the warmth and electricity he found there to spur him further along into his speech. “The day that Wickham harmed you, I remember thinking that I wanted our children to grow up with a dog as loyal and loving as Pax was. We weren’t even courting at that moment, but I began trying to see how I could make it happen as soon as I was able, because I knew I wanted a future with you in it. There is so much that I want, but it all starts with you. So Miss Elizabeth Rose Bennet, would you allow me to be the father of your children, your helpmate, and your husband? Will you marry me?”

Instead of answering with a yes, as he had hoped, she got a teasing gleam in her eyes and said, “So you got me a puppy because...”

Somehow Darcy knew it wasn’t a no, so he felt perfectly comfortable saying, “Well, if our children are to have a dog like Pax at their sides as they grow, I thought it would be much more expedient to breed them ourselves. I know dogs do not live forever, as much as we might wish them to. I hope this way our children will always have a dog available to them.” He smiled wanly, remembering they both knew the pain of losing a beloved pet.

Looking down, Elizabeth studied the puppy in her arms and then Pax before she looked back at Darcy. In her eyes, he saw the response he wanted, even if she had yet spoken the words. It reassured him to see how much love floated there in her emerald gaze. As he watched, he noticed the way her eyes crinkled, and her cheeks quivered in an attempt to suppress laughter. He was not surprised when she asked, “So you want us to spend our lives raising babies and large hairy dogs?”

Nodding, Darcy twined his fingers through hers and with a confidence he’d never felt before, said, “Yes, I do.”

Leaning towards him, she whispered, “I think that sounds perfect. I believe there is no better way to spend my time than raising children and giant dogs with you by my side.” Placing the hand that was not tangled with his on his cheek, Elizabeth

continued, “Yes, Mr. Darcy. I will marry you.”

In that moment, he couldn't resist the overwhelming warmth in her eyes and the happiness radiating from his heart. Before he knew it, their lips were locked in an embrace. The moment was pure bliss until he felt Pax licking his cheek. Pulling back, he glared at the dog, who seemed completely unrepentant. Darcy said, “I just got you a girlfriend, you ungrateful cur.”

Elizabeth collapsed into his chest, succumbing to fits of giggles. Eventually, between fits of laughter and wheezing, she managed to say, “You are the one who wants to raise giant dogs.” Darcy was happy enough to let Elizabeth lean into his chest as she regained her composure. If the ground was not so cold, he would be happy to sit with her forever.

Sitting up, Elizabeth rested her forehead against his and whispered, “How soon do you think we can get married?”

Whispering back, he said, “Why do you think I had to go to London? I was arranging for the marriage articles and a special license.”