



# Pemberley (Happily Ever Afterlife #1)

**Author:** *Mary Smythe*

**Category:** Historical

**Description:** You need not be afraid, Elizabeth. Nothing will harm you while I am here.

When Elizabeth Bennet visits Pemberley on a summer holiday tour with her aunt and uncle Gardiner, her greatest fear is encountering Mr Darcy. She has been haunted by guilt for her past misjudgment of Mr Darcy, and regrets refusing his proposal. She can only imagine how he might act were he to see her on the grounds of his estate.

When Fitzwilliam Darcy unexpectedly meets Elizabeth Bennet at Pemberley, his second impression shows little improvement over his first—but surely all is not lost? Her mystifying appearance cannot be mere happenstance. Certainly, the hand of Fate must be guiding their reunion and Darcy believes he has been granted another opportunity to woo her properly.

But is it the hand of fate, or perhaps something more supernatural, which aims to bring them together and protect them from the forces which seek to tear them apart? Darcy and Elizabeth find themselves subject to the whims of powers beyond the natural world in this second chance romance.

**Total Pages (Source):** 35

## CHAPTER ONE

“ O h my, that does smell wonderful,” Elizabeth praised as the stew she and the Gardiners had ordered was brought into their private quarters. After a long day on the road, she was eager for something hearty to eat, even if it was simple inn fare.

“Indeed, it does,” agreed her uncle Gardiner as the dish was placed in the centre of the table. He leant forwards and inhaled deeply, visibly appreciating the aroma of cooked mutton, potatoes, onions, and carrots. “Though anything would seem more appetising than our breakfast.”

Elizabeth and her aunt voiced their agreement heartily; that morning’s repast had been so entirely inedible that they had departed from their previous lodgings without having partaken of any of it, leaving them all ravenous. Now, they were prepared to eat voraciously to make up for their earlier lack of nourishment. Blessedly, the cook at the Blue Lady knew what she was about.

The maid bobbed a polite curtsy before enquiring, “Will you be needing anything else, ma’am?”

“Perhaps some bread?” suggested Mr Gardiner .

Once the servant had departed, Mrs Gardiner addressed both of her dining companions. “So, what shall we do tomorrow? I know we had previously discussed paying a visit to Pemberley, but no decision has yet been made. What say you?”

“I have no aversion to the scheme,” said Mr Gardiner as he spread his linen napkin

over his lap.

Elizabeth, who had been blowing gently on a steaming spoonful of mutton and potato, lowered the utensil back into her dish as her stomach began to writhe uncomfortably. She had rather hoped her relations might forget about visiting that particular estate after she had made a point of showing a lack of enthusiasm for it before, but such had been apparently too much to hope for. “To be perfectly honest, Aunt, I have no inclination for touring another grand house. We have seen so many of late, and I really take no pleasure in fine carpets or satin curtains.”

“My love, should you not like to see a place of which you have heard so much?” Mrs Gardiner asked between bites. “A place, too, with which so many of your acquaintance are connected. Wickham passed all his youth there, you know.”

How could she forget? Elizabeth fought the impulse to grimace at the mention of that particular man—for a gentle man he was not—given her more recent knowledge of his unscrupulous behaviour. She was sure that his past associations with Pemberley were very pleasing to him but rather doubted that anyone else who lived there shared that opinion of his residency.

Coughing a little, Elizabeth replied, “Would it not be...presumptuous to visit Pemberley without a proper invitation?”

“An invitation?” Mr Gardiner lifted his wine glass and smirked at his niece over the rim before taking a sip. “You were not so missish at Blenheim or Chatsworth. Why should we require an invitation to Pemberley?”

Because the proprietors of those great estates had not proposed marriage to me and been rejected soundly. Elizabeth could say no such thing aloud, so she contented herself with silence as a response.

“If it were merely a fine house richly furnished,” persisted Mrs Gardiner, picking up where her husband had left off, “I should not care about it myself, but the grounds are delightful. They have some of the finest woods in the country. Is that not so?” She posed this last question to the maid, who had just returned with their requested loaf of bread.

“Indeed, ma’am. You’d not see finer anywhere,” the girl agreed as she laid the additional fare on the table and began portioning it out to her patrons. A young lad of about twelve years entered the room behind her with logs cradled in his arms for the evening fire. He set to work against the far wall while the conversation continued around him.

“And is the family in residence?” Elizabeth lowered her eyes to her plate in the hopes that the earnestness of her query would go unnoticed. She could hear as well as feel the rapid thudding of her pulse as she awaited an answer.

“No, miss. Last I heard, Mr Darcy were off to London.”

Elizabeth felt the tension in her shoulders ease at this welcome news. Her throbbing heart slowed its pace, and the warmth in her cheeks subsided. She picked up her spoon and dished up a portion, suddenly hungry again.

“You don’t want to go to Pemberley, missus,” cried the boy from across the room. He stood next to the fireplace, dusted with ash, and regarded them with wide eyes. “Haunted, it is!”

“Hush, you!” chided the maid. She turned back and begged pardon on the boy’s behalf. “I am so sorry, sir, ma’am, miss. Sam is full of fanciful notions, he is. Always going on about something or other.”

Mr Gardiner, leaning back in his chair with his hands spread across his happily full

stomach, dismissed her contrition with a chuckle. “No need to apologise, lass, the boy meant no harm. Haunted, you say?”

The child nodded vigorously and stepped forwards, his hands gesticulating out of the open window in what Elizabeth assumed must be the direction of Pemberley. He was warming to his topic and spoke with the kind of enthusiasm that only the youthful could manage. “Aye, haunted! I seen it fer meself when I worked in the stables last summer. That place be full o’ spirits.”

Mrs Gardiner looked at Elizabeth with a smile curling the corners of her lips; she had much practice in indulging her own fanciful children and had shared many of their more outlandish yarns with her elder nieces. Elizabeth returned her merriment in kind as her uncle continued to dig the particulars out of their storyteller.

Mr Gardiner leant forwards again, propping his elbows upon the table and his chin upon the interlaced fingers of his hands. “Indeed? Are they very frightening?”

The boy arched his back so that his spine stood straight and to attention. “I am not afraid of ghosts, sir.”

“Certainly not. I would never have suspected it of you. But are there many ghosts? Shall we see one if we visit?”

“Aye, there’s a lady in an ol’ blue dress that’s said to come up out o’ the lake if you?—”

“That’s quite enough out of you!” said the maid, shooing the boy towards the door with a double wave of her hands. “There’s plenty o’ work to be done round here and never enough time to do it in. Leave off telling your wild stories and get off with you. Go and see to the Millers’ fire.”

The boy scowled at her for interrupting but bowed to the table and left. The way he held his nose aloft reminded Elizabeth strongly of a young lady she had met the previous autumn, and the comparison was most amusing. She held a knuckle to her lips, pressed against her growing smile, and strongly fought the desire to laugh aloud.

Once the boy's footsteps could be heard clomping down the staircase, the maid turned back to the Gardiners and offered another anxious apology. "Sorry again, sir, ma'am. Sam is full of tall tales. Truly, Pemberley is a wonderful place, not a bit frightening, and well worth visiting."

Elizabeth suspected that, in a small town like Lambton, a merchant was always careful about what was said of the principal estate of the area. No doubt they feared that the Darcys would revoke their custom should they discover that ghost stories were being spread about their family seat. With her better knowledge of Mr Darcy's generous character, she felt that he would never be so cruel, but perhaps his forbidding countenance engendered caution in the populace. No small wonder. He can appear rather fearsome even when he is attempting to be friendly! Or courting a young lady. She grimaced at the recollection of her own blindness.

"Do not worry yourself about it," said Mr Gardiner, leaning back again to sit more comfortably in his chair. "We have a boy at home about his age, and he is always telling us the most entertaining stories. Cannot believe a single thing he tells you, but he keeps us all laughing."

"Thank you, sir. Please ring the bell if there's anything more you be needing." The maid then scurried from the room, closing the door behind her.

Once she was gone, Mrs Gardiner turned back to Elizabeth. "So, shall we visit Pemberley after all? If we are very lucky, perhaps we shall see some of the former residents while we are there." The lady's smile grew incrementally at her jest, and her companions chuckled their appreciation of it.

Elizabeth, feeling it would be churlish to protest further and comforted by the sure knowledge that Mr Darcy would not be at home during their visit, allowed that she should very much like to see what lurked in the depths of Pemberley's lake. "If not a ghost, perhaps a sea monster?" She earned a deep belly laugh from her uncle and a more ladylike titter from her aunt for this quip.

With no further objections to the scheme, to Pemberley they were to go.

### CHAPTER TWO

“T here now, ain’t it a sight?”

Indeed, it is , Elizabeth silently agreed, her mouth gaping open in wonder. Their driver, loaned to them by the proprietors of the Blue Lady for the purposes of their tour, had parked their open carriage at the perfect spot for viewing the great house of Pemberley. They were settled on the rise of a hill whereupon they could peer down into the slight valley below and observe the magnificent sandstone edifice, which glowed with ethereal warmth in the summer sunlight.

Pemberley was the most magnificent dwelling Elizabeth had ever seen. It was a large, handsome house—a proper reflection of its owner, she realised with a faint flutter of her pulse—standing well on rising ground and backed by a ridge of high woody hills. In front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance as was currently the fashion. Leaning forwards, she could discern a grove of willow trees swaying in the wind along one end of the bank, adding a whimsical charm to the scene. How lovely it would be to take a stroll under the shade of those delicate branches! She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste.

“Is it not beautiful, Lizzy?”

Her aunt’s dreamy sigh drew Elizabeth’s ear but not her eyes; she could not tear her gaze from the splendour that was Pemberley. “It is magical.”



“To be mistress of Pemberley would really be something.”

Although this was said in an offhand manner, it struck Elizabeth with some force. She had been offered that very position back in April yet had disdained it for want of a proper understanding of the man who had extended it. Not that she regretted refusing Mr Darcy’s proposal—no, indeed, for she contended still that they were incompatible—but she dearly wished she had not so unfairly lambasted the poor man over her own ill-formed opinions. If she had any regrets, they were related to inflicting her foolish prejudices upon someone who had deserved better.

All of a sudden, the midday light dimmed, and Pemberley was cast into shadow, dulling the soft glow that had emanated from it earlier. The wind whipped up, sending the willows into a frenzy and ripples streaking across the lake. It now appeared a more sinister place, and Elizabeth withdrew deeper into the squabs.

“Is it meant to rain today?” she heard her uncle query.

“No, but I expect we’ll get some soon enough if the old farmers are to be believed. They’re calling for a terrible storm any day now.” So saying, the coachman whistled to his team, and they began their descent towards the manor.

As Darcy trotted down the main street of Lambton, nodding here and there to acknowledge the greetings of the townspeople, he wished desperately for a breeze to cool his face. He felt hot and dusty from a long day of travel, and he wanted nothing more than to arrive at Pemberley and take shelter within its shade.

Of course, even Pemberley would only provide him so much sanctuary. He was a few hours, a day at most, ahead of his party, after which he would be required to share his home with others. He had journeyed to London for the particular purpose of collecting his sister and friends for a house party—one arranged at yuletide and now regretted—yet he was weary of their company before even reaching their destination.

Georgiana was more than welcome, Pemberley being her home as well as his, and Bingley was always a considerate guest, but his sisters...

It would not do to think about Miss Bingley, for his temper was already short. Days spent in her cloying presence and nights haunted by anguished recollections had wrought their mischief, leaving him without his usual sangfroid. Riding ahead was meant to preserve them all from Darcy's ill humour with the lady; if he had to endure her fawning pretensions any longer, or tolerate her unwanted appropriation of his arm one more time, he would likely say something unfortunate. To think, he had once considered Miss Bingley's company unobjectionable—even occasionally enjoyable!—to the point of allowing her to befriend his sister and visit his homes. His slight partiality, such as it was, had waned to nothing since meeting a more worthy woman—one whose absence plagued him with regrets—last autumn. Now, all he wished for was distance.

And so, when Darcy had awoken early that morning, miserable and twisted up in his sweaty sheets on the heels of a horrid dream, he had determined it was better for everyone if he absented himself from their travelling party. He had left behind a note for Bingley with some excuse about preparing the house for guests, another one for Georgiana with an apology and a promise not to question any headaches she might experience over the next fortnight whilst the Bingleys were in residence, and hired a horse to take him the rest of the way to Pemberley alone.

Darcy passed the Blue Lady, the local inn, and breathed a deep sigh of relief. Just beyond this bustling establishment was the edge of town and the beginning of his own property. I am home! The house itself would not be visible for a couple of miles yet, but he felt a rush of comfort wash over him the moment he crossed onto his ancestral lands. This sense of belonging, of this being his place in the world, was almost mystical; it was as if Pemberley itself knew its master had arrived and embraced him with open arms.

This sense of peace persisted until Darcy reached the rise that would give him his first glimpse of the manor. He pulled his horse to a halt and perched there in the saddle to take in the familiar aspect of the building that had sheltered generations of his ancestors, nestled comfortably within the land that surrounded it. The warm sandstone walls were softly glowing under the afternoon sunlight, and the lake glistened like a faceted jewel before it. The gardens had erupted with colour since he had seen them last—the plants growing free and almost wild in their beds. The whole blended all but seamlessly into the woods that backed the house. Pemberley truly appeared as if it had magically sprung from the earth along with the flora and fauna of the world around it.

Glad as he was to be home—and he assuredly was—Darcy could not deny the pang of regret he felt upon beholding Pemberley again. Elizabeth would have loved it here. Only four months ago, he had greatly anticipated returning to his beloved estate with her as his new bride, but instead he had found himself retreating there to lick his wounds. He had ruined his chances with her due to his—how had she put it?—arrogant disdain for the feelings of others. He wished he could refute her accusations, but they had proved painfully correct. Looking back upon his own actions, he had not treated her, or those she held dear, with proper respect. He had not given much thought to whether she liked him or not, merely taken for granted that she would accept his overtures. With the social disparity between them, how could she do otherwise? Elizabeth, however, was not the sort of lady whose affection could be bought; no, it must be earned, and he had fallen far short of the mark. She was right to refuse me.

His father would have been utterly ashamed of how Darcy had acted. Although not without his share of pride, the late George Darcy had treated those around him, regardless of their social rank, with consideration. His long-standing friendship with his steward, Mr John Wickham, was a prime example of this liberality. Even if the younger Wickham's character had suffered from the largess, Darcy had fond memories of the elder as an upright, friendly man, who had been deserving of George

Darcy's regard. He too often forgot the estimable father when the crimes of the degenerate son were before him. Despite this example, he had still failed to behave in a manner befitting a gentleman when it counted most. His father had taught him good principles, yet Darcy had followed them in pride and conceit.

Darcy shook his head sharply to dispel the crushing sense of melancholy that attempted to smother him. If he were to honour Elizabeth's candour and attend to her corrections, he could not allow his prior missteps to overcome him. Certainly, the guilt and disappointment were natural, but they were hardly productive. If he wished to become a true gentleman like his father, the sort who merited the love of a woman of Miss Elizabeth Bennet's calibre, then he would need to push self-castigation aside and focus on rectifying the faults in his character.

Nickering to his horse, Darcy resumed his journey to the manor. A breeze kicked up and blew at his back as if encouraging him forwards.

### CHAPTER THREE

U pon arriving at the stables, Darcy dismounted and passed his horse's reins to one of the grooms with instructions to feed and water the beast before returning it to the inn. The lad nodded, welcomed him home, and led his rented mount away.

“Heel! Heel, girl— sit !”

Darcy, forewarned by a series of thundering barks, braced himself to accept the enamoured greeting of one who was always glad to see the master. He staggered back a step as a pair of large paws landed upon his chest and a slobbering tongue began bathing his face. “Freddy! I am happy to see you too.”

The spotted Great Dane licked at his chin fervently even as Darcy sputtered at her attentions. She was huge, somehow even larger than when he had last seen her just a few weeks ago, but still a puppy at heart and not yet trained out of her wildest behaviours. She might be if Darcy were more firm with her, but there was something about Freddy that tugged at his heart and enticed him to be more forgiving. Even had that not been so, Georgiana spoilt her dreadfully.

“Mr Darcy, sir, forgive me. I was walking her, and she slipped her lead, but it will never happen again.”

Turning to the winded young man whom Freddy had apparently bested, Darcy replied, “No harm done, lad. Freddy is untrainable—I am convinced of it.”

“I'll take her back to the kennel now, shall I?”

One glance at Freddy's grinning face and Darcy knew he would not be sending her away. "I believe I shall take her up to the house with me. You may return to your other duties."

The young man bowed and scurried off, Freddy's lead dangling from his hand, as Darcy chuckled and disengaged himself from the dog's embrace. He whistled for her to follow, and they began their approach towards the manor.

With no immediate concerns to see to, Darcy determined to take the longer way through the willow grove down by the lake. It was a lovely winding path, one of his mother's favourites, and would afford him better shade than the more direct route of crossing the lawn. The waving branches beckoned him forth as if they eagerly waited to receive him.

Within the wood, he was transported to a magical realm of dappled light and sighing wind. The breeze stirred the hair at Darcy's collar, and he closed his eyes to savour the relief. The soft whisper of restless leaves tickled his ears, almost like the lilting voice of an affectionate friend. Once again, he felt the sense that Pemberley was glad for his return. How good it is to be home.

When he opened his eyes again, sunlight glimmering upon the water's surface caught his attention. It looked marvellously inviting—so clear and refreshing. As a boy, his mother would bring him down to the lake frequently when it was warm enough, and he would splash and play in the water for hours. A few times, Lady Anne had even removed her own slippers and waded in above her ankles, her skirts suspended out of reach of the damp. Although he had many fond memories of his mother, who had died just after Georgiana's birth some sixteen years ago, he had rarely seen her so at ease as she had been on those summer days. Darcy's eyes misted over, and he cleared his throat as recollections, both pleasant and sad, overcame him. How dearly he missed his parents.

Freddy barked and pawed at his leg, bringing Darcy back to the present. Upon garnering his notice at last, she barked again and loped away into the water, eliciting a laugh from her master. After a short series of frolics, the dog turned back to Darcy and stared at him expectantly with her tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth.

“Oh no,” Darcy replied to her presumed invitation, his mouth twitching with mirth. “I am far too old to be swimming with you. I am master here now and cannot bow to every whim of frivolity.”

Freddy merely whined at him as if unconvinced.

“No, I shall not. Come on—I wish to change out of these dirty clothes.”

After another bark, Freddy gave up on him and launched herself deeper into the water, where she paddled about through the tangle of willow branches arched over the lake. Darcy had to admit it did look tempting. And this particular alcove was well concealed from prying eyes.

“Oh, very well,” he at last conceded, his fingers struggling with the knot in his cravat. “But if I frighten any delicate maidens, I shall blame you for it.”

### CHAPTER FOUR

“H ere we are,” announced Mrs Reynolds, stopping in front of a large portrait of Mr Darcy. She waved her hand at the painting and added, “The master. It was taken in his father’s lifetime, some six or seven years ago, but in my opinion, it is a good likeness even now.”

The gallery at Pemberley was a long corridor on the first floor of the great house, with a row of tall windows on one side and various pieces of art displayed against the wall on the other. There were numerous portraits, most of which were Darcys of yore, but there were also a few landscapes and still-lives sprinkled into the line for variety, in addition to assorted works of pottery and sculpture. One particular bust of some ancestor had a nose that looked familiar, but Elizabeth felt that the current master wore it better. At the very centre of the hall, the group was stopped before a life-sized representation of the Mr Darcy she was acquainted with, flanked by wall sconces that would illuminate it even in darkness. He looked every bit as powerful as his forebears, and his abominable pride, when surrounded by so many august personages, seemed completely reasonable.

Elizabeth was forced to agree with the housekeeper, who proceeded to enthuse over what a remarkable likeness the painting conveyed. The artist, whoever he was, had done a magnificent job of capturing the essence of the strong, masculine master of Pemberley. He stood, tall and proud, with one hand at his lapel and the other propped against the mantelpiece that their guide had presented to them in the library down below. His boot rested against the hearth before a roaring blaze, the leather reflecting the orange light in a sheen that indicated a high polish. She had seen him display himself in just such a way on several occasions during his stay in Hertfordshire, and



she smiled in appreciation of how very like him it was. The only other position in which he was more familiar would be with his back turned to the room as he stared out of a window, but she supposed that would not make a terribly good portrait. After all, his face would be what future generations would be most interested to see, and although he had quite a habit of hiding it from others, it was well worth looking at.

Mrs Reynolds continued to expound upon the painting—when it had been commissioned, what occasion it had been made for, and so on—while Elizabeth kept her eyes trained upon it. The face that ought not be hidden was so very handsome, and the artist had managed to capture Mr Darcy in one of his gentler moments. She knew it was not creative liberty because he wore a smile that, in retrospect, she recognised as one he had turned upon her on occasion. She rather wondered what he had been smiling about at the time his image had been taken, but the housekeeper either had no such knowledge to impart or was disinclined to do so. Whatever it had been, Elizabeth now strangely felt that his benevolence was for her benefit, no matter how ridiculous that seemed.

The Gardiners and Mrs Reynolds moved on to another painting, and Elizabeth could vaguely hear them commenting upon it, but she remained where she was, staring at the man she had so scornfully rejected back in the spring. That enigmatic smile seemed to be just for her, showing her a magnanimity that she did not deserve. Oh, how she had misjudged him! And for a man such as Mr Wickham. She, who had been so proud of her discernment and ability to sketch characters, had made the mistake of believing that a person's goodness was linked to his amiability in society. Had she not spent much of her lifetime controlling her impulses in company to show good manners to others? Was that not some form of mask used to beguile people into seeing only the best parts of her? Mr Wickham had done much the same but with nefarious motives hidden behind his congenial aspect.

Mr Darcy, in contrast, had failed to be polite and had even occasionally given offence, but there had been no cause to doubt his honesty. Considering the wild

behaviour of some of her own family, how could she condemn the man for poor manners? Her prejudice against him had been born the night of the assembly, when he had wounded her vanity, cracked that veneer she wore to put her best self forwards, and made her feel as unworthy as her mother often told her she was. Elizabeth had not been as angry with Mr Darcy as she had been at the realisation that she was nothing special to this distinguished stranger. Of course, he had apparently changed his mind later, but she had been unaware of such, and his belittling proposal had done nothing to alleviate the shame of being considered somehow defective.

Even so, that was absolutely no cause for wounding him as she had. Not only had she accused him of underhanded dealings with Mr Wickham, but she had also overlooked his declaration of ardent love and stomped his heart beneath her slipper before grinding it into the floor. She would never forget the expression on his face as she had dared to call him ungentlemanly; he had been stiff and pale, almost as if on the verge of tears, though he had held them back in her presence. Elizabeth had accused him of cruelty to her sister and Mr Bingley, but it was she who had been wantonly vicious. She looked away from the contentedly genial face of Mr Darcy, too ashamed to face even his likeness.

If only she could see him one last time, or even respond to his letter, she would apologise for every awful thing she had said. Even his self-defence on the score of separating his friend from Jane had shown some merit upon second perusal. Had the situation been reversed, Elizabeth might have offered her dearest sister the same advice, though she supposed that Jane would have ascertained the feelings of her suitor from the source rather than simply disappearing. Abandoning Jane was Mr Bingley's failing, not his friend's.

Well , she decided as she raised her eyes back up to Mr Darcy, there is no cause to agonise over the past, as the remembrance gives me no pleasure. If I never see him again, I can at least wish him happy.

Elizabeth walked up close to the painting and, without deliberation beforehand, reached out her fingers to fondly stroke the glossy image on the canvas. A small sigh escaped her. "Forgive me, sir. You are the very best of men and deserved better from me. If I cannot say so to your person, at least I can do so now. May you be blessed with every happiness."

Squeak .

Elizabeth quickly withdrew her hand and turned at the sudden noise. A stammering apology was upon her lips for the presumption of touching the portrait, but she discovered that there was no one there to receive it. How odd. "Is-is anyone there?"

Further perusal of the space confirmed her solitude; there was no sign of her relations or the housekeeper, only a heavy silence that made the sound of her galloping heart seem louder by comparison. Bother! They must have left while I was occupied with Mr Darcy. I do hope they have not gone far and I can find them quickly.

Elizabeth inclined her head towards Mr Darcy's painting one final time and returned his smile. She wished his image well, then turned to proceed in the direction her group had been heading upon arrival.

Squeak .

Elizabeth halted in the middle of the lush carpet as the door at the end of the corridor opened, seemingly of its own accord. Based on the coincidental timing, she concluded that this was also the source of the sharp squeal that had interrupted her interlude with Mr Darcy's portrait previously.

She looked ahead of her; she looked behind her. There were no others in evidence, either of her own party or an unknown servant. Elizabeth was utterly alone. Who could have opened the door?

She felt a thrill of fear climb up her spine, one vertebra at a time, like a mouse scampering up her back on tiny, prickly feet. She felt silly for even considering it, but could the servant boy's story have been true? Were there ghosts at Pemberley? Surely not! What a preposterous notion, Lizzy.

The door stood perfectly still as she observed it at length, suspiciously immobile after its recent activity. Could a piece of wood mock a person?

On tentative, light feet, Elizabeth approached the room and craned her neck to see inside. It appeared to be some sort of study, feminine in design, with a rosewood desk stretched along the far wall beneath an expansive window. The walls were papered in a silvery cerulean with a subtle raised pattern of willow fronds dotted across it with calculated haphazardness. There was a thick rug of deep Prussian blue laid upon the floor in front of the fireplace, and a pair of chairs in complementary ivory were turned at an angle to face the hearth. Nothing sinister, nothing mysterious. Gathering the courage on which she prided herself, Elizabeth breached the threshold and stepped inside.

As she had perceived from without, there was nothing noteworthy about this room other than the elegant furnishings, which was true of every other she had so far seen at Pemberley. Although tempted to peek inside the handsome black and yellow Japan cabinet to her left and examine the spines of the books lining the whitewashed bookcases on either side of the fireplace, Elizabeth resisted such foolishness. It would not do to be caught snooping through the contents of a room in which she did not belong; she doubted that even the most superstitious of servants would believe she was searching for ghosts and not treasures to pilfer.

When one of her own curls tickled her cheek, Elizabeth jumped as if it had been a cold, otherworldly finger stroking her face. With her pulse pounding in her ears, she turned to observe that the window above the desk was open and letting in a lovely summer breeze. She laughed aloud at her own foolishness; like almost all

unexplained frightening things, it had been the wind causing mischief. Of all the ridiculous nonsense. Spirits, indeed!

She ventured over to the open window and, with her hands placed upon the surface of the desk for balance, bent to observe the aspect. She gasped softly as she beheld it.

Across the great lawn were a portion of the woods that her aunt had so praised the evening before, and admittedly, they were very fine. Beyond the trees, far off towards the horizon, she could see the peaks rising up in the distance. In Hertfordshire, rolling hills were the rule and not the exception, so such wild, craggy protrusions were a novelty to Elizabeth. They stood like kings reaching up to heaven.

Closer to her location, she smiled to see the infamous lake where the ghost supposedly resided. It was really more of a stream that had swelled to greater prominence in front of the house, but a lake was not an unfair term for it. It was wide across and, if the dark colour towards the centre was any indication, quite deep in places. Why a ghost would choose to dwell there, she could not imagine, but perhaps the living were simply deprived of choice by their habit of breathing. Elizabeth chuckled to herself over her little joke.

“’Tis no wonder this room is a study! I should like to write my letters here every morning, given the chance.” Her cheeks burned, and she blessed her solitude when she realised the import of what she had just said, yet she still could not tear her gaze from the spectacular view.

Motion down by the lake caught her eye, and she turned her head to sate her curiosity. There was some movement in the water, but she could not detect its source through the thick veil of a willow grove along the bank. There was a splash and a cheerful bark, resolving the mystery to Elizabeth’s amused satisfaction.

“What do you think, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth, upon hearing the faint sound of her name, was distracted from the activity by the lake and looked down below to see the Gardiners and Mrs Reynolds strolling beneath her upon the lawn. All three had turned back to, presumably, hear her opinion of whatever had been under discussion only to realise that she was absent. Her aunt called out her name again, more loudly this time, with the clear intention of bringing her forth.

Elizabeth pushed the window open a bit wider and, with one hand bracing herself upon the desk, leant forwards in order to make her response heard. She could apprise them of her presence within the house then rush out to meet them if they would but stay in the same spot. “Aunt?—”

Creak— crash .

Elizabeth jumped away as the window snapped back at her, shutting her off from the outside. “My goodness!” Had she been but a few seconds slower, her fingers would have been caught in the frame and likely injured. There must have been a strong gust of wind.

She returned to the window, lifted the latch, and pushed against the pane to open it again, but it was stuck. She pressed harder against the frame, but the stubborn thing refused to budge at all. Perhaps the wind had been so strong that it had been wedged shut? How strange.

Elizabeth peered through the glass and down to see that her relatives and Mrs Reynolds were moving on to other locations, spreading out in different directions in an apparent attempt to find her. “Wonderful,” she groused aloud, even though there was no one around to hear her. Well, she was fairly certain that was true.

Anxiously glancing over her shoulder, Elizabeth confirmed that she was, indeed, quite alone. Not a single shadow stirred, nor could she hear any sound apart from her

own laboured breathing. There were no signs of life, although she could not help but feel there was an invisible presence in the room with her.

Shaking off the most ridiculous notion she had ever entertained before, Elizabeth made the practical decision to simply descend to the lower floor and venture out into the grounds to intercept her party. She had a relative idea of their whereabouts and would hopefully be back in their company soon.

Thus decided, Elizabeth left the way she had come in, glancing suspiciously at the door as she passed through it, and headed in the direction she remembered the staircase to be.

### CHAPTER FIVE

Elizabeth found her way to the ground floor easily enough, but discovering a door through which to make her escape onto the grounds proved to be more difficult than she had anticipated. Finding a mysterious lack of servants to direct her, she instead let herself tentatively into several different rooms in hopes of either discovering a way out or someone to request assistance from, but she was thwarted at every turn.

In the first two rooms—unused parlours papered in cool hues with elegant designs; the late Lady Anne showed a decided preference for blues, greens, and ivory—there were only windows, and she was not about to get caught letting herself out of one of those. There was no ladylike explanation for such an action when Pemberley, presumably, had a number of suitable doors at hand. She left these without even bothering to cross the threshold.

Another room turned out to be a closet. She moved on quickly.

Finally, she let herself into what she had initially believed to be the library—even though she had no notion of how she might have found herself in that particular part of the house again—but it turned out to be another private study. If she had to guess, she would say that it was directly beneath the one off the gallery, though her sense of direction was obviously of no use at Pemberley. Had she accepted the position of its mistress back in the spring, she would have insisted that someone make her a map of this confusing place to carry around with her.

Although intended for a similar purpose, this room was a decided contrast to the study Elizabeth had already seen. Where the other had obviously been designed to



meet the requirements of a lady, this one was more masculine in quality. A large, heavy-looking desk built from a dark mahogany was placed at one end of the room, partially surrounded by loaded bookshelves at its back and sides, and an empty hearth was carved into the wall at the other. In between, there was a cosy sitting area of four bottle-green leather chairs surrounding a fur rug.

To her deepest horror, Elizabeth realised that she had stumbled into Mr Darcy's private sanctum.

As she placed one foot behind her, ready to flee and pretend she had never been there, a flicker of warm sunlight snared Elizabeth's attention. She raised her eyes to the far wall where the source could be found: a bank of nearly floor-to-ceiling windows surrounding a pair of glass doors! Considering the view of the lake through the panes, she knew that these would lead her out onto the grounds.

Elizabeth hesitated only a moment before reversing course and stepping fully into the study, gently and quietly closing the door to the hall behind her. I have no intention of disturbing anything, she reminded herself as anxiety tightened in her stomach, but I must get outside and find my aunt and uncle!

She crossed the room on eagerly quick feet, intent on escape. She dodged around one of the green leather chairs, gaze fixed upon the cheerily gleaming doors ahead of her, and imagined the relief of warm sunlight bathing her cheeks once she was free of the manor house. How sweet the fresh air would taste!

Perhaps because her pace was so hurried, she stumbled over nothing and had to pause to catch herself, arms flailing for purchase on any nearby surface. She was saved from ignominy by the edge of Mr Darcy's desk, and thankfully, her balance was regained without injuring any of the contents of the room.

"Very graceful, Lizzy," she grumbled, grateful that the inexplicably absent servants

had not appeared only to witness her clumsiness. She chuckled darkly at the notion that she might have the secret ability to conjure others by the power of her mortification. It certainly felt that way at times.

As Elizabeth righted herself, the glossy, dappled surface of a painting hung behind Mr Darcy's desk caught her eye. It had not been visible from the hall entrance because of the way it was sunk within the wall of bookshelves surrounding it, but it was, in her inexpert opinion, an exquisite composition, one that held her spellbound for several seconds. Distantly, she wondered why it was not on display in the gallery upstairs.

She at first thought that it was another likeness of Mr Darcy and his sister—perhaps explaining her strange fascination with it—but the pair in the portrait, upon second consideration, were a touch too old to be the current master and the young Miss Darcy. The man, however, bore a striking resemblance to the Mr Darcy she knew, so she supposed that he must be the elder Mr George Darcy, Fitzwilliam's father. It was easy to deduce from there that the woman then must be his mother, the dearly departed Lady Anne Darcy.

The couple was posed together in a traditional configuration—he standing behind with his hand on her shoulder while his lady sat upon a sofa in the French style—and they appeared united as master and mistress of Pemberley. There was no sign of their children, so she supposed it must be a wedding portrait—an assumption which was borne out by Lady Anne's youthful appearance and the outdated cut of their clothing. They looked elegant together, regal even, as they gazed benevolently upon their beholder. Elizabeth imagined, with a pang, that they brought much comfort to their son as he toiled over estate business.

Mr George Darcy was irrefutably handsome, just like his son, with a touch of grey at his temples that was nothing if not distinguished. She suspected that Mr George Darcy, with the crinkles at the corners of his eyes and the gentle smile he had also

passed down to his progeny, would have known better than to offer an insulting proposal and expect acceptance.

Lady Anne Darcy, seated before her husband on an embroidered sofa with a pug lounging on her lap, was much younger by comparison, perhaps no older than Elizabeth was now. Her own hand, resting upon her husband's as he touched her shoulder, bespoke genuine affection, and the lady's eyes showed a certain merriment that seemed unfeigned to Elizabeth.

"Would they have approved of their son's choice?" Elizabeth wondered aloud to the painting as much as to herself, gazing upon the faces of what could have been her in-laws. "Or would they have shared Mr Darcy's opinion—that I am beneath their consequence?"

She sighed, unaccountably saddened by the thought that these long-dead strangers might have disliked her. Mr George Darcy, like his son, came from a long line of wealthy gentlemen, originating at the time of William the Conqueror, as detailed by Mrs Reynolds earlier in the afternoon. Lady Anne, of course, was the daughter of an earl and entitled to her share of pride. She hardly looked as haughty as her sister, Lady Catherine, but she surely would have considered herself above a nobody from Hertfordshire.

"And what would they have thought of my refusal?"

Thump.

Elizabeth jumped several inches off the floor and spun around, looking for the source of the noise that had startled her—a frequent occurrence since finding herself alone in this maze of a house. With her hands both braced upon the desk at her back, she surveyed the room but found nothing that immediately looked out of place. No servant come to chase her away. Only...a book. On the floor.

Quivering slightly from the fright, Elizabeth released her hold on the desk and crossed the room to approach the displaced leather-bound tome that rested in front of the hearth. It appeared to be the Darcy family Bible, and it lay splayed open along its binding, its pages spread for perusal. Its stand, from which it had apparently fallen, stood stoically to one side of the great fireplace, empty of its charge.

Elizabeth knelt down, intending to pick it up and return it to its place, and her eyes caught some of the words on the page.

We will exult and rejoice in you; we will extol your love more than wine; rightly do they love you.

Elizabeth, who had been reaching for the Bible, retracted her hand as if she had mistakenly placed it in the fire. Her heart thudded against the inside of her ribs as she stood up and backed away a pace. Of all the verses in all of Christendom, how could the tome have opened to that one just as she was contemplating how the elder Darcys would have considered her as a prospective daughter-in-law? It was a perfectly respectable verse, one that might even have been comforting to her were she not suddenly worried that, far from being alone, her steps were being stalked by an invisible presence. Elizabeth rubbed at her arms, still encased in the sleeves of her spencer, feeling goose-flesh erupt across her skin.

I must leave. Now.

Abandoning the book where it lay, Elizabeth rushed to the glass doors, wrenched one open, and virtually threw herself out onto the lawn.

### CHAPTER SIX

Out in the bright summer day, Elizabeth drew in a deep, shuddering breath of warm air. She let it out and then took in another, releasing it in the same fashion. After several of these calming exercises, the trembling and fluttering within her began to subside, and she felt more herself. She then laughed aloud, somewhat shakily, at her own expense as the comparison that could be drawn between her current anxious condition and her mother's infamous nervous fits became apparent.

With a final glance back at the house, Elizabeth cast off the last of her disquiet and began strolling across the lawn towards the lake. Its rippling waters drew her forth with their natural eminence, soothing the uneasiness she had been feeling all day in this place. Between ghost stories and the equally haunting reminders of its absent master, Pemberley had proved to be a challenge to her equilibrium. She closed her eyes and indulged in the soft sound of splashing water, chirping birds, and rustling wind. Whatever tales of death the locals amused themselves with, this estate was full of life .

The farther away from the manor she drew, the more Elizabeth began to feel a little silly. The stories told by the boy at the inn had clearly left more of an impression than she had originally thought, and that, she concluded, must be the source of her fright. Had young Sam not told her that Pemberley was haunted, she likely would never have even noticed the events she had counted as strange happenings since her visit to the gallery. She would have ascribed everything—the creaking doors, the recalcitrant window, the conspicuously to-the-point Bible verse—as either coincidence or the wind. No, her imagination had wrought this mischief; her aunt and uncle Gardiner would be vastly amused when Elizabeth told them later over dinner how she had

jumped at every insignificant noise.

A heavy splash drew Elizabeth's notice to farther up the bank, where she discovered a spotted Great Dane cavorting in the shallows. It paused now and again to stare into a willow-obscured alcove—no doubt there was some fascinating creature just out of sight—and bark before resuming its frisks, endearingly unaware of its own absurdity.

The dog, apparently sensing her presence as well, regarded her with curiosity. It tilted its head and considered her a moment before cautiously approaching.

As fond of animals as she was, especially dogs, Elizabeth offered her hand for it to sniff. "Well, what are you doing here? Have you escaped your minder?"

The dog snuffled repeatedly at her hand and, its due diligence complete, nudged her fingers into the proper position for a stroke. Elizabeth chuckled and acquiesced with a scratch behind the Great Dane's ears, crouching slightly to do the job properly. "Are you not the sweetest thing?" Its tongue lolling out of the side of its enormous mouth, the dog panted and leant further into Elizabeth's ministrations .

More splashing drew Elizabeth's gaze back to the water for a moment, but she saw little else besides a cluster of ripples emerging from beyond the willows before the Great Dane again vied for her full regard by touching its cold nose to her cheek. She laughingly apologised for her neglect and resumed her attentions.

After indulging her new friend for a few seconds longer, Elizabeth rose from her bent position and announced her intention to depart. "I really must find my aunt and uncle, but I was most pleased to make your acquaintance."

The dog whined and sidled closer, begging for affection, but Elizabeth allowed herself only one more scratch of its ears before setting off down the bank, intending to enjoy the shade cast by the willows along her way. Her aim was to reach the main

drive—visible from her present position across the vast lawn—where she would almost certainly find a servant to assist her in reuniting her with her party. The dog skipped along the water's edge at her side, still earnestly petitioning for her to stop and play. She could only be amused by its antics.

“Now, now, I should love to have a good romp with you, but I cannot?—”

Elizabeth's playful scold was cut short as the dog pranced into her path, causing her to halt in place and stumble for balance. For a terrible moment, she thought she was going to fall into the lake, but she managed to dig her boots into the soft soil just enough to prevent it. Barely in time; another few inches and an unanticipated swim would have been unavoidable.

The Great Dane barked and loped forwards, entirely unabashed. Elizabeth laughed and wagged an admonishing finger. “No more of that! I have not the slightest interest in calling upon Pemberley's ghost.”

As if summoned by her flippant remark, something emerged from the lake only a few scant feet away, its visage largely obscured by a tangled curtain of willow branches. Huge and hulking, it loomed out of the water. It was well above her own height, draped in weeds, and spattered with mud. Whatever it was, whether monster or phantasm, it must have once been human, for its form was clad in a bedraggled shirt and dirty breeches.

It lumbered nearer, clumsily struggling to part the veil of greenery between them. It heaved and panted as if labouring to draw breath out of the murky depths. Or perhaps the sodden beast—vengeful spirit?—was attempting to taste her on the air before it devoured her whole.

With a shriek, Elizabeth fell backwards onto the grass in her effort to evade the creature's reach. Her skirts tangled around her legs and hindered her escape from the

dripping shadow, transforming her fear into mindless panic.

Then, the apparition spoke. “M-Miss Bennet?”



### CHAPTER SEVEN

“ M -Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth ceased struggling with her skirts as the voice of the newly risen spirit struck her as familiar. She raised her eyes upwards and, squinting against the shards of late afternoon sunlight that outlined the silhouette, glared up into its face. “Mr Darcy?”

Indeed, the master of Pemberley was home, and after a short-tempered skirmish with the willow branches that clung to him with the tenacity of a desperate debutante, he stood before her winded and soggy. His appearance was greeted enthusiastically by the spotted Great Dane, who leapt upon him with such exuberance that he nearly stumbled back into the drink.

“Down, Freddy! Down , I say!” The dog obeyed and sat back on its haunches, though it still gazed longingly up at Mr Darcy and whined petulantly. “Good girl.”

Mr Darcy rewarded Freddy’s compliance with an absent-minded pat on the head and returned his wide-eyed stare to Elizabeth. She was certain the same sort of disbelief was apparent in her own features as she beheld the generally reserved and fastidious gentleman in all his dishevelled glory. He stood before her wearing nothing but a linen shirt and riding breeches, both of which were plastered to his skin and, the top portion at least, shockingly transparent. Water ran down his face in rivulets, dripping from the drenched, unruly nest that was his hair, and splotches of mud were visible upon his face and clothing. Over one shoulder, a severed willow frond dangled. He was not nearly so formally attired as in his portrait yet still as strikingly handsome as she remembered. Perhaps even more so.

She flushed bright red as the implications of him finding her at his estate belatedly occurred to her. What must he think of me? To not only have the impudence to visit Pemberley without invitation, in flagrant disregard of our shared history, but then also to trespass upon his presence when he is so...so...

“Forgive me, I...” Elizabeth began, but then Mr Darcy slicked his hair back away from his face, and she promptly forgot what she was going to say. His hand remained tangled in his drenched curls as he stared at her, chest heaving, with those vivid grey eyes of his. Suddenly quite overcome by the heat of the day, she reached for the reticule dangling from her wrist only to discover it missing. Bother! I must have left it in the carriage. How inconvenient to be without my fan.

“Miss Bennet,” he said again, blinking as if to clear his vision of water droplets—or perhaps her. “I-I...forgive me, I am sorry to greet you in such a way. Are you...” He shook his head, squinting his eyes shut for a moment before resuming his intense regard. After apparently collecting his wits, he enquired, “Are you here alone?”

“No,” Elizabeth managed to reply, her voice rather strangled. “I am travelling with my aunt and uncle, and we came here for a tour. I was separated from our group and, in searching for them, stumbled across you...” She gestured at him, and he looked down his body, his ears reddening. “Like this.”

“Of course,” said Mr Darcy, lowering his arm back down to his side. It made a wet slapping sound when it collided with his soggy clothing, and Freddy, sensing an opportunity for attention, licked his palm. He distractedly obliged by scratching the dog’s ears. “I have only just returned myself, and feeling rather hot and dusty after a long ride, I decided to cool off before going into the house. I apologise for greeting you in such a way.” He seemed not to realise he had already said the last bit.

Elizabeth could not withhold a small laugh, though it came out as more of a nervous titter than her usual throaty chuckle. “I assure you that I understand completely, sir.

There have been many times I have wished to take a dip in Longbourn's pond. Were I a man, perhaps I would indulge the inclination occasionally."

Mr Darcy visibly swallowed and asked, his voice hoarse, "You never have?"

Elizabeth impishly smirked as an instinctual impulse to tease him arose. "If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it. Is it not bad enough that I dirty my hems so thoroughly on my walks?"

Finally, Mr Darcy smiled. It was the same enigmatic curve of the lips seen in his portrait, and Elizabeth could feel her pulse, only recently resettled, quicken. "No matter how many inches deep in mud your own hems have become, I doubt you have ever greeted a guest like this." He spread his arms to remind her of his own bedraggled state.

"No, I cannot say that I have, though perhaps my mother deserves the credit for that. I was never very tidy in my appearance as a child and likely looked dishevelled more often than not, in spite of her attempts to keep me otherwise. Therefore, on days when company was expected, I was absolutely forbidden from stepping out of doors lest I return home looking..." She allowed her eyes to rove Mr Darcy's unkempt form a moment before remembering herself with a hot blush. "Well, I am sure you can imagine."

Mr Darcy's smile remained, though he seemed to have run out of words for their silly conversation.

After a stretch of silence, which was equal parts awkward and thrilling, Elizabeth entreated, "Sir, I beg your pardon, but might I have your assistance? I appear to be trapped by my own gown."

Mr Darcy's eyes widened. "I beg your pardon, Miss Bennet. I was so astonished that

I was not thinking. Allow me to help you.”

He trudged forwards, still up to his calves in the lake, with his arms outstretched towards her. Freddy barked once and splashed along at his side. He mounted the grassy slope upon which she had stumbled at his unexpected appearance and reached out to her, bare feet squishing in the soil beneath him.

Elizabeth accepted his outstretched hands gladly and allowed herself to be pulled into a standing position. He was so strong and she so light that the momentum thrust her forwards quickly, and she nearly fell into his chest, though he managed to steady her by the points of her elbows before she took another spill. She looked up, intending to both thank and apologise to him again, and found their faces mere inches from one another's. She could feel the soft puffs of his breath against her cheeks and sensed them noticeably quicken.

“Miss Bennet, I?— ”

Whatever Mr Darcy was about to say was cut short by a sudden barrage of water droplets. Freddy had apparently determined it the appropriate time to shake herself dry, regardless of whoever happened to be in range. The pair of them ineffectually shielded their faces from the spray, Elizabeth laughing at the absurdity and Mr Darcy scolding, “Freddy, no! Bad dog!”

Freddy halted at her master's command and peered up at them, all innocence, with her head tilted inquisitively. Elizabeth could not but laugh again at the saucy creature. “Your dog is very well trained, sir.”

Mr Darcy, his tone far drier than his person, replied, “Quite.”

“Lizzy!”

Elizabeth turned her head to see her aunt, uncle, and Mrs Reynolds coming towards them across the lawn. Behindhand in realising that she was all but ensconced in the improperly dressed Mr Darcy's embrace, she hurriedly stepped backwards and away from him. Should I pretend that I suddenly swooned?

"We have been looking for you everywhere, Lizzy." Mrs Gardiner addressed Elizabeth, but her gaze skirted up and down the length of their sodden host. Whether this was related to the obvious disarray of his attire or finding her niece in his arms, Elizabeth could not say for certain, though it was reasonable to conclude a healthy measure of both. Her uncle, standing just behind his wife, was largely stoic but sported a concerned wrinkle betwixt his eyes.

Mr Darcy fidgeted under their scrutiny, his aspect rigid. The Gardiners would never attempt to insist upon a marriage to an apparent stranger over so small an infraction, but she supposed Mr Darcy could not know that. I cannot blame him for his apprehension, thought Elizabeth with chagrin. I must be the last woman he would ever wish to marry !

"When did you become separated, my dear?" asked Mrs Gardiner, still entranced by Mr Darcy and his disordered magnificence.

"While we were in the gallery. I made my way out of doors and was searching for you when there was, ah, a bit of a mishap. Mr Darcy was kind enough to assist me to my feet, which was when you found me."

"Mr Darcy?" repeated Mr Gardiner, his eyes darting back to where the master of the estate dripped, a puddle slowly forming about his bare feet. Mrs Gardiner's startled gaze was likewise drawn to their host. I suppose he is presently less august than they were expecting.

Mr Darcy seemed to recollect his dignity and straightened himself into a more correct

posture. But for his muddy attire, he was as formal as she recalled him from their previous encounters. “Forgive my manners. Miss Bennet, would you do me the honour of introducing me to your friends?”

“Indeed, sir.” Biting back a resigned smile at the absurdity of the moment, Elizabeth performed the proper introductions. She knew not how the gentleman would feel upon learning the status of his unexpected guests, but there was no helping it, and she would not be ashamed of her beloved relations. He was perfectly aware of her connexions to trade, and she rather doubted that his opinion of her could sink any lower than it currently was.

Against her expectations, Mr Darcy bowed to the couple and spoke without the hauteur she was accustomed to. On the contrary, he was all ease and friendliness at being admitted to the acquaintance of a tradesman and his wife. “Mr and Mrs Gardiner, welcome to Pemberley. I trust you have been enjoying your tour?”

Mrs Gardiner responded for the couple. “Yes, the house is impressive and the grounds entirely delightful. We had heard that you were away and did not intend to trespass on your”—she again looked him up and down, an amused smile trembling on her lips—“privacy.”

Mr Darcy glanced down at himself, and his patrician features flickered into what might have been a grimace. It was hard to say, for the expression was there and gone in a blink. “Ahem, yes, as I was just explaining to Miss Bennet, I have only recently arrived and decided to cool off in the lake, not realising that I had guests. The rest of my party,” he continued, directing his speech back to Elizabeth, “will arrive tomorrow. As a few of them—Mr Bingley and his sisters—can claim an acquaintance with you, I hope you will still be in the area.”

“I believe so, sir. My aunt spent her youth in Lambton, and we intend to stay some days to revisit some of her old haunts.” She flinched at her choice of words; haunts ,

indeed!

Mr and Mrs Gardiner exchanged a look, though Elizabeth could not tell whether they were laughing at her accidental joke or wondering over the scene they had encountered between her and the soaking wet Mr Darcy. Elizabeth was likely to hear something of both later when they returned to the inn.

“Excellent,” was Mr Darcy’s immediate reply, followed more quietly, almost shyly, by, “I hope I may introduce my sister to your acquaintance during your stay?”

To say Elizabeth was nonplussed by this tentative request would have understated the matter. She never could have imagined that a gentleman she had rejected so harshly would not only wish to continue their association but also to advance one between her and his beloved sister. Her astonishment was so complete that she stumbled over her answer. “I—yes, of course.”

Mr Darcy exhaled with a noticeable sibilance. Clearing his throat, he then said, “Very good. For now, I would be most honoured if you would all repair to the house for refreshments. I shall, of course, change my attire and join you shortly.”

Elizabeth glanced down at her formerly pristine white frock, and only years of proper deportment prevented her from groaning aloud at how dirty she looked. Between falling upon the grassy bank at Mr Darcy’s emergence from the lake and Freddy’s cleansing shake, she was no more fit to be seen than their host. She shuddered to think of the state of her hair and face. There was no amount of dabbing that would repair her appearance; her gown would need to be laundered, and she herself required a good scrub.

Elizabeth caught Mrs Gardiner’s attention and shook her head rapidly, vaguely indicating her untidy condition with a sweeping wave of her hand. To her enormous relief, her aunt understood this silent communication and said, “We thank you for the

invitation, but we would not wish to impose.”

“’Tis no imposition,” replied Mr Darcy with surprising eagerness. His eyes found Elizabeth; he swallowed, then pressed, “Truly, I would be most pleased if you would remain. If your tour is not yet finished, I should be most happy to conduct it myself.”

Elizabeth withheld a sigh at the necessity of being so forthright, but there was no other way to go about it. “I believe we must return to our lodgings so that I might repair my own appearance. I presently look as if I have walked to Netherfield and back again,” she said with a self-deprecating chuckle, indicating her mud-spattered gown.

“I must say, I hardly noticed, given my own state.” Mr Darcy looked pointedly down at his dripping attire, and Elizabeth could not repress her amusement. “You are far more presentable than I. Quite winsome, in fact. ”

Taken aback by this quiet compliment, Elizabeth felt heat rush into her face.

Mr Darcy’s gaze dropped to the ground, and he coughed into his fist. “I shall be happy to accommodate you in any way you require. Stay.”

Glancing back at her aunt and uncle, who watched their back and forth with curiosity and palpable interest, she silently begged for their guidance. Mr Gardiner looked to his wife, who shrugged lightly as if to say it was up to Elizabeth’s preference. Did she want to stay? Or would she rather crawl away and hide?

“Then...thank you, sir. We would be glad to partake of your hospitality.”

Mr Darcy’s shoulders slumped in what might have been relief before he stood tall again and addressed his housekeeper. “Mrs Reynolds, please see to Miss Bennet’s needs and send to the kitchen for tea to be served in the blue saloon. I shall be down



shortly to attend my guests.”

Mrs Reynolds’s expression flickered with surprise. “The blue saloon, sir?”

“Yes.”

Mrs Reynolds bobbed a curtsey to her master as he returned his attention to Elizabeth and the Gardiners. He bowed to them and walked away, barefoot and sodden, with Freddy nipping at his heels. She could hear the squelching of the lawn as he took each step until he was nearly at the front portico.

Once the master and his dog were well out of earshot, Mr Gardiner leant close to Elizabeth to tease, “Well, Lizzy, I see you found what lurks in the lake.”

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Impatient to return to Elizabeth and her relations, Darcy virtually burst from his chambers. Behind him, the footman he had enlisted to assist him in changing his muddy clothes cried out a surprised, “Sir!” at his ridiculous haste; Darcy would forgive him the lapse this once, given the unusual nature of his master’s behaviour. His cravat was barely knotted before he had wriggled free of the fellow’s ministrations.

He knew that so much urgency was unnecessary, that his guests would never be so rude as to depart without bidding a proper adieu to their host, but Darcy could not seem to help himself. Within moments of seeing Elizabeth again, despite the awkwardness of the encounter, he had felt the hand of Fate at work. He had believed them torn asunder permanently, only for her to tour Pemberley on the very day that he rode ahead of his own party—it could not be mere coincidence. He was being gifted another chance to earn her favour, to please her the way a worthy woman deserved to be pleased, and he would not waste another moment. Had he not been in such an unconscionable state of dishabille, he would never have left her side at all.

Taking the steps two and three at a time, he made it to the lower floor in mere seconds. He forced himself to slow his pace as he approached the blue saloon lest he appear unbecomingly eager. After a deep inhalation, which soothed his lungs but did nothing to alter the pace of his still-racing heart, he nodded for the footman on duty to open the door for him.

Within the blue saloon—one of his mother’s favourite rooms and the preferred location for greeting their most esteemed guests—was a scene that stole what

remained of his breath. There was Elizabeth Bennet, exactly as he had frequently imagined her, facing the doorway in a deep azure upholstered chair. She held a cup of tea in her lap as she effortlessly charmed his guests in one moment, then looked to him with a becoming smile in the next. She was such a vision that Darcy vaguely wondered whether he was hallucinating an alternate reality in which he had managed to woo her into becoming his wife. Yes, Fate is surely guiding us. She will be Elizabeth Darcy before the year is out, I am determined.

When she rose from her seat, still smiling, Darcy shook himself from his reverie and walked deeper into the room. He bowed to the gathered party—not forgetting the Gardiners, even though he was largely distracted by Elizabeth—and dispensed apologies for his delay, all of which were politely dismissed.

The Gardiners resumed their place on an ivory sofa, leaving Darcy free to take the matching chair next to Elizabeth's. She flushed becomingly pink and averted her eyes when he inched it slightly closer to her, causing his heart to stutter.

She really was entirely lovely, no matter what stupid thing had fallen from his mouth upon first encountering her. He really must have his eyes examined if he could believe, even for a pique-filled moment, that she was anything less than the handsomest woman of his acquaintance. She had repaired her appearance somewhat—her hair was again pinned neatly in place, her face freshly scrubbed, and her gown less soiled beneath the emerald pelisse she had been wearing—but she had been ravishing even spattered in lake water. Indeed, he had been reminded greatly of that day at Netherfield when she had walked three miles to attend her sister, arriving at their doorstep in all her windswept glory. That was the first time Darcy had ever felt attraction like a punch to the gut, and from thenceforth his gaze had rarely strayed from her face and form.

“Do you not think so, Mr Darcy?”

Darcy blinked and tore his attention away from Elizabeth. One of the Gardiners had asked him a question, and he could not immediately discern which. The lady, he thought. “Pardon me. I was not attending.”

“I was saying,” Mrs Gardiner said, her eyes crinkled with knowing mirth, “that the weather is rather warm today. Quite lovely.”

“Oh, indeed. Perfect for a swim after a long, dusty ride.” There was polite laughter at his self-deferential jest, and Darcy’s mortification receded slightly. “I understand that you did not have much time to tour the grounds, but how did you find the house?”

Darcy’s eyes strayed to Elizabeth again, and he caught a queer expression upon her face before she covered it with a sip of tea. Does she not approve of Pemberley? The very thought horrified him.

Resettling her cup into her saucer, Elizabeth turned to him without any trace of dissatisfaction. “You have a delightful estate, sir. We have seen several great houses on our holiday, but I can safely say that yours is quite the best of them. I was remarking to my aunt earlier how tasteful everything is—neither gaudy nor uselessly fine, as is often the case. Pemberley feels like a true home, not merely a museum for inquisitive tourists.”

There was universal agreement for Elizabeth’s observation, which Darcy could not contradict. He had been in his share of unnecessarily ornate manor homes and had often found the excessive use of gold ormolu distasteful; it was harsh on the eye and existed primarily to boast of the wealth of the owner. Worse was the lack of comfortable furniture and the ever-present fear of breaking the spindly leg of a table or chair simply by using it for its intended purpose. Where was the sense, he oft wondered, in being uncomfortable in one’s own residence? Of subjecting guests to the same?

“I thank you, Miss Bennet, that is high praise indeed.”

Elizabeth glanced down again, appearing bashful. “Anyone would surely tell you the same.”

“Perhaps,” Darcy replied, leaning a fraction closer, “but I have it on good authority that your esteem is not easily bought. Earning it would be quite the feat, indeed.”

The warm flush in her cheeks made Darcy feel giddy, but it did not last. Moments later, his besotted musings were interrupted by the clearing of a throat. He looked up to find his butler stoically awaiting his attention. Somewhat brusquely, he said, “Yes, Grieves?”

“Your carriage has been spotted entering the grounds, sir. I suspect the remainder of your party will arrive shortly.”

Darcy cursed inwardly; he had not expected Georgiana, the Bingleys, and the Hursts for a long while yet—not until at least the dinner hour. He had even nursed the hope that their town habits of rising late might put them off their arrival until the morrow. They must have left the inn shortly after he had to make such excellent time.

Dismissing Grieves, Darcy turned back to his present guests, who were already beginning to rise. Sensing they were about to make their excuses and depart, he stood himself and urged them to remain.

The Gardiners and Elizabeth exchanged looks before Mr Gardiner, speaking on behalf of his entire party, replied, “We would not wish to impose upon your hospitality, sir. Surely you will want to greet your houseguests without anyone else underfoot.”

“Not at all, for I only saw them this morning. I was travelling with them, you see,

until I remembered some business at Pemberley and rode ahead. Truly, 'tis no imposition." He looked to Elizabeth in what he was sure must be an imploring manner. Please do not leave yet. I cannot bear to bid you farewell so soon.

She bit her lip and pondered a moment before turning to her aunt and uncle. "It would be pleasant to see Mr Bingley again, if you do not mind remaining a short while longer."

"Not at all, so long as Mr Darcy is certain that we are not in the way."

Darcy was quick to respond, "I am quite certain. Stay." Again, his eyes lingered on Elizabeth, and she returned the favour; he prayed that she could read the deeper meaning of his entreaty, though of course he could not know. They had been beset by misapprehension before, due in no small part to his own reticence, but he dearly hoped that she understood him to mean 'stay forever'.

Although still uncertain whether Elizabeth could sense his longing for her, their gazes remained tangled together as she slowly lowered herself back into her chair. Darcy mirrored her, as did the Gardiners in the faded background .

They resumed their light conversation until the road-weary party arrived and were shown into the saloon immediately after shedding their gloves, hats, and other travel apparel. The ladies entered first, Miss Bingley with her arm looped through the long-suffering Georgiana's, followed by the gentlemen. Responses to the unexpected company within were mixed, varying from puzzled to delighted, but Miss Bingley's was decidedly the most unguarded—she was shocked and rather angry, her feelings apparent in the way her brow furrowed and her mouth gaped open. A moment later, she apparently remembered herself and donned a veneer of placidity, which, even if it lacked friendliness, was at least an improvement upon her initial indignance. Darcy's jaw clenched at her incivility, and he wondered, not for the first time, how she could ever imagine herself a suitable candidate for his bride.

Bingley, at least, evinced a real pleasure at seeing Elizabeth again and hurried forwards to bow over her hand. “Miss Elizabeth, how do you do? I had no notion of seeing you here—none at all.”

Elizabeth smiled easily at his garrulous friend, and Darcy was inclined to be jealous until he caught her glancing at him, her lips quirked in just such a way as to imply a private joke. “Neither had Mr Darcy. We quite surprised one another.”

Darcy coughed into his fist to disguise a laugh that threatened to bubble up. “Indeed.”

Elizabeth bit her lip and looked down as if she were repressing her own merriment before turning back to Bingley. “I am very glad to see you again. How long has it been?”

“Oh, above eight months, at least. We have not met since the twenty-sixth of November, when we were all dancing together at Netherfield. I hope you are well. And your family?”

“Quite well. And you?”

“Well enough.” Darcy felt a pang of conscience at Bingley’s weak response to Elizabeth’s polite enquiry. It had been a long, difficult winter for his friend, who still pined openly for his Miss Bennet. Their present gathering at Pemberley had been proffered in an attempt to elevate Bingley’s sunken mood, little though it had pleased anyone other than his sisters. As yet, Darcy had not informed him of Miss Bennet’s being in town for several months, nor of Elizabeth’s contention that she had reciprocated Bingley’s affections. He greatly feared that he was too late and the lady had overcome them, meaning further interference would only lead to an uncomfortable conclusion for all involved. “Tell me, are all your sisters still at Longbourn?”

The knowing expression, so full of compassion, on Elizabeth's face both warmed Darcy and compounded his guilt. He listened to her answer with almost as much anticipation as Bingley, hoping that his former mistake might still be put to rights. "All but one," she said. Before either he or Bingley could press her for more specifics, she continued, "My second youngest sister, Kitty, is at Brighton for the summer with the Forsters—you remember the colonel and his wife? Lydia was meant to go but suffered an unfortunate injury just before she was to depart, and so they took Kitty instead."

"I do hope Miss Lydia is not in any danger?"

"Not at all, merely a twisted ankle. One cannot go dancing or promenading in such a state, and so she remained at home."

"How tragic."

Darcy turned to Miss Bingley, the originator of this embittered comment, where she sat on a sofa across from the Gardiners. She was wedged between Mrs Hurst, who was giving her sister such a look, and Georgiana, who appeared distinctly uncomfortable at the malice radiating from their houseguest.

He turned back to Elizabeth, who regarded Miss Bingley coolly for a second before returning her attention to the lady's brother. "Where are my manners? Might I introduce you to my aunt and uncle?"

Bingley, eager to dispel the mounting tension, agreed to be made known to the Gardiners, who were everything gracious in contrast to Miss Bingley. She afforded them a slight nod when it was her turn to make their acquaintance.

Elizabeth paused when she reached Georgiana, to whom she had never been introduced herself, and Darcy stepped forwards to perform the necessary office.



“Georgiana, this is Miss Elizabeth Bennet. We met last autumn while I resided with the Bingleys at Netherfield.”

Georgiana stood and dipped a stumbling curtsy, her expression a mix of embarrassment and curiosity. “My brother has written of you, Miss Bennet. I am pleased to make your acquaintance at last.”

Darcy was staggered not only by the number of words spoken by his diffident sister but by the content of them. He did not, at first, recall mentioning Elizabeth to Georgiana but then remembered a reference to her in one of his letters from Rosings. And perhaps another two or three off-handed comments from his time at Netherfield. Good Lord, Georgiana probably believes I am introducing her to her future sister! I can only hope it is so...

Elizabeth, for her part, seemed unusually flustered by his sister’s innocent observation. She rallied, however, and replied, “Your reputation precedes you as well, Miss Darcy. I have heard so much about your talent at the pianoforte as to be duly impressed without even hearing you play! You are rumoured to be quite the paragon.”

Georgiana blushed and looked down to where her fingers fidgeted with her skirts—a poor habit she struggled to break. “Oh no, not at all. Though I have heard that you play and sing beautifully.” She glanced up at Darcy here, leaving no question as to the source of her information. He felt his ears burn in mortification.

“I am sure your brother has exaggerated my abilities dreadfully, though it was most kind of him. Do let me now present my aunt and uncle...”

By the time the last of the introductions had been made and some stilted chatter had been exchanged, it was time for Elizabeth and the Gardiners to depart. Darcy prevailed upon them to stay, perhaps to dine, but they were firm in their refusal to

trespass further on his household. He at last relented, but not before wrangling a promise from them to return some other time during their stay in the area. It was not enough, but it was better than nothing.

### CHAPTER NINE

O f all the nerve! To invite herself to Pemberley and throw herself in Mr Darcy's way again is absolutely...it is so...there are no words for such presumption! And yet, he seems ready to prostrate himself at her feet. Men are such simpletons.

A number of other invectives skittered across Caroline's mind as she witnessed her Mr Darcy, the man she fully intended to take as her husband, bend over Eliza Bennet's hand and wrest from the chit permission to call upon her at the local inn. Why he should want to venture into Lambton to visit the second-born daughter of a middling estate was beyond her comprehension; he had much better attend to the comfort of his more elevated houseguests.

Her only consolation was that Eliza could not have had long to beguile Mr Darcy with her 'fine eyes' and so-called wit, given that their travelling party had arrived so soon after he had. It was a good thing that she had enlisted Warren, her lady's maid, to maintain a watchful eye on things below stairs so as to apprise Caroline of any possible movement of her prey. Dragging herself out of bed at that ungodly hour had not been pleasant but apparently necessary; with Eliza in the area, Caroline could not afford to leave Mr Darcy to his own devices lest his foolish infatuation lead him astray. If only Hurst had not been so difficult to rouse, they might have overtaken Mr Darcy on the road and prevented a private reunion with that hoyden!

At long last, Eliza and her lowborn relations—a tradesman, at Pemberley? Were the shades of this great estate to be so polluted?—could linger no longer and were shown out. The master lowered himself to see them off personally with a murmured apology to the rest of the room, which did not please Caroline at all, but at least the

mushrooms were gone.

The instant that they were, Caroline exclaimed, “Can you believe the unmitigated audacity of that girl? Showing up here, uninvited, to thrust herself upon our notice? And just as muddy as before! I swear, Miss Eliza has never met a puddle that she did not wish to wade into.”

Charles burst out with an aghast, “Caroline!”

Caroline disregarded him, her spleen as yet unrelieved. “I suppose we must be glad that it is not raining, else she would assuredly fall ill and expect to spend the night! I swear, she is as bad as her scheming mother.”

“What an awful thing to say!” Charles cried.

Caroline sneered at her brother’s apparent shock. “Do not be such a missish ninny. We are all thinking it. Those grasping Bennets are full of paltry tricks designed to ensnare a man. I am sure you remember her elder sister turning up at Netherfield last autumn, ready to be nursed.”

“She was invited. By you, if memory serves.”

“Yes, then she vastly overstayed her welcome. Who rides out on a day when rain is expected?” She rolled her eyes with an exasperated huff. Her brother could be so tediously naïve. “And now, here comes Eliza, out of nowhere, to work her wiles upon Mr Darcy. I am utterly disgusted!”

“Sister.” Caroline looked to Louisa, who was giving her a wide-eyed expression of warning and leaning her head to the side. Following the motion, she saw a pale-faced Miss Darcy staring at the tangled fingers in her lap.

Oh, for heaven's sake. The girl is worse than Charles—trembling at any sort of discord. Repressing her annoyance, she rested a hand upon Miss Darcy's forearm. "Forgive me, dear friend, for speaking so candidly in your presence. You see, we have been acquainted with the Bennets for some months now, and they have proved to be artful fortune hunters. As you surely noticed yourself, they are apparently willing to go to extreme measures in order to put themselves forward to eligible men."

When Miss Darcy replied, she spoke to her knees. "Miss Bennet seemed a delightful young lady to me."

"She is exceedingly talented at appearing so," said Caroline, though it was a great deal of effort to afford Eliza any sort of compliment, even a backhanded one. "However, I would put you on your guard around her. She is a cunning, manipulative?—"

Charles's eyes bulged alarmingly. "Caroline, really!"

"—covetous girl who is out for everything she can get. You should have seen how she dangled after your brother at Netherfield! Why, she went so far as to walk three miles across muddy fields just to?—"

"Tend to her elder sister, who was quite ill at the time."

All heads in the room turned as one to the doorway, where Mr Darcy stood, his bearing rigid and his hands clasped behind his back. He looked every inch the master of Pemberley with his stern countenance, causing Caroline to involuntarily shrink back.

There was an awkward, palpable silence for several seconds before Caroline, after regaining her composure, said, "I was merely advising Miss Darcy to consider new

acquaintances carefully before encouraging a friendship, that is all.”

Mr Darcy did not move save to raise a single brow in her direction. “It sounded to me as if you were denigrating the character of one of my guests.”

“No, not at all! It is only—and I am sure you will agree with me—that Eliza’s sudden appearance at Pemberley is rather suspect. What can she mean by coming all this way from Hertfordshire?”

“She has been travelling with her aunt and uncle. Pemberley is merely one of the houses they have visited on their tour.”

At times, Mr Darcy was as painfully unsophisticated as her brother. How she pitied him. “Oh yes, and how surprised Eliza must have been to find you here.”

“I can assure you that Miss Bennet,” said Mr Darcy, fixing Caroline with a narrow-eyed stare as he leant into the emphasis, “was excessively startled by my appearance. Now, I have spoken to Mrs Reynolds, and she assures me that your rooms are ready for habitation. Perhaps we ought to repair to our chambers and meet in the drawing room at six?”

Caroline startled when Miss Darcy sprung to her feet and declared, “I should like to refresh myself,” before scurrying towards the door. Uncouth little thing.

More gracefully, Caroline stood to follow their young hostess. She meant to grab hold of Mr Darcy’s arm and coyly suggest that he escort her to her chambers, but she was forestalled by Louisa pulling her back. Unwilling to make an undignified scene, she had no choice but to watch Mr Darcy leave the room with the other gentlemen, putting him beyond her reach. Curse my meddlesome sister !

In a harsh whisper, Louisa scolded, “What can you be thinking, insulting Eliza

Bennet in that manner? You will not win Mr Darcy's favour with such behaviour. You have better sense than to bandy about your unvarnished opinions in someone else's home."

Caroline attempted to tug her arm free of Louisa's clutches, but her sister held fast. "Oh, please. The Darcys ought to know what sort of adventuress they are dealing with. Imagine, pursuing Mr Darcy all the way to Pemberley!"

Fixing her with a flat look, Louisa drolly remarked, "Yes, how foolish. It is almost as if she does not know her place."

Caroline felt the sting of Louisa's implication but gave it no credence. Her brother and sister had always underestimated her chances of winning a man of Fitzwilliam Darcy's ilk, but she would not be cowed by their lack of faith. She had always been adept at getting her way, and there was no reason to suppose she could not have it now.

Jerking her arm free of her sister's grasp, Caroline extended herself to her full height and drew hauteur about her like a cloak. "Mark my words. Mr Darcy will offer for me before our visit is over."

A distinct chill raised the small hairs upon the back of Caroline's neck just then, and she shuddered, her bravado temporarily pierced. Where had that draught emanated from? A quick perusal of the saloon exposed no obvious culprits, such as an open window, yet a decided coldness lingered in the air. Perhaps it had flowed in through the chimney? She rubbed at the goose-flesh budding along the length of her arms and decided that a fire in her rooms might be in order, despite the summer warmth.

Heaving a world-weary sigh, Louisa shook her head. "If you will not listen to reason, at least promise me that you will behave with more decorum. Mr Darcy is not the sort of connexion we can afford to lose."

Refusing to dignify this provocation with a response, Caroline turned on her heel and stalked from the room. Mr Darcy would see her here, in his home, and realise that she belonged at Pemberley as its next mistress. No other outcome would do. And the moment I have secured his promise, I shall insist that he send Miss Eliza Bennet back to her father's pitiful estate where she belongs, wading about with the pigs.



### CHAPTER TEN

Over dinner that evening, Elizabeth and the Gardiners laughed cheerily over her misadventures of the afternoon.

“And so the ghosts lured you into the room only to trap you in there? How inhospitable!” Mr Gardiner said, wiping a tear from the corner of one of his eyes.

“I was not trapped, Uncle,” Elizabeth disagreed, her own mirth overflowing. She had been sure to tell her relations of her spectral encounters with the type of spirit such a tale deserved, even feigning suspenseful, expressive pauses whenever a new incident had been revealed. They had both savoured her theatrical recitation. “The window was locked against me, but the door to the hall was still wide open. I suspect the ghost was merely playing a little prank on me.”

“As with the Bible?” her aunt enquired.

“I always assumed ghosts preferred Mrs Radcliffe’s novels,” quipped Mr Gardiner, earning another laugh from his wife.

Elizabeth’s amusement flagged, and she disguised her chagrined grimace by taking a bite of her turnips. She had mentioned the falling tome but not which quotation it had presented for her consideration. Not that she truly believed a spirit was communing with her via the holy text—no, certainly not!—but it still caused a blush for her to think upon the Song of Solomon despite her more rational conjectures.

Of course, the lingering disquiet she felt for the manor house at Pemberley was

nothing to what she experienced over its master. She still recalled the tingling sensation of Mr Darcy's fingers grasping hers, the intensity of his gaze as he looked upon her with wonder as if she were some fantastical apparition.

Stop it, Lizzy! She shook her head, banishing the image of Mr Darcy to the depths of her mind, even if the anxiety remained. If you continue to dwell on this nonsense, you will be sent to bed to rest your poor nerves! There is nothing stalking the halls of Pemberley save for the likes of Miss Bingley, and I refuse to fear her. Though, she considered with a wry smirk, Mr Darcy ought to watch himself with that one.

"And then, after all that," Mr Gardiner continued, "to stumble across Mr Darcy in such a state! Tell me, my dear, did you think he was a phantom or a sea serpent when he rose from the muck?"

Feeling that the best remedy for her affliction of nerves was to laugh at herself, Elizabeth affixed a smile on her face and said, "I hardly know what I thought, but I was certain that whatever it was intended to eat me for dinner!"

Mr Gardiner slapped his hand upon the sturdy wooden table repeatedly as he howled at his niece's latest sally, while his wife snorted into her napkin. "I shall take great pleasure in the experience when we tell your father of this. Please, Lizzy, promise that you will not write to him of it and spoil the moment. "

"I believe I can faithfully promise you that. It loses something in the retelling on paper, anyhow."

"But shall we write to him of Mr Darcy?" Aunt Gardiner asked, peeping at Elizabeth through the corner of her eye as she replaced the linen napkin upon her lap.

Elizabeth could feel the blush rising in her face as a wave of embarrassment overtook her. "I do not know what you mean, Aunt. Why should I write to Papa of Mr Darcy?"

Mrs Gardiner shook her head. "I rather think that your uncle and I might have to take on that responsibility. It would not be right to leave him unaware of the young man's interest, if, indeed, he does not already know."

Elizabeth grew so warm that she almost felt as if steam should be coming out of the top of her head like a steeping teapot. "Interest? Do not be ridiculous!"

"Mm," replied Mrs Gardiner, her attention seemingly fixed upon buttering her roll. "I suppose you embrace many young men, then?"

"Of course not!"

"Then Mr Darcy is a special case?"

Becoming frustrated, Elizabeth's tone was a touch sharper than she generally used with her aunt. "He was simply helping me to right myself. When he rose out of the lake like a great sea monster come to feed upon a helpless maiden, I tripped upon my skirts and fell. He was kind enough to assist me back to my feet."

"I see. And I suppose he plied us with tea and a future invitation because you dirtied your frock?"

"He...he was being a proper host, that is all. Any true gentleman would do the same."

"Perhaps, but he seemed unusually keen to keep you at Pemberley. For a moment, I rather wondered whether he was going to let you leave or instead hold you captive in the attics." Mrs Gardiner chuckled at her jest, joined by her husband. Then she sobered and said, more gently, "Really, Lizzy, you are being intentionally obtuse."

How could she make them understand without revealing the events at Hunsford? She knew that Mr Darcy would never pay her any sort of attentions again, not after being

rejected so thoroughly, but it would be nigh impossible to convince her well-meaning relations of this without admitting to something of their shared past. However, Mr Darcy did not deserve to be humiliated by having the affair shared with others, even those as trustworthy as the Gardiners, and it would bring her no small amount of pain to relate her shortcomings as well. No, she would have to try and dissuade them some other way or simply let them think what they would about the situation; when she left the country without an offer, they would then realise their error.

“Lizzy.” Mrs Gardiner placed a hand upon Elizabeth’s forearm. Her tone was changed to one less teasing and more motherly, soothing the nerves she had so lately ruffled. “I do not mean to question you about such a sensitive matter, but I think you must accept that Mr Darcy has some form of intentions towards you. He was most gracious to us all but particularly attentive to your comfort whilst we were in his presence. He could hardly take his eyes off you! Whether you return his affections or not I do not know, but do not be caught unawares if he makes his feelings known.”

Elizabeth lowered her head and stared at her aunt’s hand, which stroked soothingly at her arm with a thumb. “Mr Darcy cannot have any intentions towards me. He made it very clear in Hun—Hertfordshire that I and my family are beneath his consequence. There can be no match.” He had also made it very clear during his proposal, but Elizabeth was hardly at liberty to divulge that .

“He did invite us to dine.”

“True, but he probably felt obligated due to my previous acquaintance with him and the Bingleys. It is nothing, I am sure.”

Mrs Gardiner huffed—a sure sign of her exasperation. “He also asked to call upon you. Is there a surer sign of a gentleman’s romantic interest in a lady than that?”

“I am certain he meant nothing particular by it. It might be considered rude if he did

not call upon me whilst I reside in his neighbourhood for several days.”

“He made a point of introducing you to his sister, did he not?” Mrs Gardiner raised her brow as if daring Elizabeth to counter this argument.

“Yes, but...” She hardly knew what to say to that. Mr Darcy was protective of his sister; she was perfectly aware of that fact and could not suppose that he would encourage—nay, insist upon—an acquaintance to just anyone, especially when Miss Darcy was not yet out.

“Trust me,” said Mrs Gardiner with an air of forced patience. “A man will not risk introducing a lady to his family unless he is intending to mark her as special. Most will not unless an offer is imminent.”

There was nothing to say to that; they were at an impasse.

“Ahem,” Mr Gardiner interjected, dabbing one last time at his mouth before depositing his napkin on his plate. “Anyone for cards?”

Elizabeth, even though she had no great liking for card games, enthusiastically championed her uncle’s suggestion. Any distraction from her muddled feelings was most welcome.

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

The ticking of the mantel clock and the shimmer of moonlight upon the smooth surface of the lake outside lulled Darcy into a nearly hypnotic state, yet he was no closer to sleep than when he had laid his head down upon his pillow hours ago. After tossing and turning for some time, he had abandoned his bed and wandered downstairs to his study in the hope that a snifter of brandy might assist him, but it was no use; his mind was too active with the events of the day—or, to be truly honest, it was entirely occupied by Elizabeth and their wondrous reunion.

The chances of discovering her upon his arrival at Pemberley, at a time when he himself had not expected to be there, were...astonishing. Infinitesimally small. It would have been less of a shock to be struck by lightning twice, yet somehow the incredibly improbable had come to pass. He had considered the matter since all but tripping over her earlier in the day, and his conclusions remained the same—the hand of Fate was indeed at work. This time, this marvellous second chance, he would win her hand. He had learnt from his past mistakes and was ready to do better, be better. He would be the sort of man?—

Startled by a flash of movement across the lawn, Darcy set his empty glass aside and leant forwards in his armchair to determine the source. It was probably some sort of animal, nothing to concern himself about, but his curiosity was naturally piqued. He rose and went to the nearest window for a better look.

There! It moved again, just out of Darcy's line of sight. This time, he was certain that the intruder was human rather than beast; he knew of no breed of fox or deer that was either so large or bipedal. He pressed his face to the glass, but the person had slid into

the shadows of the willows. Unable to discern anything further from his present position, Darcy sidled over to the glass doors, which afforded a more direct view of the grove. He rested his hand on the latch and prepared to confront whoever was prowling about his property in the middle of the night, for there could be no innocent purpose to their visit.

The wind picked up, divulging the interloper's position by whipping their long, silvery hair into a tangled frenzy. Despite the nearly full moon, he could not make out more than a billowing silhouette lurking within the disordered veil of spindly branches. He squinted his eyes to bring the figure into sharper focus, but from such a distance, all he could discern was the vague outline of a tall, slender lady dressed in a blue gown. What would a lady be doing out of doors at this hour?

“Brother?”

With a jolt, Darcy whirled round. There, framed in the doorway with her face eerily lit from below by the flame of a single flickering candle, was his sister. “Georgiana! What are you doing out of bed? ”

She took half a step back, her free hand pressed to her heart. “Oh, do forgive me! I had not meant to startle you.”

“I was not—” Darcy paused, inhaled a calming breath, and confessed, “I suppose you did give me something of a fright, but it is not entirely your fault. I spotted someone out on the lawn, and my attention was on following their movements.”

“Someone is in the gardens?” Georgiana said with a gasp, hurrying forwards to join him at his post. She set her candle on the desk and peered out into the darkness, her eyes darting back and forth across the scene. After a full minute of this search, she said, “I do not see anyone.”

Darcy positioned her to face the willow grove. “Just there—see? Along the shoreline. I believe it is a lady, though I cannot understand why she might visit in the middle of the night. Do you think one of our guests is also restless?”

Georgiana squinted at the area in question for several seconds before shaking her head. “I do not see anyone, lady or otherwise.”

“What? She was there a minute ago, just before you came in.” A glance of his own, however, proved that the mysterious figure was gone. “She must have hidden somewhere. In the trees, perhaps.”

“They do not provide much cover. Are you absolutely certain you saw someone?”

“Quite certain.”

Georgiana bit her lip. “Unless this mysterious lady has jumped into the lake, I think perhaps you might have been dreaming. You often doze in your chair, you know.”

Darcy opened his mouth to argue but then thought better of it. Georgiana’s explanation was far better than his own, and he would do well to accept it. After all, what would a lady be doing prowling through the willow grove past midnight? “I suppose you must be right. It was so vivid, I believed it to be real.”

Georgiana patted his hand sympathetically. “I have had those sorts of dreams. It is always difficult to fall back asleep afterwards. They are so lifelike that it is almost as if they are truly...” There was an air of wistful melancholy about her as she trailed off, a distance in her gaze as if it were turned inwards.

Feeling as though the topic had become too maudlin to continue, Darcy hurried to say, “Yes, well, enough of that. Tell me why you are out of bed.”



“I could not sleep. Too much sitting in the carriage, I suppose. Also...” Georgiana bit her lip and averted her gaze—a sure sign that she was hesitant to say more.

“Also?” Darcy prodded.

“Something Miss Bingley said earlier today has been on my mind.”

“I wish you would not give credence to anything Miss Bingley says, dearest. She is often...” He struggled for a term that would not be overtly insulting, but his mind could not conjure one. “Well, she is not always correct. Did she say something to injure your feelings?”

“No, it was not me she intended to injure but rather Miss Bennet.”

I should have known. “Was it worse than what I walked in on?”

“You heard only the least of Miss Bingley’s accusations! She believes Miss Bennet came here solely for the purpose of entrapping you.”

Perhaps Miss Bingley caught her own reflection in the mirror. Darcy shook away this ungentlemanly conjecture and assured his sister, “Yes, well, consider the source. I can attest that Miss Bennet was supremely surprised to stumble across me. Indeed, I believe she was more shocked than I, though my appearance might have made the difference there.” He grimaced at the recollection of his beloved Elizabeth seeing him in such a state. Good Lord, he could not have made a worse impression if he had insulted her again.

A confused wrinkle appeared between Georgiana’s eyes. “What was the matter with your appearance?”

Darcy coughed awkwardly into his fist. “It is not important. You may trust me,

however, when I tell you that Miss Bennet is no fortune hunter.”

Georgiana looked down to where her fingers fiddled with the tie of her dressing gown. “What if she was merely putting on an act? How do you know that Miss Bennet is what she seems?”

Because if she was mercenary, we would be married by now.

As an inkling of what was truly bothering Georgiana occurred to Darcy, he disengaged her hand from where it fidgeted with her clothing and took it into his own. “What did you think of Miss Bennet?”

“I liked her very much. She was kind and genteel, and she was able to face down Miss Bingley without so much as a flinch! But I have been wrong about people before.”

And there it was—the real source of Georgiana’s distress. “Dearest, you must not believe every person false simply because one man wronged you. Yes, there are those who would prey upon you for your fortune, and you must be cautious of such false friends, but most are exactly what they seem. Take Bingley, for example, or Richard. Or our cousin Anne. I have known Miss Bennet for nearly a year now, and I can say with all reasonable certainty that she is the most genuine, trustworthy lady of my acquaintance—save for you, of course. You have nothing to fear from her.”

Georgiana glanced up, a small smile forming on her features. “I have never heard you speak about a lady so. Am I soon to wish you joy?”

I dearly hope so. Darcy cleared his throat and said aloud, “I cannot imagine what you mean.”

“Come now! Even aside from your defence of Miss Bennet, it was plain to me earlier

when I saw the two of you together what your feelings are. It was plain to everyone! Miss Bingley turned a shade that was not complementary to her dress.”

“Yes, well, with our prior acquaintance...”

Georgiana sighed, having exhausted her patience with him. “Very well, keep your secrets. We both know how it will be. Do you intend to call upon her?”

With a sardonic twitch of his lips, Darcy replied, “I had considered the notion, yes.”

“When do you mean to go?”

After a conscious pause, he mumbled, “Tomorrow.”

The gleeful, knowing glitter in Georgiana’s eyes forced Darcy to duck his head. It took no great perception to recognise the eagerness he felt at seeing Elizabeth again, but he was unused to his younger sister discerning his motives so plainly. There had been a time not so long ago that he might have insisted that the woods around Pemberley were inhabited by any number of magical creatures, and she would have entirely believed him. Indeed, he had indulged her on many a unicorn hunt, searched nearby caves for dragon eggs, and even once plunged the depths of the lake in pursuit of water sprites at her direction. Now, he could not even hide that which he most wished to keep to himself.

Blessedly, Georgiana was not so apt to mercilessly tease him as Fitzwilliam was. Her newfound pertness did not extend that far. “Might I accompany you?”

“To visit Miss Bennet? ”

A sigh and a chuckle were her immediate and unvarnished response. “Yes.”

Although Darcy would have preferred to go alone, he could not deny Georgiana the opportunity to spend time with the lady she anticipated would become her sister. He wished he could warn her to guard her expectations, but his own rising hope prevented him lest he curse his chances. He therefore affirmed that she might go, and they arranged to meet in the entrance hall at an appropriate time.

Once that was settled between them, Georgiana ventured, “I hope you will take care around Miss Bingley.”

“Miss Bingley?”

Looking directly into his eyes, her expression serious, she proclaimed a dire warning. “As I have already said, your interest in Miss Bennet is abundantly clear, and I have seen the effect it has had on Miss Bingley. You would be worried too if you had witnessed the poisonous look she was giving Miss Bennet earlier today. She is angry, and I fear what she might do if you are not on your guard.”

Pressing a soft kiss to his sister’s forehead, Darcy said, “I believe you overestimate her power, but I shall be careful. I promise.”

“That is all I ask.” She paused. “Oh, and I have been thinking. With so many friends about, it would be lovely to have a picnic.”

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Despite the mostly sleepless night, Darcy was ready and eager to leave his bed at his usual time the next morning. After a hasty breakfast, he was equally eager to find some occupation to dispel his nervous energy and therefore proceeded directly to the stables for a ride. Once he returned, his restlessness only partially abated, there was still some time yet until respectable calling hours, so he retired to his study to pursue some other avenue of employment. He filled this period of anxious waiting with as much work as he could reasonably get his hands upon, glancing at the clock every few minutes or so and cursing the slowness of its hands.

At long last, it was time to meet Georgiana in the entrance hall for their planned visit. He arrived before her and paced the marble floor for several minutes, impatiently watching the staircase for her appearance. He was just on the point of sending a servant to fetch her—or, better yet, venturing upstairs himself to mitigate the agony of more interminable loitering—when she appeared on the landing on Bingley’s arm. Immediately, Darcy deduced the cause of her tardiness.

“So sorry to delay your excursion!” Bingley said upon reaching the lower floor. Given his friend’s wide grin and affable demeanour, Darcy could not discern any real sense of remorse. “I could not sleep what with all those odd noises—you have a draughty old pile here, my friend!” Bingley winked and then laughed at his own jest. “So I gave it up as a lost cause about an hour ago. When I emerged from my chambers in search of something to do, I found your delightful sister prepared to go out, asked where she was going, and she graciously invited me to come along without too much begging on my part. You do not mind, I trust?”

No, not at all. Why not bring the entire household, servants and all? And I am sure Freddy would enjoy an airing; we shall make a merry caravan. With a thin, forced smile, Darcy did his best to appear amenable to Bingley's inclusion in their scheme. "Of course not. You are most welcome."

Movement from Georgiana caught Darcy's attention. She mouthed him an apology and gave him such an exaggerated expression of repentance that his vexation immediately dissolved in favour of wry amusement. It seemed she was constitutionally incapable of rebuffing the vigorous determination of the Bingleys, even when cheerfully applied. At least Bingley uses his abilities for good and not self-serving chicanery. He smiled for his sister's benefit, and her features were articulate in their relief.

"I suppose we cannot take the curricule now we are three. I shall instruct the stable master to hook up the coach. Excuse me."

Caroline stifled a yawn behind her hand as she descended the main staircase. Waking early for the second day in a row was not her preference, but if she intended to distract Mr Darcy from dancing attendance upon the horrid Eliza, some sacrifices were required. Rising before noon was taxing upon her constitution, but until the blessed day her rival returned home to her tedious family, more vigilance would be required.

At the closed door of the breakfast room, Caroline took a moment to pat her hair and smooth out a wrinkle in her gown—a gorgeous silk taffeta frock of vivid jonquil, edged in lace along every hem and well worth the exorbitant cost—before nodding imperiously at the footman to open it. He did so, and she entered the room on an elegant glide, prepared to greet the Darcys with a pleasant veneer. Alas, it was empty.

"Where is everyone?" she demanded of the footman still stationed at the door with his hand on the knob.

The man bowed slightly and regretfully reported, “Mr Darcy, Miss Darcy, and Mr Bingley have already breakfasted, ma’am.”

“Already?”

“Yes, ma’am. Some hours ago now.”

Caroline’s stomach gurgled, but she pointedly disregarded it. “Oh well, I was not especially hungry in any case. Where have they gone? The blue saloon?” A lovely spacious room, if not for the preponderance of silvery, celestial blue. It might be considered a fashionable hue in certain circles, but it was far too dull for her tastes. A Pomona green, perhaps, or better yet a bold Pompeian red would be more striking. When she was mistress here, she would redecorate it in a more vibrant Oriental style with a great deal of gold ormolu and delicate furnishings. Pemberley could be so much more if left in her capable hands.

“No, they are not presently in the house.”

Curses. Caroline detested being out of doors. She could not abide getting dirty. “The rose garden, then?”

“No, Mr Darcy, Miss Darcy, and Mr Bingley have gone into Lambton. Mr Darcy said to assure his guests that he would return by two o’clock.”

Caroline clenched her hands into fists and tamped down the urge to screech. She had not believed that Mr Darcy would call upon Eliza with such alacrity, given that he had seen her just yesterday. Clearly, she had underestimated her adversary’s charms.

Spinning about, Caroline marched away from the unhelpful footman and back up the stairs. She turned down the hall that led to the guest wing, and upon reaching Louisa’s door, she thrust it open without knocking. “You will not believe this!”

There was a squawk from behind the bedcurtains, a scrambled rustling, then Louisa's bedraggled face appeared between the heavy aubergine drapery. She blinked rapidly in the early afternoon sunlight that crept in around the matching window curtains as she replied dazedly, "Caroline? What ails you?"

"Mr Darcy has lost his head over Eliza! Even now, he, his sister, and our traitorous brother are in Lambton calling upon her. At this hour! Mr Darcy should be attending to his guests round the breakfast table at this very moment, not gallivanting about the countryside after pert misses and their lowly relations."

Louisa glanced at the clock above the empty fireplace and heaved an exasperated sigh. "It is nearly one o'clock. We are in the country, and as nonsensical as you find it, many people this far from London ascribe to country hours. Should you wish to breakfast with Mr Darcy, you will have to rise with the sun, I daresay."

"I was up before noon!"

Louisa again glanced at the clock, as if to reaffirm the time. "And you have only just noticed Mr Darcy's absence now?"

"I had to make myself presentable, did I not?" She posed herself at a more flattering angle so as to show her gown at best advantage.

Not that Louisa seemed inclined to comment on it. With another sigh, she parted the curtains fully—blessedly, Hurst had not visited her in the night, so she was alone—and stood. "As I now shall. Ring for the maid, will you?"

"He could be making her an offer this moment!"

"With his sister and our brother in attendance?" Louisa snorted and crossed the room to tug on the bell pull herself. "Not likely. Regardless, I do not see how it makes



much difference. Even without Eliza nearby, Mr Darcy would not be offering himself to you .”

“And what makes you say that?”

“Because,” Louisa replied as she donned her robe and tightened the belt about her waist, “if he had any intentions towards you at all, he would have done so well before now. He has been on intimate terms with our brother since university and has never shown even the slightest interest in taking you for his bride. It is high time you gave up this fanciful notion of marrying into the highest echelons of society and redirected your sights to someone more attainable. Hurst knows a great many gentlemen who might suit.”

“They are all like him, I suppose, consumed with shooting, drinking, cards, and stuffing their bellies.” Caroline sneered at the prospect. “I thank you, no.”

Louisa pulled the curtains open, allowing sunlight to flood the room. “Very well, but when Mr Darcy makes another choice—whether it is Eliza or some other fortunate lady—you will have to resign yourself to it. I shall begin drawing up a list of candidates for your perusal, and perhaps you can make the most of it when the Season begins.”

Crossing her arms over her chest, Caroline slumped onto Louisa’s bed with the sort of gracelessness their former governess would have rapped her knuckles for. “I have not given up, nor shall I ever cede the field to the likes of Eliza Bennet. I shall prevail in the end, even if I must do something drastic.”

The door to Louisa’s dressing room began to open, and she rapidly moved to close it again against the entrance of her startled maid. “No! I will not see you descend to any underhanded machinations. I absolutely forbid it.”

“You are in no position to forbid me from anything!”

“That is where you are wrong.” Louisa’s tone was firm and her expression positively frightful. “Should I get so much as an inkling, the slightest notion, that you are intending to...to...do what I think you are plotting, I will tell Charles. See if I do not!” From behind the dressing room door, there came a timid knock, which was disregarded.

Caroline scoffed. “And what will Charles do, pray tell?”

“Send you to Aunt Bingley.”

“He would never. Our aunt is an old crone who lives so deep in the middle of nowhere that I would never find a husband. Not that I need seek one because I mean to have Mr Darcy by any means necessary.”

All of a sudden, the room was cast into a dreary, forbidding darkness, and an unaccountable chill seeped into Caroline’s bones. She rubbed her arms to dispel it, her breath fogging the air before her. She looked to her sister, but Louisa appeared unaffected; either that, or she was too incensed by their conversation to pay any notice to the unusual shift in temperature.

“You stupid, stupid girl!” Louisa hissed, holding tight to the door latch to prevent it opening again. “Do you not realise that you are far more likely to ruin yourself than gain a husband with such methods? Mr Darcy is a gentleman—and a wealthy, well connected one at that—and you are the daughter of a tradesman. He will not be cornered into making a match he does not desire. You will be the only one who suffers should he refuse to propose—you and all your family, that is. Not only will you be excluded from good society, but also me, Hurst, Charles...I beg you, do not attempt anything so foolish!”

Caroline turned her head, sniffing even as her nose pointed into the air. Where is that wretched cold emanating from? “Mr Darcy is a man of honour. He would never slight Charles by sullyng his sister and then refusing to make amends.”

“Caroline, please. Promise me you will keep your head and not do anything irreparable.”

“Really, Louisa, you ought to take your theatricality to the stage.”

“ Promise me! ”

“Oh, very well!” Caroline threw her hands up into the air, exasperated by her sister’s urgency. “I promise. I was not serious, in any case. After all, there is no reason my abilities should not be enough to win the day, even if Mr Darcy is, temporarily, taken in by Eliza. Once I have shown myself to best advantage, he will surely come to his senses and direct his attentions in a more proper course. Are you satisfied? ”

Louisa eyed her warily. “I suppose...but do know that I shall remain vigilant. Do not think for a moment that you are not being watched.”

With a huff, Caroline rose from the bed and removed herself from the frigid room. If she stayed much longer, she would turn the same dreary blue as the saloon.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As Elizabeth perched in the window seat of their lodgings, a sound from the yard drew her away from her novel. It was a well-worn copy of one of Mrs Radcliffe's—a choice inspired by Mr Gardiner's joke from the evening before—and utterly shocking. However, even the mystery of what was hidden behind the black veil paled in comparison to the identity of her visitors.

She looked out just in time to see a large, shiny black carriage pull up to the front of the inn and stop there, presumably with the intention of releasing its passengers. She vaguely supposed that they must be fellow travellers like herself, possibly only stopping in for a spot of tea before getting back on the road since it was still so early in the day. She watched as the servants scurried to open the door and a gentleman stepped out.

Mr Darcy! Elizabeth gasped, the book falling to the ground with a thud in front of her.

She continued to observe as Mr Darcy reached back inside and withdrew a delicate gloved hand, which foretold the emergence of his sister. Behind Miss Darcy, Mr Bingley hopped from the conveyance with a burst of boisterousness.

As the party approached the door to the inn, it occurred to Elizabeth that she needed to be prepared for their arrival, and she virtually tumbled out of the window seat. She picked up the book, straightened her posture, and shook out her skirts—hoping they were not too wrinkled for receiving company—then patted her hair. She made a hasty inspection of herself in the looking glass above the hearth and lamented that she was

wearing her blue-striped muslin rather than the cabbage-green, which was newer, but there was nothing for it now. Her appearance would simply have to do because she could hear footsteps on the staircase moving her way.

She threw herself onto a sofa just as there was a knock on the door. It swung inwards to reveal Sam, the bearer of ghost stories, followed closely by the party from Pemberley. “Mr Darcy, Miss Darcy, and Mr Bingley, miss,” the boy announced.

Elizabeth rose and curtsied to the group. “Good day.”

She received bows and a curtsy in return. “Good day, Miss Bennet,” said Mr Darcy, speaking for the rest. “I hope we have not come at an inconvenient time.” His eyes darted around the room as if looking for the missing Gardiners.

“Not at all. My aunt and uncle have gone calling on old acquaintances this morning, and I have stayed behind to read my book. Please, will you not sit?”

The Darcys settled themselves on the sofa directly across from Elizabeth, and Mr Bingley pulled up a chair to her left. They exchanged various pleasantries, commented on the local rumours of an impending break in the temperate weather, canvassed the travails of their recent travels, and generally said nothing of particular consequence. She and Mr Bingley were the principal speakers and the Darcys the principal listeners, and they passed several minutes in this fashion.

When the conversation lapsed into a natural silence, Mr Darcy cleared his throat, and Elizabeth turned to him with nervous anticipation of what he might say. However, his sister ventured to speak first. “What are you reading?” She then reddened as if surprised by her own question and looked down to her hands in her lap, which fidgeted with the seam of her glove. A moment later, Miss Darcy stilled her hands and clasped them together as if willing them to behave.

Elizabeth herself was a bit nonplussed but pleasantly so; Miss Darcy seemed a quiet, shy sort of girl, nothing at all like Mr Wickham had once described her. Not that he was a reliable resource, mind. “The Mysteries of Udolpho . It is an old favourite of mine that I have enjoyed often. Do you care for novels?”

Here, she glanced at Mr Darcy. It was not uncommon for gentlemen, especially those with the charge of young ladies, to disapprove of novels for their fanciful bent and lack of intellectual worth. While some could be fairly derided in this fashion, not all were so empty of virtue and were really quite wonderful. Elizabeth was not certain whether Mr Darcy was one of these critical gentlemen, but there was no trace of disgust wrinkling his patrician nose.

“Oh, very much!” said Miss Darcy, raising her face. “I have read all of Mrs Radcliffe’s, of course, and Belinda , Camilla ...I love novels—the more horrid, the better. Though my brother will not allow me The Monk , no matter how much I plead.”

“Nor shall I bend,” Mr Darcy said with a stern look for his sister. “There are many novels that are well worth perusing, but The Monk is entirely unsuitable for young ladies.”

Mr Bingley chuckled. “Terrible book, that one! Read it a few years ago because it was all the rage, but I never understood what all the fuss was about. It is thrilling, I suppose, but I could not understand half of what was going on, and the other half was thoroughly ridiculous. You may have guessed, Miss Bennet,” Mr Bingley turned to Elizabeth with a wink, “that I am not as great a fan of novels as my friends here.”

“Oh, but it cannot be that horrid. Have you read it, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth gave Mr Darcy an apologetic grimace. “I have, I confess. I borrowed it from my father’s library, without his knowledge, and I must say that your brother is

correct to keep you from it, particularly at your age. I daresay I did not sleep properly for a week afterwards and came to regret my folly.”

Miss Darcy sagged back into her seat with a sigh. “I suppose I shall have to be satisfied on this point. Alas.”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together lest she laugh aloud at her visitor, who was posed in an endearingly petulant manner. “There are plenty of novels, as Mr Darcy has already pointed out, that are both suitable and entertaining. Why, I borrowed one last year about a young lady visiting Bath, and it was absolutely delightful. It was rather satirical and...”

And so the conversation continued on the thread of books for some time, largely carried on between Elizabeth and Miss Darcy. Mr Bingley contributed a thought here and there, but as an acknowledged lackadaisical reader, he spoke mostly to tease. Mr Darcy added some more interesting insights, even though he professed a preference for history and poetry over novels, but he encouraged his sister to talk in his stead.

Regardless of who was speaking, Elizabeth could not help directing frequent glances at the dark-haired gentleman across from her. He gazed upon her with a familiar intensity, the air about him fairly crackling with it, even as he deferred to Miss Darcy’s enthusiasm. He was perfectly attired in a deep-blue superfine coat, nary a stitch out of place, but she could not help recalling how she had found him yesterday, all wet and hulking and... Goodness, it certainly is hot in here! Positively broiling. I ought to open the window to let some cool air in.

“Miss Bennet?”

The dulcet voice of Miss Darcy recalled Elizabeth to the present, and she shook herself. “Do forgive me, I... What were you saying?”

“Oh, well.” Miss Darcy began fiddling with her glove again and glanced at her brother. Mr Darcy nodded encouragement, and she turned back to Elizabeth, apparently determined. “We actually came today to issue an invitation. We are hosting a picnic on Friday by the lake and would be greatly honoured if you and your aunt and uncle would come.”

“My sister has made all the arrangements,” Mr Darcy added, turning to Miss Darcy with an affectionate turn of his lips. A moment later, his fervent gaze was back on Elizabeth. “There will be luncheon and lawn games, and I daresay it will be a wonderful fête .”

With both Darcys waiting on her answer with palpable enthusiasm for their scheme, Elizabeth could not resist the widening of her smile. “I shall have to confer with my aunt and uncle, but I believe we have no fixed plans. Tentatively, I accept. ”

“I do hope you will be able to attend!” said Miss Darcy, lightly bouncing upon her cushion.

Mr Darcy added, “If the good weather holds, it will be a fine day, and the shade by the lake should prove most refreshing.”

Coyly, Elizabeth teased, “I well remember.”

When the gentleman coughed into his fist, she thought him disguising a laugh.

The moment of levity was broken at the entrance of the Gardiners, who stopped short upon seeing guests awaiting them.

“We have been invited back to Pemberley on Friday,” Elizabeth said once the necessities of social intercourse were out of the way. “I could not give them a definite answer without your concurrence, but there is to be a picnic by the lake.”



“How delightful!” said Mrs Gardiner, looking to her husband for his approbation before continuing, “We accept gratefully.”

Not long after this, Mr Darcy reluctantly declared that the time for their visit had elapsed and they ought to depart. When Elizabeth glanced at the clock, she realised that they had been with her for more than three quarters of an hour. There was another flurry of bows and curtsies before the forms had been exhausted and the party took their leave.

Elizabeth saw them to the door, and while Mr Bingley escorted Miss Darcy down the stairs, Mr Darcy lingered for a few moments longer to press her hand. He said nothing, but his eyes told her much.

Once Mr Darcy too had left, Mrs Gardiner said to her niece, “I hope you are now convinced.”

Elizabeth said nothing but turned to hide her smile.

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“ I t is not yet two o’clock, Caroline. Do stop pacing lest you wear a hole in the carpet.”

Caroline sneered at the carpet in question; it was an ugly thing in yet another atrocious shade of blue and deserved to be destroyed. It would be amongst the first things to go once she was mistress of Pemberley. “How can you be so calm when that hussy is working to displace me in Mr Darcy’s affections? Horrid, intolerable girl!”

Louisa sighed and dropped her sewing to her lap. “I am beginning to believe that you are not only as stubborn as Aunt Bingley but just as deaf. You absolutely will not hear that Mr Darcy has no affections for you that Eliza can steal for herself.”

Caroline sniffed. “You are just jealous that a gentleman of Mr Darcy’s calibre is considering me for his bride when you were forced to settle for Hurst.”

Shaking her head, Louisa muttered, “Perhaps not deaf but daft.” She picked up her needlework again and resumed stitching, paying no further attention to Caroline whatsoever .

Another three quarters of an hour—well past two, Caroline fretfully noticed—passed before Mr Darcy, his sister, and Charles finally returned. They appeared well pleased with their excursion if their happy chatter and general demeanour were anything to go by. Tea was ordered, and they settled in to politely beg forgiveness for their absence.

“I understand that you paid a call in Lambton this morning,” Caroline remarked with,

she thought, exceptional poise given her internal seething.

Miss Darcy nodded, and her brother said nothing, but Charles cheerfully confessed their destination. “Yes, indeed! It is so pleasant to see Miss Elizabeth Bennet again—and so far from her home county. Really, what are the odds of stumbling across one of our Hertfordshire neighbours this far north?”

“Better than you might believe,” Caroline muttered. Could none of them see what Eliza was about? She was as bad as her elder sister, turning up to people’s homes uninvited and throwing herself in the way of eligible gentlemen. I have said it before, and I shall doubtlessly say it again ad infinitum , but men are vexatious simpletons!

Louisa agreed that it was a strange, but delightful, coincidence and asked a few more particulars of the call. Apparently, Miss Darcy and Eliza shared a great love of novels, and everyone from the Lucases to the baker’s dog was deemed ‘well’ in Meryton. Caroline might have fallen into a stupor if Mr Darcy were not present to impress.

“...and so we shall be hosting a picnic by the lake.”

Lost in her own ennui, Caroline only caught the last part of Miss Darcy’s statement. “A picnic?”

The girl nodded. “Yes, on Friday.”

“Oh, but Friday is much too soon!” Caroline exclaimed, aghast. “There is not nearly enough time to send out invitations, arrange for suitable entertainment, decide on dishes, or have anything delivered from London. You must push it out for two, three weeks, at least.”

Miss Darcy’s eyes widened, and she blinked rapidly. She ought to be shocked by her

own lack of foresight; social occasions were a multi-faceted jewel that could only shine when arranged in just the right way. “Oh, but...”

Such an opportunity! If Caroline could show Mr Darcy how capable she was of making his home sparkle, surely she would appear to greater advantage than Eliza. What could that country mouse possibly know about organising an elegant event?

Collecting herself, she reached over to pat Miss Darcy on the hand in a reassuring manner. The girl looked positively agog at the enormity of what she was facing. “Fear not, dear friend, I shall be happy to assist you with all the arrangements. Have you given much thought to the food? No, of course not, you are not yet out, so you could not possibly know the latest fashions. You will need a special punch, of course, and—oh! Ices would be just the thing! And no outdoor affair is complete without?”

“Miss Bingley.”

The manner in which Mr Darcy barked out her name shocked Caroline into silence.

Once he had her attention, he continued more sedately, “My sister and I thank you for your kindness, but you are our guest, and we could not allow you to put yourself out.”

“It is no trouble at all!” she said hastily. Her brother and sister made to interrupt, but she rushed on, “Why, I would consider it an honour to act as mentor to Miss Darcy. I assure you, sir, that she will benefit greatly from my expertise.”

Mr Darcy’s expression and tone were both carefully blank when he replied, “I am sure she would, but recall that my sister is not yet out and so cannot partake in, much less plan, a grand event such as you describe. This is meant to be a small party of close friends and family only, and I am certain she can manage the arrangements with the help of her companion and my housekeeper.”

“But surely you mean to invite?—”

“—only ourselves, Miss Bennet, and her relations. It will be an informal, intimate affair.”

Caroline burned with a sudden flush comprised of equal parts mortification and outrage. She longed to object to Eliza and her tradespeople relations being included in the guest list when more worthy individuals were not. Did not his Matlock relations live within five-and-twenty miles of Pemberley? She bit her tongue, however, as it would do her no good to disagree with Mr Darcy; imperious gentlemen like him preferred biddable wives.

“Georgiana, I do believe that Mrs Annesley will be waiting for you in the music room by now.” Mr Darcy levelled a meaningful look at his sister, who seemed rather alarmed at the goings on. The girl all but jumped from her seat and excused herself before scampering from the room like a frightened rabbit. Pitiful ninny.

No matter. If she could not illustrate her extensive skills, Caroline would find some other way to draw attention to herself. Mr Darcy would be forced to acknowledge her.

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Friday dawned sunny and perfect for a picnic within the shade of the willow grove. Darcy could hardly wait to sit by the stream, preferably with Elizabeth at his side, nibbling on fresh strawberries and basking in the splendour of a flawless afternoon. She would say something witty, he would riposte with something equally clever, and they would laugh in chiming harmony. Then they could take a stroll along the lake, where he would take her hand—to prevent her from stumbling, of course—and show her the choicest spots for viewing. With Pemberley at her best, surely his beloved would wish to remain forever.

Such had been Darcy's expectation upon waking, but he was not enjoying the excursion as much as he had anticipated. The blame for his discontent could be laid at the feet of one individual: Miss Bingley. When she was not clinging to his arm or brazenly putting herself forward to his notice, she was complaining over how uncomfortable it was to sit on the ground 'like a savage' and fussing over the state of her gown. Why one would wear satin to an outdoor picnic in the summer is beyond my comprehension. There were too many insects buzzing about, the salad was wilted, the grass was too damp, the willow branches caught at her ensemble, the wind was threatening to dismantle her coiffure...an orchid required less coddling.

Darcy had been forced to excuse himself to sit with the gentlemen in order to escape her, which sadly meant that he was presently divided from Elizabeth as well—a consequence that was no doubt part of the lady's scheme. Aside from their initial greetings and a few exasperated glances shared behind Miss Bingley's back, Darcy and Elizabeth had barely interacted at all, leading him into impotent frustration. She was so close yet maddeningly divided from him by the length of the rug they sat

upon. She reclined at the far end, just out of reach, chatting quietly with Georgiana over the remains of their luncheon—simple fare of cold ham, chicken, cheese, salad, bread, fresh strawberries, and Cook’s special jam tarts, per their original intent—so enticingly lovely in her ivory muslin gown against the background of rustling leaves. Every so often, one of the branches would caress her cheek or shoulder as if they too recognised how well she fitted into the scene. She belongs here.

The breeze that tormented Miss Bingley picked up and wafted Elizabeth’s delectable honeysuckle scent in his direction, teasing her curls and intoxicating his faculties. Should she ever accept his hand, he would spend hours luxuriating in her hair. He could imagine himself plucking her hairpins free, one by one, until the tresses tumbled around them both.

“Is the fishing any good here, Mr Darcy?”

Startled from his inappropriate wool-gathering, he jerked about to face Mr Gardiner. The older gentleman was watching him with an amused glimmer in his eye. “Pardon?”

“I asked whether your lake”—he nodded to the expanse of water stretched out before them—“has good fishing.”

“Oh yes, quite good. Excellent,” Darcy stammered, his ears burning, “though I most often utilise the trout stream behind the house. Do you enjoy the sport?”

“I do not often have the opportunity to partake in it, but yes, when I get the chance.” After a pause, Mr Gardiner smirked and asked, “Tell me, are there more like what Lizzy found in the lake on our first visit to be caught? If so, I believe one would require a net.”

Darcy barked an uneasy laugh. “Ah, no. Pike and trout only, I am afraid.”

“A great pity, indeed. Lizzy was quite happy with her catch.”

“Fishing, you say?” interjected Hurst, saving Darcy from whatever bumbling reply would spill from his lips. “I say, that sounds like just the thing. What say we make a party of it tomorrow? Bingley? Gardiner?”

Bingley, never one to deny anyone their pleasure, readily lent his voice to Hurst’s cause. Mr Gardiner, seemingly chagrined at what he had inadvertently begun, had the grace to show more deference to their host. “I was not hinting at another invitation, I assure you.”

“Nonsense!” Hurst replied, as if the authority rested with him. The man is an inveterate leech. “It was a capital idea, and you ought to benefit from it. The more the merrier and all that.”

Warily, Mr Gardiner looked to Darcy. “I am game, should Mr Darcy not object.”

“No objection,” he muttered, leaving the other gentlemen to sort out the particulars. It was quickly settled that the morning, before the heat of the day was upon them, would be the best time, and the aforementioned trout stream would be their location .

Darcy had hoped to spend the day wooing Elizabeth. With Miss Bingley’s interference, he was not likely to have much opportunity today, despite being only a few feet separated from her. So much for my grand plans. His gaze again found his beloved with palpable yearning. Apparently sensing the tickle of his attention against her skin, Elizabeth looked up, her cheeks flushing prettily. I wonder whether Bingley would object to locking his sister in the cellar for the remainder of their stay.

He was about to resign himself to another day without Elizabeth when a notion occurred to him. “Mr Gardiner, if the ladies are not otherwise occupied tomorrow, they might call on my sister at, say, one o’clock? We could then join them for



refreshments.”

Mr Gardiner, recovered from his momentary chagrin, chuckled. “You are not yet tired of hosting my family, then?”

“Not at all. It would be my pleasure—and Georgiana’s.” He hastily included his sister lest he appear unbecomingly eager.

“We had tentative plans to tour the church tomorrow, but nothing has been absolutely settled. Let us apply to the ladies for their opinions.”

Mrs Gardiner, with a knowing glance at her niece, agreed that tea at Pemberley sounded like a delightful idea. Elizabeth echoed her aunt with encouraging bashfulness. After looking to Mrs Annesley for an approving nod, Georgiana clapped her hands with enthusiasm. Even Mrs Hurst appeared generally pleased with the proposed plan. Only Miss Bingley’s face puckered as if her lemonade was too sour—no doubt another complaint she had yet to voice.

It was not only Miss Bingley’s interference in his courting of Elizabeth that raised Darcy’s ire but also her presumption. The lady behaved as if Pemberley were her own—as if she had the right to direct the household according to her particular whims. He had been absolutely out of patience with her on Wednesday when she had attempted to take control of this picnic without so much as being asked for her help, and he was reminded of that annoyance now as she surreptitiously glowered at Elizabeth and Georgiana. Who does she think she is?

My future wife. Darcy flinched at the revolting thought. He could see that Georgiana was correct to warn him about Miss Bingley and her pretensions; it was growing increasingly clear that she saw herself as the destined mistress of the house and was acting accordingly. He had already been cautious around her; now he would be on his guard.

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Although Elizabeth did her best to listen attentively to Miss Darcy as they talked, her eyes frequently betrayed her intent by straying to where Mr Darcy conversed with the other gentlemen. It was not so long ago that she had been content to disregard him, but now she sought him out everywhere—in a roomful of strangers, through the window of the inn, even generally off in the distance on her walks. It was less that she expected to see him and more that she hoped to. When they were actually together, she could scarcely keep her hungry gaze away from him, and each time she caught him looking back, her breath caught.

Like now. Her uncle was in the midst of some fishing story, which had all the gentlemen enraptured save for Mr Darcy. His eyes sought out hers and held steady, seemingly unaware of all around them. It was as if only the pair of them stood beneath the shade of the willows, hidden from the rest of the world within the veil of wispy branches. The wind tickled the back of her neck, and she could almost imagine that it was him whispering endearments against her nape.

A shock of cold wetness startled Elizabeth from her reverie, and her connexion with Mr Darcy snapped. She looked down to find her lap spattered with the contents of an overturned glass of lemonade.

“Oh dear, your gown!” Miss Bingley’s face was partially hidden behind her fan, but her amusement was not entirely obfuscated. “I suppose that is the risk one takes when eating on the ground.”

Fully aware that the glass had been Miss Bingley’s and equally suspicious that its

capsize had been no accident, Elizabeth's response was a sardonic, "Indeed."

Miss Darcy began dabbing furiously at the spots on Elizabeth's gown while Mrs Annesley applied to a servant for more napkins. "I do hope your lovely frock is not ruined. Do you require a change? You are shorter than I, but I am certain something could be arranged."

Elizabeth slowed the girl's ministrations with a gentle hand. "No harm done, Miss Darcy. Lemonade will not stain, and my gown will be as good as new after a wash."

Readjusting the ornate feathered band in her hair—how it had not blown away already, Elizabeth did not know; she expected it to take flight any moment and join the birds—Miss Bingley said, "I suppose you need not worry overmuch for muslin. It is well suited to dirty activities, I am sure."

More suited to eating out of doors than her ensemble. Really, it is as if she expected a full dining set out on the lawn! Elizabeth bit her lip against the laughter that threatened to bubble out of her at the haughty woman's ridiculous fashion choices. Her gown might have been appropriate for perambulating through Hyde Park on a cool day, but by a lake in the height of summer, it was a silly choice. Miss Bingley greatly misunderstands the style of living at Pemberley, I think.

From behind her, towards the side of the house that was not visible through the trees, Elizabeth heard a series of barks and a sharp whistle. Almost as soon as she had turned round to investigate properly, she was playfully accosted by a large, wet tongue. "Freddy!" She giggled.

It was, indeed, her spotted friend from her first visit, and the Great Dane was overjoyed to see her. It was not more than a few seconds before Elizabeth was overturned just like Miss Bingley's glass, pinned down by Freddy's fervent affections. It might have been a grievous ordeal had it not tickled so much.

Havoc, naturally, ensued from there. Numerous voices—Mr Darcy’s chief amongst them—rose to scold Freddy away, though Elizabeth was in no danger. Her dignity was, perhaps, somewhat tarnished, but the dog’s romp was entirely friendly. Even so, it was a relief once Freddy was pulled off so she could sit up.

“Miss Bennet, are you injured?” Poor Mr Darcy looked utterly horrified as he held Freddy at bay by her collar, and Miss Darcy, at his elbow, had covered her mouth with her hands. Beyond them, the Gardiners watched with concern but not panic.

Laughing and probing her coiffure—surprisingly intact, albeit with a few extra leaves to pluck out—Elizabeth replied, “Not at all. I am perfectly well, if a little dishevelled.”

“Are you certain? I can call for a physician if?—”

“Goodness, no! That is entirely unnecessary. Look.” Elizabeth stood, twirled about, waved her hands, and generally proved to everyone’s satisfaction that she was unharmed. “There, see? Not a single scratch.”

“Such a hardy country girl,” Miss Bingley said with an unconvincing smile. She received more than one chastising look for this unsubtle remark—the most blistering of all from her own sister.

Although growing weary of Miss Bingley’s paltry attacks, Elizabeth only wished for the animosity to pass. With a self-deprecating chuckle, she said, “I confess I am. More a weed than a rose, I am afraid, though it is much to my advantage on occasions such as this. Is that not so, Freddy?”

Upon hearing her own name, Freddy barked and struggled free of Mr Darcy’s grasp, bounding towards Elizabeth across the rug. He caught her again before she could get far, but Miss Bingley, who had leapt up at the Great Dane’s first incursion, screeched

as if set aflame and stumbled backwards into her own discarded plate. It flipped along one edge and sent the remains of her luncheon catapulting onto her gown. Elizabeth winced; strawberry jam would not be easy to scrub from apricot satin.

“Look what you have done!” she shrieked, turning the same colour as the dreadful splotch and glaring in Elizabeth’s direction. “My frock is ruined, completely ruined ! If you had not called that dog, this never would have happened!”

Feeling some small amount of contrition for the part she had played, Elizabeth opened her mouth to apologise but was forestalled by Mr Bingley. “Do not be absurd, Caroline, it was an accident! Miss Elizabeth could not have known you would trip over your own feet.”

“Charles—”

“Our apologies, Miss Bennet. I believe my sister is merely overcome. ’Tis a favourite gown,” Mrs Hurst interrupted, grasping Miss Bingley by the elbow and shooting her a silencing look. The younger woman’s face puckered, but she held her tongue. “Come, Caroline, let us go back up to the house so you can change. If we are quick, your maid might be able to save the fabric before the stain sets.” So saying, Mrs Hurst began marching back towards the manor, tugging Miss Bingley along with her.

“One would think Miss Bingley had been the one tackled to the ground by a large dog.”

Elizabeth turned to Miss Darcy with surprise, a short laugh bursting out of her. “I beg your pardon?”

The girl blushed and averted her face, mumbling, “Nothing.”

Patting her young hostess on the arm, Elizabeth whispered, “It is what she gets for

that mean trick with the lemonade, if you ask me. Some mystical force is watching and held her to account.”

Her quip was rewarded with a tentative smile. Miss Darcy’s gaze was then caught by something over Elizabeth’s shoulder, and she hastily excused herself to see to some small matter. Elizabeth worried that she had been too bold with the delicate young lady.

“I do beg your forgiveness, Miss Bennet. I assure you that guests are not routinely accosted in this manner.”

Elizabeth’s confusion was resolved when she turned and beheld Mr Darcy at her shoulder, still struggling to keep Freddy under control with a firm grip on her collar. He had stripped to his shirtsleeves, as had the other gentlemen, and the sight of his arm straining beneath the thin material caused her pulse to quicken.

Shaking away her sudden bashfulness, Elizabeth replied, “Do not trouble yourself, sir. I am uninjured, as I have already proved, and I am very fond of dogs. They are the dearest, most loyal creatures in the world and feel so strongly that they cannot always contain themselves. That is no crime.”

“Even so, Freddy ought to be under better regulation. I have tried everything to make her more obedient, but I am afraid I have spoilt her instead.”

Thinking of her younger sisters, Elizabeth saucily replied, “It is easily done, sir.”

“Let me return her to the kennel master and?—”

At Freddy’s piteous whine, Elizabeth’s heart ached. “Oh no, do let her stay! Perhaps if we allow her to gambol about a bit, she will calm. I, myself, can be quite unmanageable when full of restless energy.”

A smirk curled to one side of Mr Darcy's mouth, and the wind lifted the hair from his forehead, making him look more roguish than genteel as he drolly replied, "I never would have suspected it of you, Miss Bennet."

All of a sudden, Elizabeth wished Miss Bingley had left her fan behind so that she could cool the warmth rising in her cheeks. How was she to comport herself in a ladylike fashion when he said such playful things?

After a slight clearing of his throat, Mr Darcy spoke again in his usual accents. "We have been sitting in the same attitude for so long ourselves that I believe a bit of exercise would be beneficial to us as well. Would you care to take a stroll with me?"

She was tempted to say that she would go anywhere with him in that moment but contained herself to, "I thank you, yes." They informed her aunt and uncle of their plan and were waved off with a ready blessing. She felt a momentary pang of guilt for leaving Miss Darcy without youthful female company, but the girl settled cheerfully next to her companion and resumed plotting the next day's tea party with the older ladies.

Mr Darcy released Freddy to offer Elizabeth his arm, which she took with a trembling hand. The dog loped around them in circles for a few seconds before bounding off towards the water, her nose to the ground .

He steered them to a well-worn trail that was partially obscured by the draping willow branches. It would afford them some amount of privacy—Elizabeth's nerves fluttered at the thought of what they might do with a little more—but would not shield them entirely from the view of their chaperons. They were a few scant feet from the shoreline, with water gently lapping against the tree roots, many of which were exposed in a gnarled tangle. Added to this was the rustling of the leaves, which created a natural melody they could almost dance to. It was a beautiful, restful place.

They were comfortably silent for some time before Mr Darcy quietly ventured, “I have fond memories of my parents by this lake. Especially my mother.”

Elizabeth looked to her escort and found his gaze cast over the stretch of sparkling water. “Oh?”

“Yes. She was not a great walker like you, but she did enjoy the water. When I was very young, she would bring me swimming here and even occasionally dip her own feet in. She liked this lake so well that she even chose a room with a view of it for her study.”

Elizabeth subtly winced. As I well recall.

“I had once hoped...” Mr Darcy shook himself, withdrew his eyes from the distance, and affixed them upon her face. “That is, I had always thought you would enjoy this aspect as well, given how fond you are of nature.”

Elizabeth retained his gaze, even as she spoke of the lake in question. “It is a wonderful place. I can see how a person would never wish to leave it.”

Mr Darcy opened his mouth but seemed to think better of what he was about to say and closed it again. He coughed, then resumed his usual formal manner. “Tell me, what have you seen of the Peaks since you have been in the area? There are some magnificent views.”

The wind whistled and died away, reflecting her own disappointment. She wished she knew what Mr Darcy had been about to say. “We have been to Dovedale and?”

Elizabeth squeaked as her foot caught on something—a tree root, no doubt—and she began an ungainly descent. Fortunately, Mr Darcy was nimble and managed to pivot and catch her before she could fall into a graceless heap upon the ground.



“Are you well?”

“Perfectly well, I assure you. I only lost my balance for...a...”

Elizabeth quite forgot what she meant to say once she became cognisant of Mr Darcy’s proximity. With his hands upon her back, her chest pressed against his, she was essentially folded into his embrace. So near, she could easily observe the dark lushness of his lashes, make out every sliver of blue and green in his grey irises, and feel his soft panting breaths upon her cheeks. If she were not mistaken, he was moving closer yet, his eyes gradually drifting closed...

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Caroline stormed through the double front doors of the house, determined to return to the picnic—a shoddy affair, as she had predicted; Miss Darcy really ought to have sought her advice—as quickly as she was able before Eliza could gain the upper hand. Without anyone there to intervene, there was no telling what arts the chit might descend to in order to gain Mr Darcy for herself. Already today, she had managed to thwart and upstage her rival while somehow maintaining a veneer of guileless innocence, but Caroline was onto her game.

As she strode towards the gathered party on the lawn, Caroline smoothed down her skirt—a primrose silk, which was light and delicate, perfectly suited to dining al fresco in the summer—and searched the small crowd for Mr Darcy with probing eyes. Where has he gone?

Upon reaching the rug where her sister—who had abandoned her to the ministrations of her lady’s maid after scolding her for making a scene, as if it were not that pert Eliza’s fault—sat conversing with Miss Darcy and Mrs Gardiner, Caroline demanded, “Where has Mr Darcy got to?”

Mrs Gardiner, who had been droning on about some dull aspect of her insignificant Cheapside abode, stuttered to an abrupt stop. While the other ladies frowned, she coolly replied, “He and Elizabeth are walking around the lake.”

Was it Caroline’s imagination, or did Mrs Gardiner sound unbecomingly smug? She pinched her lips against a snide reply, nodded, and walked away in pursuit of her quarry.

Closer to the shore, the terrain became more uneven with roots and scattered debris, which her slippers did little to protect her from. She ought to have worn boots, she supposed, but none of the pairs she had brought with her matched this particular gown. Had she realised she would be required to traipse after that hoydenish Eliza into the wilderness, she might have risked the fashion faux pas, but her own genteel expectations had foiled her. She stepped gingerly along the trail, swatting branches out of her way as she moved deeper into the grove.

There! Up ahead through the curtain of foliage she spotted two figures on the path walking close to one another. Although she saw them in shadow and only from behind, their identities were apparent; Mr Darcy and Eliza were engaged in some quiet conversation she could not quite overhear.

Caroline gasped with outrage as Eliza feigned a stumble and began falling forwards. Mr Darcy reached out to catch her, and the pair of them ended up in an intimate clutch. “That scheming strumpet!” Disregarding the pain in her feet, she rushed to intercede before Mr Darcy fell prey to Eliza’s transparent wiles.

A harsh wind kicked up, sending the dangling fronds surrounding her into a hissing frenzy. The thin branches whipped at her, stinging her face, neck, and hands as if she were a naughty child, driving her back from whence she came. She cried out at the onslaught but was muffled by a mouthful of leaves, which she immediately spat out in a most unladylike fashion.

Somehow returned to where she had begun, Caroline stared uncomprehendingly at the wall of branches separating her from Mr Darcy and Eliza. If she were not such a rational creature, she might have believed them capable of intentionally hampering her pursuit, but that was utter nonsense. Squaring her shoulders, she swept them aside and marched back into the grove.

The wind rose again the instant she breached the veil, and she found herself accosted

by grasping branches and pointed leaves, which grazed her exposed skin like razor blades. She held up her arms to protect her face and pushed her way blindly through the onslaught.

She had not progressed much farther when she felt something wrap about her ankle and give a wrenching tug, pulling her foot out from under her. She screamed as she descended and collided with the packed dirt of the trail, then fell abruptly silent as the breath was knocked from her body.

Dazed, she made no effort to rise and lay completely still even as light, padding footsteps approached and a cold wetness grazed her cheek. Stupid dog. To this further indignity, she could only elicit a quiet moan of dismay.

As she lay prostrate on the filthy ground with the curious beast snuffling at her hair, she felt another jerk upon her leg and began rolling down the slope that separated dry land from the lake. Already stunned by her ignominious spill, she could do nothing as she tumbled into the water.

A scream rent the air, startling Elizabeth from the luring pull of Mr Darcy's heady gaze. She felt him jerk away likewise, and they turned in tandem to the path behind them. Freddy, ears pointed and alert, scampered off to investigate as the gentleman wondered aloud, "What was that?"

Elizabeth squinted through the obscuring veil of leaves and spotted a prone figure on the ground, which Freddy paused to sniff at. "I think someone is injured!"

As they disentangled themselves with the common intent of rendering aid, the figure began rolling down the incline towards the lake and landed in the water with a resounding splash. They both rushed forwards, Mr Darcy in the lead while Elizabeth struggled with her skirts, and found Miss Bingley levying herself up out of the muck while Freddy barked at her from the bank.

“The trees—so much wind— my gown !”

Unlike the one Miss Bingley had soiled earlier, Elizabeth feared that this particular frock had no chance of being rescued. Being drenched might have been put to rights, but the lady’s plunge had stirred up a dark, putrid sludge from the lakebed, the stains from which would not be easily removed or disguised by clever embroidery. The feathers in her headdress drooped in front of her eyes, and she struggled to flick them away, but they only tangled around her fingers. In wrenching them free, the lady sent the ornament flying off farther into the water, where it sank beneath the surface and was lost to sight. Upon realising this, Miss Bingley clenched her fists, scrunched up her face, and screeched loudly enough to send the nearby birds fleeing from their roosts.

Elizabeth looked on with her hands cupped over her face. She was ashamed of herself, really, for it was not shock that she concealed but barely restrained mirth. Jane would be appalled!

Mr Darcy, to his credit, jumped directly into the lake and sloshed to Miss Bingley’s rescue. Over his dog’s continued barking, he called, “Hush, Freddy. Miss Bingley, are you injured?”

In spite of her better angels, a snort escaped Elizabeth when Miss Bingley, upon spying Mr Darcy’s approach, suddenly wilted and began flailing about as though drowning. As she was seated upright in no more than a foot or so of water, Elizabeth was reasonably assured that the lady was in no particular danger, despite her overwrought performance. When Miss Bingley cried out a plaintive, “Oh, Mr Darcy, do save me!” Elizabeth was forced to turn away lest she give way to unseemly laughter.

Mr Darcy reached out to the squalling damsel, a study of calm in the face of her histrionics. Elizabeth was mightily impressed that he managed to contain his

exasperation to the faintest of eye rolls, a mere flick of his gaze to the heavens for strength. “All will be well. Come, take my hand.”

“Oh dear, I am not certain my legs will support me, sir!”

“Here, you may lean on me.”

“It might be best if you were to carry me back to shore...”

A smirk in Elizabeth’s direction only redoubled her amusement. Miss Bingley clearly thought herself quite clever in her machinations, even as Mr Darcy flinched back a step. The next moment he sighed, set his shoulders, and bent down. At least he will have me as a witness to his gentlemanly intentions.

Beside her on the bank, Freddy whined and pranced restlessly. Elizabeth reached out a hand to soothe the Great Dane, but she was too late; Freddy slipped out from beneath her fingers and launched herself into the water after her master. Elizabeth winced at the pitch of Miss Bingley’s resultant screech as the pair were both showered from the dog’s clumsy advance.

“Freddy, no! No—back, back I say!” While attempting to keep Freddy at bay with one hand, Mr Darcy reached down to help Miss Bingley to her feet with the other. At last, the panicked lady took it and allowed him to pull her upright and out of Freddy’s range. “Down, girl!”

Miss Bingley clutched at him, but Mr Darcy remained preoccupied with his dog, who was now jumping at him as if enticing him to play. “Thank goodness you were here, Mr Darcy! I am so grateful for your quick thinking.”

Mr Darcy seemed not to have heard her. “Freddy, sit.” The dog splashed down on her haunches but wriggled about as if ready to jump up again in an instant.

Miss Bingley's tone became more urgent as her ire visibly rose. "Mr Darcy?"

Again, he overlooked her in favour of redirecting Freddy. "Good dog. Go to Miss Bennet." Mr Darcy pointed at Elizabeth where she stood on the bank, and the dog tipped her head in that direction.

Elizabeth swallowed her mirth and called to the Great Dane. "Here, Freddy. Here, girl."

Freddy looked between Mr Darcy and Elizabeth as if struggling to decide between them.

"Mr Darcy ."

"A moment, Miss Bingley—Freddy, go to Miss Bennet."

A fleeting expression of annoyance passed over Miss Bingley's face before she pressed the back of a hand to her forehead and exclaimed, "Oh dear, I feel the faintness coming upon me!"

A moment later, she tottered and made as if to collapse into a startled Mr Darcy's arms, but Freddy at last made her choice and determined that Miss Bingley would receive the attention she so craved. The dog lurched forwards and injected herself between the lady and her master, rearing up onto her hind legs to plant her paws upon Miss Bingley's shoulders. In doing so, Freddy redirected her fall and sent the lady tumbling backwards into the water once more. She came up sputtering and wailing anew.

Mr Darcy pulled Freddy back by her collar, begging Miss Bingley's pardon even as he scolded his dog. "Miss Bingley, I do apologise—Freddy, sit ."

Elizabeth's hands again flew up to cover her mouth, acting only just in time to prevent peals of laughter from spilling out of her. In the midst of dragging Freddy away from the hapless Miss Bingley, Mr Darcy shot her a droll look, which suggested he understood her struggles, and she nearly came undone regardless.

Fortunately, distraction in the form of the rest of their party arrived just at that moment and prevented an unfeeling display on her part.

“Good God, what happened here?” cried Mr Bingley. He and Mr Gardiner had reached the scene first, followed at a somewhat more sedate pace by Mr Hurst, with the ladies trailing along behind. The former pair launched immediately into the water to help Mr Darcy, while Mr Hurst shouted advice from the shore. His wife stood anxiously by his side, wringing her hands and observing the gentlemen struggling to reach her sister as Mr Darcy held Freddy at bay.

The three other ladies begged Elizabeth to explain, which she mastered herself enough to do after several deep breaths. “It seems that Miss Bingley lost her footing and suffered a mishap,” she offered succinctly as the lady was again lifted out of the water. Her brother assisted her to dry land and handed her off to the waiting Mrs Hurst, though she continued to dart calculating glances at Mr Darcy. He, preoccupied with dragging Freddy from the lake, seemed not to notice.

Miss Darcy's lips quivered as she said, “Poor Miss Bingley.”



### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

After they had successfully fished Miss Bingley from the lake, the rest of the party had naturally dissolved. Darcy, Bingley, and Mr Gardiner all required a change of clothing every bit as much as the distressed damsel, and while the former two might have adjourned to the house temporarily, the latter was required to return to his Lambton lodgings for the purpose. With Mrs Hurst, Mrs Annesley, and Georgiana all attending the overwrought Miss Bingley, that left only Hurst to entertain Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner, so it was deemed best for them to accompany Mr Gardiner back to the Blue Lady.

Darcy was disappointed to bid Elizabeth farewell so soon, especially after that promising interlude disrupted by Miss Bingley's clumsiness, but at least he could console himself with seeing her on the morrow. It had been a stroke of genius on his part to suggest a tea party for the ladies, if he said so himself. So long as he remained dry in his beloved's presence—a state that seemed to elude him lately—he would consider the gathering a success. If he were truly fortunate, perhaps he would be afforded the opportunity to resume their truncated walk. There were numerous secluded spots in the gardens where they would be protected from the interruptions of meddling houseguests.

“How good it is to sit down at a table!” opined Miss Bingley as they gathered for dinner that evening. She spoke as if she had been following the drum for a twelvemonth instead of enduring a genteel picnic at a lavish estate. Admittedly, the fête had not ended well for her, but then she had complained of her suffering from the beginning.

The lady's comment was met with acknowledging smiles and nods but was otherwise disregarded in favour of their meal. This seemed more than enough encouragement for her to elaborate on her grievances, for she proceeded to lament, at length, every particular that had made her experience so harrowing throughout the entire soup course and into the fish. The heat, the insects, the mud—in general, the outdoorsy-ness of it all.

“Not that I blame you, dear Miss Darcy!” she said once she had at last exhausted her list, patting his sister patronisingly upon the hand. She glanced Darcy's way as she did this, as if anticipating praise. “You have not had the advantage of being out much in society yet, as is good and proper for a girl your age. For your next attempt, I have some ideas, such as providing proper seating for your guests.”

Georgiana thanked her demurely and withdrew her hand, returning to her trout. Darcy gritted his teeth against the suggestion that Miss Bingley mind her own business and stop pestering his sister with her particular ‘ideas’ of what an elegant hostess should and should not do. What did the daughter of a tradesman truly know about being the mistress of an estate? And what sort of ninny would require a table and chairs for an informal picnic? They did not stand on such ceremony at Pemberley, even if some other great houses insisted upon pomp and circumstance for each inconsequential foray out of doors. The Darcys were not of the opinion that every occasion must require an elaborate production. Miss Bingley obviously believed otherwise, but he was of no mind to indulge her outlandish expectations of what a summer house party should be.

Mrs Hurst, to her credit, seemed to recognise his irritation where her sister did not and made the effort to change the subject. “I understand that the gentlemen are to have a fishing party.” This was, of course, well known to everyone at the table, but it was a far better discussion point than listening to Miss Bingley carp.

Her husband, who had retained steadfast focus on his plate during Miss Bingley's

monopoly of the conversation, perked up and confirmed this with enthusiasm. “And if Gardiner is half the angler he claims, it ought to be quite an excursion.”

Bingley seconded this notion, while his younger sister snorted and rolled her eyes. Blessedly, she did not actually say anything, but her opinion was apparent despite the lack. Darcy inhaled deeply to stave off his mounting frustration with her.

“I think we have everything in hand for the ladies’ tea party as well,” Mrs Annesley said, nodding at her young charge to elaborate.

Georgiana darted a wary glance at Miss Bingley. “Yes, I believe we shall host it on the terrace off the music room. It is recently redecorated, thanks to my brother’s generosity”—she smiled at Darcy, and some of the tension in his chest loosened—“and has a lovely view of the gardens. It also has the added benefit of allowing the gentlemen to join us directly. Is the stream not just beyond the lawn, a little into the woods?”

Darcy nodded and swallowed his mouthful. “Indeed it is. So long as we do not fall in...” Belatedly becoming aware of his accidental jest, he paused to clear his throat, hiding his emerging smile behind his fist. He noticed he was not the only one at the table forced to similar manoeuvres in order to cover their amusement. Miss Bingley was not amongst them. “Excuse me. That is, so long as we are presentable, I see no reason we ought not. You can expect our appearance a little past one.”

Miss Bingley sat stiffly in her chair as a servant reached around her to remove her plate and replace it with a clean one. This being an informal dinner, dessert was next to be served, and Darcy was glad of it. He longed for the separation of the sexes if it meant a reprieve from his presumptuous houseguest.

They ate their syllabub largely in silence, all of them likely feeling it to be the safest choice. An occasional compliment to Darcy’s cook was offered, but otherwise the

gathered company seemed to agree that it was wiser to say nothing than to prolong the awkward tension that had plagued them throughout the meal.

All save Miss Bingley, apparently. “I must say, I am glad we shall be partaking in more civilised activities tomorrow, even if we are still plagued by certain...nuisances.”

Darcy’s spoon fell to his dish with a clatter, his patience entirely at an end. “Miss Bingley, I will thank you to keep your opinions on any additional guests to yourself. It is not your prerogative to pass judgment on anyone I see fit to invite to my home.”

“Oh, but surely you can plainly see how Eliza and her grasping relations are taking advantage?—”

“I see nothing of the sort,” he interrupted. Miss Bingley’s teeth came back together with a satisfying clack. “Miss Bennet and the Gardiners have behaved with the utmost civility and decorum whilst they have been with us”— which is far more than could be said of you, madam —“and I will hear no unfounded disparagement of their characters. Have I made myself entirely clear?”

Miss Bingley swallowed tightly and offered a single nod.

“Good. The subject is now closed.”

The silence following Darcy’s pronouncement became the ringing sort in which the lack of noise was somehow more pronounced than the presence of it. Bingley sat to his left red-faced and mortified, Mrs Hurst was biting her lip so hard he feared it might start bleeding, and even Hurst appeared uneasy. Miss Bingley herself had turned a shade of puce that did not flatter her gown at all, and her expression was hardened into the sort of rictus that might have been painful. He could not say she looked chastened, but she was certainly angry.

Darcy had never held any great opinion of Miss Bingley, but he had never before seen her act with such flagrant disregard for propriety. To openly insult someone else's guests was the height of bad manners, and he had thought her more capable of controlling herself than that, if only for the sake of maintaining her own dignity. He could only assume that paying court to Elizabeth right in front of her had made the lady desperate, and desperate people often resorted to desperate measures. Well, she will not succeed with me. I shall instruct Bailey to keep the spare key to my chambers on his person at all times, and should Miss Bingley still make some sort of attempt to compromise my honour, she will learn to regret it.

He returned to his syllabub, and it was no more than a handful of minutes later that Georgiana, without even being reminded of her duty by Mrs Annesley, rose and led the ladies out of the room. Good riddance.

Caroline stalked from the dining room with as much poise and nobility as she could muster, but she still felt the sting of Mr Darcy's chastisement in her cheeks. How could he? Do Eliza's 'fine eyes' really bewitch him so much that he cannot see what is right in front of him? Apparently so.

Mr Darcy's set down was merely the final blow to a terrible, no good, exceptionally bad day. Not only had two of her most favourite gowns been utterly ruined—no matter what Warren said, Caroline could still see the splotch of strawberry jam, and no amount of awkward embroidery would successfully disguise it—but she had been forced to witness Mr Darcy pitch woo at Eliza. She had made a good beginning in successfully keeping them apart, but the moment her back was turned they had disappeared into that wretched willow grove and somehow ended up in one another's arms. Worse, she had been utterly humiliated by her ungainly fall and had not even Mr Darcy carrying her from the water to show for it. She intended to plead a headache and retire to her room as soon as possible so that she might have time to herself to consider what must be done to repair the damage wrought.

Before she could advance more than a few steps down the corridor, the familiar grasp of her elder sister's hand on her elbow drew her to a halt. Oh, wonderful. Now I shall be subjected to Louisa's strictures on deportment as well.

Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley paused ahead of them and turned round, but Louisa forced a smile for their benefit. "We shall be along directly. I merely wish a quick word with my sister."

Caroline sneered. She doubted very much that Louisa meant to be quick with her remonstrations.

Once the young lady of the house and her companion had disappeared into the withdrawing room, Louisa's pleasant veneer was dropped, and she presented Caroline with the full expression of her wrath. She was almost inclined to shrink back at the unmitigated fury. "How dare you expose yourself in such a manner? Has your mind been addled by your ridiculous pursuit of Mr Darcy?"

"My mind is perfectly sound!"

"Then why, for heaven's sake, did you provoke Mr Darcy? Even were he not obviously infatuated with Eliza, he could never have allowed any insult of his guests to stand. If nothing else, doing so questions his judgment, and men prefer to consider themselves the superior intellect."

Caroline had not considered that aspect when she had disparaged Eliza and the Gardiners, but Louisa was correct. Men did like to think well of themselves, even—or perhaps especially—when they were wrong.

"All you have achieved is to make yourself appear the harridan. Even were Mr Darcy inclined in your favour before this, you have disqualified yourself from his consideration with how you have behaved. Not just this evening but since we arrived

at Pemberley. I am absolutely disgusted with you!”

Caroline snatched her arm away, rubbing at the soreness Louisa’s fingers left behind. “You make far too much of this, I am sure. Once Mr Darcy?”

“No.” Louisa cut her off by stepping forwards and raising a finger beneath Caroline’s nose. She shook it at her sister with tightly reined fury. “You are done chasing after Mr Darcy. Assuming he does not throw us from the estate after breakfast, you will begin comporting yourself in a submissive, ladylike manner and leave him be for the remainder of our stay here. Once we return to London for the Season, we shall seek out a gentleman who might actually have you and let Mr Darcy pursue Eliza or whomsoever he pleases without further interference. Am I rightly understood?”

“You have no right to make such demands of me!”

“Au contraire, ma soeur,” Louisa retorted. “I am your elder sister and have every right to demand things of you. Even if I did not, Charles does, and you are not the only one capable of influencing him. After the way you have embarrassed him tonight before his greatest friend, do not think he will take your part against mine or that he will wish to retain you as his hostess. None of us can afford your ill-bred behaviour if we are to raise ourselves in this world, and I shall make sure he sees that.”

Caroline’s jaw was clenched so tightly that her teeth began to ache. “I will not forget this betrayal. When I am married and far out of your reach, you will come to regret this day.”

“I would not do anything stupid, were I you,” Louisa cautioned fiercely. “I am telling you now that you cannot count on me, Hurst, or Charles to support you if you overstep.”

She was astonished for a moment at the vehemence of her sister's warning but shook it off in the next. "Very well, then. Do not expect an invitation to the wedding."

The lights along the corridor all dimmed simultaneously, casting the sisters into temporary darkness. They flared back to life an instant later as if nothing unusual had occurred. Caroline rubbed at her arms as a sudden, inexplicable chill assailed her. This house is terribly draughty!

Louisa blinked uncomprehendingly at the nearest wall sconce before turning back to Caroline. "I shall be speaking to Charles about sending you off to Aunt Bingley as soon as the gentlemen have finished their port. Do not test my resolve in this matter, or it shall go ill for you."

"The day I am fearful of our brother's wrath is the day I start believing that Pemberley itself means to eject me, for the latter is far more likely."

With this final word, she pivoted on her heel and retreated, leaving Louisa to make whatever excuse she chose on Caroline's behalf. If her family were set on underestimating her abilities, then she would just have to prove them wrong. She needed to speak to Warren immediately and begin setting plans in motion.



### CHAPTER NINETEEN

Elizabeth looked up at the sky, which until that moment had seemed entirely benign. Now, she glared at the light shading of grey in the clouds with suspicion. “Was that thunder?”

Mrs Gardiner, freshly emerged from the carriage, followed Elizabeth’s gaze with a thoughtful furrow in her brow. “I think you are mistaken, my dear. I did not hear anything.”

“Perhaps I was.”

Shaking off her concern, Elizabeth smoothed her gown—the cabbage-green, flower-sprigged muslin she wished she had worn when Mr Darcy called upon her at the Blue Lady—and followed her aunt up the front steps to where the butler awaited them. He bowed deeply, welcomed them back to Pemberley, and led them directly into the house. “Tea is being served on the back terrace,” he informed them as they trailed in his wake. “Off the music room.”

Elizabeth recalled the music room from their tour earlier in the week and experienced a thrill of anticipation to see it again, for it boasted the most wonderful view of the formal gardens and wooded hills behind the house. They had not lingered there, what with so many other rooms to visit, but she would have been happy to remain longer.

As the butler announced them to the ladies within, Elizabeth again looked about her with admiration. It was a large room done up in soothing shades of green offset by cream and the occasional note of beige. There were two seating areas: one clustered

near the pianoforte to form an audience for the performer, the other in a semi-circle before the white marble hearth at the other end of the room. Mrs Gardiner joined Mrs Annesley at the former, while the superior sisters and Miss Darcy were arranged elegantly about the latter. Every piece had obviously been selected with care and made a delightful tableau, marred only by Miss Bingley—who glanced at Elizabeth and distinctly cut her—in her amber and puce-striped day gown. She quite ruins the scene, Elizabeth thought with a rueful chuckle.

The most impressive feature of the room was the bank of windows that comprised most of the far wall. The curtains—which so perfectly matched the furniture that the same fabric must have been used for both—were a heavy silk damask in the most lovely shade of mossy green, tied back with ivory tassels to allow natural light in. Sheer gauzy fabric blunted the glare of sunlight from without and danced whimsically in the breeze let in by the open glass doors at the centre. And through those doors...

“Oh my!” Elizabeth found herself entranced by the call of nature beyond. The wind billowing the gossamer curtains seemed to whisper to her, beckoning her forth, and her feet obeyed its persuasion. When she emerged onto the terrace, her breath caught. ‘Tis fairyland!

Servants bustled about her, industriously setting out the accoutrements for tea, but she hardly noticed them, so absorbed in the panorama of natural splendour was she. The terrace overlooked the most fantastical garden she had ever seen. At Rosings Park, which could boast being settled amidst the ‘Garden of England’, the shrubberies and flowers were all confined to geometric patterns designed by the hand of man—or Lady Catherine herself, more like. Here, at Pemberley, wildness was allowed to flourish alongside purpose, and the effect was spectacular.

Steps on either side of the terrace led down to a gravel path, which wound throughout the scene. Closest to the house and immediately before her was a neatly cut rectangle surrounded by shrubbery, which comprised the rose garden. An arch festooned with

white roses was the entry, and beyond it were blooms of every shade and variety, with buzzing insects flitting from one to another in a hedonistic feast. With the heat of the summer sun and a light breeze to assist, the fragrance wafting from it was heady and nearly drugging. Elizabeth closed her eyes a moment and inhaled.

She could not resist the view for long, however, and opened them to take in more of the picturesque vista. The path wound both through and around the rose garden, though outside the shrubbery the garden beds became less tame and far more wild. They were well tended, that was obvious, but there seemed to be little attempt to curtail them into polite formation. Explosions of lavender, hyacinths, primrose, honeysuckle, daisies...so many varieties that Elizabeth could not possibly name them all. She could spend hours wandering about and cataloguing the different species before ever so much as leaving the path!

Far off into the distance, beyond any semblance of order, rose the high wooded hill she had seen on her first descent into the valley in which Pemberley lay. It was green and verdant, full of life she could not presently see but instead hear. Is that flowing water?

“Are you a great admirer of flowers, Miss Bennet?”

Elizabeth blinked and turned to find Miss Darcy standing at her side, twiddling her fingers again. “Miss Darcy! Forgive me for not greeting you properly when I arrived. My attention was caught by...this. It is magnificent.”

“Do not trouble yourself—I am not offended. We are very proud of it. My mother planned the rose garden—it was a hobby of hers to tend them herself, I understand—but insisted that the rest be allowed to grow free of restraint. Aside from the kitchen garden, which is round the side of the house, it is the only part of the grounds that is assiduously tended.”

“Do you also spend time amongst the roses, Miss Darcy?”

The young lady’s smile was soft and distant as her gaze perused the view. “Yes, it makes me feel close to my mother. She died shortly after I was born, you see.”

Elizabeth, despite the contentious relationship she had with her own mother, was nevertheless blessed to have her alive. Sympathy for the girl beside her welled up in her breast, and she touched her arm. “I am sorry for your loss.”

Miss Darcy shook her head, dispelling the sadness in her eyes. “It was so long ago...I do not even remember her. My brother says I am her image, though.”

“I have seen a likeness of Lady Anne and am inclined to agree.”

“Thank you, Miss Bennet.”

Feeling as if a change of subject was in order, Elizabeth said, “I am surprised you are not more frequently distracted by this oasis. How can you ever tear yourself away to attend to anything else? I would be forever walking the grounds and neglecting all my duties.”

Miss Darcy giggled lightly. “I suppose I am used to it, though I do find myself occasionally caught by whatever flies past the window. I rather enjoy watching the birds.”

“They are pleasant creatures, are they not?” Elizabeth again turned to face the aspect, sighing wistfully. “Magnificent.”

A minute or so passed in companionable silence before Elizabeth recalled a query she meant to ask. “Tell me, is that the sound of rushing water I hear? Or is my mind playing tricks on me?”

Miss Darcy shook her head, her blonde curls bouncing against her cheeks. “No, the stream that feeds the lake in front of the house runs downhill through the woods. Just there.” She pointed into the distance to Elizabeth’s left, where a stone bridge arched across a ribbon of water that was too far away to see clearly.

Elizabeth walked up to the balustrade, planted her hands against it, and leant forwards to give herself a better view. Just past the bridge, where the forest began, there was a charming waterfall cascading down the face of a short cliff. “Oh yes, I see it now. How lovely.” She almost asked whether she might be granted the privilege of walking that path, but she did not wish to presume. The Darcys had welcomed her to Pemberley, it was true, but unless Mr Darcy renewed his addresses...

“The gentlemen are down there now fishing for trout. Perhaps, after they have joined us for refreshments, my brother might take you on a tour of the gardens since they interest you so.”

A hot flush erupted across Elizabeth’s face; could Miss Darcy somehow read her thoughts? The girl wore a carefully innocent expression, but that in and of itself was suspicious. Does she know something of Mr Darcy’s feelings?

“So, Miss Eliza,” came the unwelcome voice of Miss Bingley as that lady strolled out onto the terrace and inserted herself between Elizabeth and Miss Darcy. Overhead, Elizabeth thought she heard another gurgle of thunder, though it was possible she merely imagined it because Miss Bingley always brought a sense of foreboding with her wherever she went. “I understand that you have been on an extended tour with your relations this summer. Have you been away from Hertfordshire long?”

Determined to be more polite than her self-appointed adversary, Elizabeth forced herself to smile and respond with civility. “Indeed, we have been travelling since mid-July. It has been a lovely trip full of interesting sights.”

“And I am sure you have seen many of them on foot,” replied the lady, the simper in her voice at odds with the smirk on her face. The dusky orange feathers in her hair whipped about in the increasing wind as she slyly enquired, “Have you ruined many hems since leaving home?”

Elizabeth was inclined to make sardonic mention of the number of gowns Miss Bingley had ruined only yesterday, but she held it in with effort. If the woman thought that ‘Miss Eliza’ would suddenly become embarrassed by her countrified habits, she was sorely mistaken. “Only the usual number. We have been lucky to have dry weather since entering Derbyshire.” A more distinct rumble of thunder punctuated her remark, causing the three ladies to look skyward.

With only fluffy white clouds grazing slowly across the sky like a field of docile sheep, Miss Bingley apparently dismissed the sound as nothing. “How fortunate. I can see from your colour that you have been enjoying the sun very much. ”

Elizabeth accepted that it was so, admitting further, “I have, as you know, a great love of the out of doors. They have tempted me often on our trip. I was just telling Miss Darcy”—she nodded to the girl on the other side of Miss Bingley—“that I would love to stroll Pemberley’s gardens.”

“Who would not? I do admire roses, and these are kept so neat and tidy. Miss Darcy must be commended for her efforts. I daresay I should like to take my daily constitutional there—with a parasol to protect my complexion, of course.”

“Of course.” Elizabeth pressed her lips together lest she give away her amusement at Miss Bingley’s expense. It would be such a shame if she were to grow as coarse and brown as I.

“Pemberley is the most marvellous place in the world, is it not?” Miss Bingley sighed. Rather than cast her covetous gaze out over the park, she turned to face the

manor. “To live in a house like this... You are a fortunate young woman, Miss Darcy, to be so surrounded by elegance and refinement, such ease and luxury. One need never worry about anything here.”

“I would not say that,” replied Miss Darcy uncomfortably. “I do not believe any place is entirely free from difficulty.”

“Oh, but Pemberley must be the exception! What could trouble you here?”

Elizabeth fought the urge to grimace at Miss Bingley’s obtuseness; who could ask such a question of an orphaned girl, well into the age when a mother’s guidance would be most wanted? No amount of money could replace what the Darcys had lost. Further, as the daughter of a tradesman, it seemed the lady had no true sense of what it took to successfully manage a property of this size, both for their own benefit and that of those within their purview.

As it was not her place to chide Miss Bingley for the former, Elizabeth bent her mind towards enlightening the lady on the latter. Stroking the smooth, sun-warmed sandstone of the balustrade beneath her hand, she said, “Certainly, there is nothing wanting in Pemberley. It is a perfect reflection of the land that surrounds it, as well as the individuals who oversee its care. That said, it takes great dedication to run an estate, and even more to see it thrive. There are, no doubt, many who are dependent upon Pemberley, and the pressure to superintend their welfare must be enormous. The Darcys must be commended for the generations of toil and sacrifice that have made it into what you see before you.”

“That is exactly what my brother says,” Miss Darcy said, little above a whisper. “That we are merely stewards of this land and have a great responsibility to it.”

Miss Bingley’s agreement was somewhat stilted. “Yes, quite.”

Elizabeth discreetly sighed. It seems that Miss Bingley will only see what she wishes to see and not what actually is. I pity her, for she is destined to be disappointed in life.



### CHAPTER TWENTY

While Elizabeth had been staring with wide-eyed wonder at the gardens, the servants had been hard at work preparing a feast of delicacies for their consumption. There were cakes, biscuits, sandwiches, tarts, jams, toast, numerous seasonal fruits—but no pineapple, to Miss Bingley’s lament—and all manner of delights for them to sample. Elizabeth felt assured that there would be quite the bacchanal below stairs later because there was no possible way that they could consume even half as much as was laid out, even after the gentlemen joined them.

A quick glance across the park to where the stone bridge perched in the distance revealed no approaching fishermen. Tamping down her disappointment, Elizabeth set about filling her plate.

Once all the ladies had selected their food, they adjourned to smaller tables set out across the terrace. The married ladies settled at one, while the unmarried took another. For some time, there was no conversation while they ate, but at length Miss Bingley’s appetite was apparently satisfied enough to venture a new topic.

“So, Miss Eliza, how is your family at home? I trust they are well?”

It was a common enquiry and seemed innocuous enough, but there was a certain glint in Miss Bingley’s eye that put Elizabeth on her guard. She swallowed and replied, “They are very well, I thank you.”

“The last I saw of them, they were very... energetic , particularly around the officers. I have heard that the militia has been quartered at Brighton for the summer. That must

be a great loss for your family.”

Ah, so that is her game. If she hopes to discompose me, she will have to do better than these paltry attacks. “We are enduring the deprivation as best we can.”

“I am sure. Though I understood there were certain members of the regiment who made themselves particularly agreeable to the ladies of Meryton. Was there not one you were fond of?” Miss Bingley asked her question with the air of one who already knows the answer and only wishes to have her suspicions confirmed.

Elizabeth clenched her teeth together at this oblique reference to Mr Wickham. Miss Bingley, she had no doubt, meant to imply that Elizabeth’s affections were already engaged elsewhere and not faithful to Mr Darcy, but she could not possibly know of Miss Darcy’s history with the miscreant. Rather than risking injury to her sweet new friend, Elizabeth determined it was time for a change in subject.

“I cannot imagine whom you mean,” Elizabeth said placidly before turning her attention to her other companion, effectively closing the conversation in Miss Bingley’s face like the slamming of a door. “Miss Darcy, you enjoy a good gothic tale. Tell me, have you heard about the ghost that supposedly haunts Pemberley’s lake? We have been told that it is quite the local legend.”

“How ridiculous! Ghosts!” Miss Bingley interjected with a sniff before Miss Darcy could respond. “Superstitious nonsense spread by servants.”

“Actually,” Miss Darcy ventured, eyes darting back and forth between the two members of her audience, “I have heard a story like that.”

“Indeed?”

“Oh yes, I heard about it from Cook, who has worked at Pemberley since she was a

girl. She knows everything about this house, possibly even more than Mrs Reynolds,” Miss Darcy affirmed with an earnest nod of her head.

“Miss Darcy,” Mrs Annesley spoke up from where she sat at the next table, a note of sternness in her voice. “I am not sure this is an appropriate subject for company.”

“Oh, but it is such a romantic story,” Miss Darcy replied, becoming animated. “Please let me tell it.”

Mrs Annesley still looked unconvinced. “It is not the sort of thing one discusses at tea.”

“I am sure there is no harm in telling a local tale,” said Elizabeth, rather eager to hear more about this supposed ghost of Pemberley. “In Meryton, we have our own story of a ghostly goat who is known to eat stockings that have not been properly put away. It only ever steals one, however, leaving numerous mismatched pairs behind.”

Most of the party laughed, save Miss Bingley and her sister. Though Mrs Hurst, Elizabeth was quite sure, hid a smile behind her teacup.

“Very well,” Mrs Annesley acceded, nodding to her charge to continue.

Miss Darcy began her tale with a relish that reminded Elizabeth of Lydia, though her voice was much quieter in the telling. “Well, this occurred so very long ago that no one is entirely sure when it happened, though I suppose it must have been sometime in the last three hundred years because Pemberley did not exist before that. In any event, it begins with a love affair between the young lady of the manor and a gentleman her parents did not approve of. The young lady loved her beau so passionately that she was willing to elope, so they made plans to meet at midnight by the lake, telling no one what they intended.”

Elizabeth flinched, better understanding Mrs Annesley's reluctance in sharing this particular yarn. She wondered whether it perhaps painted a romantic portrait of elopement, which in turn could have influenced Miss Darcy's poor decision in regard to her own misadventure. Had she seen herself as the lonely maiden of the manor and Mr Wickham as her devoted suitor?

Suddenly, in a deluge of disturbing clarity, Elizabeth began to wonder whether Mr Wickham had not been familiar with this Pemberley legend himself and used it to his advantage when convincing Miss Darcy to run off with him. Were that the case—not that it could ever be proved—he would be even more despicable than anyone had ever thought. His machinations against a tender-hearted young girl still enamoured of fairy stories and supernatural tales were nothing if not disgusting.

A low growl of thunder rolled overhead, sweeping across Pemberley like a wave over a pebbled beach. The clouds, which had once hearkened the image of ambling sheep, were knitting themselves together into what now more closely resembled a grey wool blanket. It seemed that more turbulent weather was on its way, and Elizabeth, with another concerned glance towards the stone bridge, hoped the gentlemen were at last ready to abandon their sport.

“However,” Miss Darcy continued, apparently seeing no reflection in her own behaviour and unconscious of the menacing sky above, “the bridegroom never arrived. Heartbroken, the young lady flung herself into the water and drowned, unable to carry on without her dearest love. The next morning, she was discovered missing from her room, and a search was organised, but it was too late—she was already gone. Her parents, not knowing how she ended up in the lake, assumed that it must have been a terrible accident, and she was put to rest in the family vault. Now, they say her restless spirit remains, roaming the house and grounds searching for her lost lover.” She sighed wistfully as she finished her tale.

Elizabeth, observing the warm flush and sparkle of pleasure in Miss Darcy's eyes,

could not help but feel a surge of affection for the young girl who, in spite of her own failed elopement, still held a sense of romantic wonder that had not been diminished by the selfish actions of Mr Wickham. At least he had not robbed her of that .

“Do you think it could be true, Miss Bennet?” asked Miss Darcy, her naturally soft voice quivering with emotion. She clutched her folded hands just above her heart. “If it were, how tragic and romantic!”

“Perhaps,” Elizabeth allowed, smiling indulgently. “I suppose we shall never know.”

In Elizabeth’s opinion, the story itself was incredibly silly when one considered it closely. It was more than a little fanciful, probably derived from the plot of a bad novel, and honestly lacked inherent logic. If the lovers had told no one of their pact, how had the story been passed down? Why did the young woman drown herself before ascertaining what had happened to her bridegroom? It seemed a touch precipitous to take such an irreversible step without first determining whether he had been unable to come due to an unforeseen and reasonable circumstance. What if he had simply been delayed and had been on his way? Perhaps the heroine of this tale had been enamoured of Romeo and Juliet and had taken their melodramatic ending to heart. Moreover, what had happened to the gentleman to prevent him from meeting up with his bride at the prearranged time? The story did not reveal his fate at all.

The other ladies in the circle had various responses to the legend, none of which seemed to parallel Elizabeth’s. Mrs Gardiner’s was probably the closest to her own—humour—but Mrs Annesley was clearly maintaining her previous disapproval. No doubt, in light of Miss Darcy’s own recent history, she felt that discourse about a failed elopement ending in tragic suicide should be avoided. I cannot blame her there.

Miss Bingley, true to her own character, scoffed at the young lady in the story. “Who would give up Pemberley for some penniless nobody?”

Mrs Hurst nodded in agreement, also in line with her usual practices. “So true, so true.”

All of them, however, were invested enough in debating the merits of the tale to jolt visibly when a loud crash of thunder sounded from above, rattling the dishes. Mrs Hurst shrieked at the sudden noise. Moments later, the clouds Elizabeth had been eyeing with suspicion opened up and unleashed a downpour, sending the ladies scurrying inside and a coterie of alarmed servants out onto the terrace to preserve the refreshments.

Safely indoors, Elizabeth laughed good naturedly as she withdrew her handkerchief and dabbed droplets from her face. “My goodness! That certainly came out of nowhere.”

Miss Darcy stood beside the open door, out of the way of the servants, dripping wet and gawping at the sky. She looked positively terrified, as if she had somehow invoked the deluge. “Indeed! How horrible.”

Elizabeth approached, proffering her spare handkerchief. “Do not worry, Miss Darcy. I doubt you have stirred up any spirits. The weather merely has a theatrical sense of timing. It is almost as if a stage hand waits just out of sight, ready to stir up a tempest on cue.” A weak chuckle was her reward.

Miss Bingley scowled and fussed at the minor damage done to her appearance, complaining loudly, “Another frock ruined!” From what Elizabeth could see, her gown had retained no substantial damage—a shame, really, given how ugly it was—but her feathers were another matter; they sagged over her tightly curled coiffure like yellowed, wilting lettuce. Beside her, Mrs Hurst and the other matrons more calmly dried themselves with towels efficiently provided by a pair of maids.

Within, there was little cause for concern, but without was another matter.

Apprehension twisted Elizabeth's stomach as she squinted across the sodden lawn for any sign of the gentlemen. Yes—there! Several figures raced towards them, having breached the crest of a slight rise that existed between the stream and the manor. One of them was a lumbering, four-legged creature—Freddy, she presumed—who seemed reluctant to follow the lead of her handler. She stopped several times, requiring said handler to cajole her forwards, before at last being tugged by the collar the last several yards to the garden path.

It was as they drew nearer that Elizabeth realised there were only three men when there ought to have been four. Surely the one leading Freddy must be Mr Darcy, but who was missing? Had any of the gentlemen suffered some sort of calamity out in the elements? Was it her beloved uncle or Jane's Mr Bingley? She was greatly tempted to rush out herself to sate her anxious curiosity, but of course that would have been foolish. Still, the anticipation was difficult to bear .

With the darkness of the clouds and the punishing sheets of rain coming down, Elizabeth was unable to determine the identity of the absent gentleman until the party was clambering up the terrace steps. Mr Gardiner was in the lead with Mr Bingley and Freddy directly behind him, whilst Mr Hurst availed himself of the opposite staircase. Contrary to her earlier assumptions, it was not Mr Darcy leading his dog through the storm but his friend.

But where is Mr Darcy? Elizabeth's worry was growing apace, and her pulse quickened accordingly.

Mr Hurst was the first to dash inside, with the other gentlemen hard upon his heels. Mr Bingley tugged Freddy by her collar, but she seemed most reluctant to come in and whined in protest. The poor beast attempted to throw her weight into the effort, but her paws could gain no purchase on the slick tile, and Mr Bingley, with the assistance of Mr Gardiner, was able to lug her indoors despite her protestations. The servants, having already saved the feast, closed and latched the doors behind them.

Wind and rain pushed back but were no match for the protective force of Pemberley.

“It is raining buckets out there!” announced Mr Bingley cheerfully as he released Freddy’s collar and slumped to the floor, panting from his exertions. The dog went immediately to the glass doors and peered out into the storm, still keening for her master.

Mr Hurst stepped around his brother-in-law and trudged through the room without acknowledging anyone, even his wife. Mrs Hurst scolded him regardless for frightening them all half to death, little though he seemed to hear her. He was gone within seconds out into the corridor and, presumably, upstairs to his assigned chambers.

Mr Gardiner laughed as his own wife fussed over him, assuring her, “Now, Maddie, a little summer shower never hurt anyone. I shall be right as rain, you will see.” He winked at her.

“Oh, Edward, that was terrible!”

Elizabeth, seeing no amusement in the situation, wrung her hands and blurted, rather impatiently, “But where is Mr Darcy? Surely he was with you.”

“Him?” replied Mr Gardiner, still in the mood to tease. “I am sure he has gone for another swim. Do not fret, Lizzy.”

Elizabeth scowled at her uncle, feeling it was hardly the time to joke, and Mr Bingley stepped in to resolve the mystery. “He is on his way, Miss Elizabeth. He sent us on ahead and stayed behind to see to one of the servants who had slipped and fallen into the mud. Twisted his ankle, poor chap.”

“Why should Mr Darcy do such a thing?” Miss Bingley demanded, rushing over to



the window to peer out, even though visibility was extremely low. “The clumsy oaf should be more careful and not expect his master to risk his own health for his sake.”

Mr Bingley frowned at his younger sister. “That is hardly how it was, Caroline. The man had an accident, and Darcy was the one closest to render aid. I like to think I would do the same.”

“Oh, Charles— gah !”

Whatever scold Miss Bingley was about to issue was cut short by Freddy, who chose that moment to shake herself dry. As the one closest to the dog, it was Miss Bingley who suffered the worst of it, though Mr Bingley, Elizabeth, and the Gardiners were also required to shield their faces from the onslaught of droplets.

Just like that, Mr Darcy’s travails were apparently forgotten by Miss Bingley, who screeched in a most unladylike fashion and scolded Freddy for being a ‘dirty beast’ and her brother for bringing the dog indoors in the first place. Mrs Hurst joined the dispute with the apparent intent to calm her sister—an endeavour that only bore fruit once she led Miss Bingley from the room.

The squabbling was largely lost on Elizabeth as she squinted out into the haze of rain beyond the window. Surely Mr Darcy would return soon, and safely? Freddy, the dear soul, leant against her leg and whined piteously for comfort. She provided it with a weak smile and a scratch behind the Great Dane’s ears.

A soft touch to her shoulder incited Elizabeth to turn. Miss Darcy, wearing a look of commiseration, said, “My brother will be perfectly well, I promise you. The stables are not so very far from the trout stream, and he knows better than to dawdle in a storm. I am certain he will return to the house forthwith.”

Not wishing to distress her hostess, Elizabeth nodded and proffered a tight smile. “I

am sure you are correct, Miss Darcy.”

“Come,” the girl said, stepping away. “We could all do with a change of clothes. We are not the same size, but I am sure we can find something that will suit.”

Elizabeth was almost to the door when she remembered Freddy. She called to the dog, who glanced betwixt her and the window before sitting down where she was. Elizabeth left the Great Dane to her sentry and followed Miss Darcy upstairs.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

H ours later, the storm had yet to abate, so Elizabeth and the Gardiners were invited to remain for dinner. There was little hope that they would make it safely back to the inn afterwards, so they were assigned bedchambers in anticipation of staying overnight as well.

Unfortunately, with all their clothes back at their lodgings, they were in no way prepared to dress for the meal. The Gardiners, being similar in stature to the Hursts, experienced no difficulty in borrowing something suitable, but Elizabeth did not fare so well. Miss Bingley—not that she was inclined to supply her self-appointed rival with any of her precious gowns—was significantly taller and a great deal thinner than she, Mrs Hurst rather plumper, and Miss Darcy was somewhere in between the two yet still somehow vastly different from Elizabeth. Given her choices, she had determined Miss Darcy’s offering to be the best possible fit.

Even so, Miss Darcy was taller than Elizabeth; thus, the lovely evening gown so graciously loaned to her dragged on the floor as she moved. She attempted to alleviate this condition by gathering fistfuls of extra fabric and lifting it upwards, freeing her feet to walk unencumbered, but there remained a slight train of white that followed Elizabeth everywhere. She hoped she would not ruin the dress before she could return it.

Elizabeth paused to appraise her appearance in the mirror above her dressing table before she descended to dinner. She appeared pale and fretful, but her hair had been neatly arranged by Miss Darcy’s lady’s maid—another generous loan—and she was swathed in richer fabrics than she was generally accustomed to. The dress was pure

white satin with delicately embroidered indigo forget-me-nots and anemones descending the skirt along the front panel. Otherwise, it was largely free of ornamentation, save for a whisper of eyelet lace around the neck, puffed sleeves, and hem. In short, the perfect garment for a sheltered maiden such as the genteel and delicate Miss Georgiana Darcy of Pemberley yet not entirely suited to Elizabeth herself. Perhaps it was because she was several years older than the girl who owned it, or it might be the greater knowledge of herself and the world she had gained over the past year in her interactions with Mr Darcy.

“Or,” she admitted to her reflection with a self-deprecating huff, tugging at the snug bodice to rearrange her...self, “perhaps it is just too tight!”

Thoughts of Mr Darcy, who at last report was still out in the swirling tempest that had descended upon Pemberley, dropped the smile from her face in an instant. Was he well? Had anyone gone out to look for him? The household remained calm, so she hoped there was no cause for alarm, but...

Creak .

Elizabeth looked to the door that would open out into the corridor, her increasingly wary mind wishing to be sure that it was as closed as the maid had left it before returning to Miss Darcy. The opening remained sealed, and she released a tense breath.

Perturbed by the noise and her own thoughts, Elizabeth decided that it was time to go down to dinner, ready or not. Even Miss Bingley would be welcome company when compared to the spectres that supposedly haunted these hallowed halls.

“Then again, perhaps not,” she muttered to herself as she turned the knob and released herself into the corridor.

Outside her assigned chamber, all was as quiet as it should be. There was no one about, the other guests having noisily passed her door as she finished stuffing her bosom into her dress; even the servants had apparently found work elsewhere. The only sound that reached her ears was the soft pitter-patter of her own slippers upon the carpet. Amazing how, in a house so full, I should frequently find myself completely alone.

Pit-pat-squish, pit-pat-squish, pit-pat-squish.

Elizabeth halted in the middle of the hall, arrested there by the sound of approaching footsteps. There was something strange about them; they sounded...wet, like her muddy boots on Longbourn's kitchen floor.

Her imagination seized upon the image of a ghastly pale figure, dripping lake water as she stalked the halls, willow vines tangled in her long, silvery tresses. A chill suddenly accosted her, raising the fine hairs on her bare arms.

Elizabeth shook the notion away and scurried forwards, intent on reaching the stairs quickly and returning to the comfort of people down below. The hem of her borrowed gown hissed against the weave of the carpet as it skimmed over the floor at an accelerated pace. She kept her eyes squeezed tightly shut, refusing to even so much as glance at a door or window as she passed them. If she could but?—

“Oh!” Elizabeth exclaimed, colliding with something solid with a wet smack and bouncing backwards. She landed on her bottom, her skirts flaring around her as she descended to the floor then resettling in a haphazard fashion. Above her, a figure swathed in shadow loomed.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Having been assured that his guests were comfortably ensconced in the withdrawing room off the dining parlour, Darcy had not anticipated finding anyone above stairs, save perhaps a servant. And yet, as he had crested the landing, he had collided with none other than Elizabeth, sending her toppling to the ground for the second time in recent memory. Freddy, who had refused to leave his side since he entered the house, trotted over to her and began licking her face.

“Miss Bennet! Forgive me, I was not attending to where I was going. Freddy—Freddy, no, stop that. Are you injured?” Elizabeth giggled even as Darcy hauled Freddy back by her collar, but he would not be easy until she assured him of her good health.

“I am well, sir, I promise you. Are you—” Her speech stuttered to an abrupt halt as she took him in. No doubt he was as much a sight as he had been upon their first accidental encounter, dripping mud and rainwater all over the carpets as he struggled to restrain his dog. He looked down at himself and grimaced; it was worse than he thought. His coat was absent, having been utilised as a makeshift umbrella as he had dashed from the stables to the house, and his shirtsleeves were soaked through to his skin and entirely transparent. Only his waistcoat preserved his modesty, while his breeches—slicked tight to his thighs—left little to the imagination. Good Lord, am I always to appear the fool before Elizabeth Bennet?

Worse, compared to him, Elizabeth was entirely enchanting, if not charmingly disarrayed. She had collapsed to the floor in such a fashion that her skirts revealed a glimpse of her delicately turned ankles, and her bodice...well, as a gentleman, Darcy

was required to avert his gaze lest his immodestly damp clothing reveal his ardour.

“Freddy, sit .” The Great Dane whined in complaint but did as she was told and planted her hindquarters to the carpet while Darcy moved to assist Elizabeth. After pulling her to her feet, he released her quickly lest he ruin her appearance. He then repeated his solicitous inquisition into the state of her health, his eyes roving her from top to toe—carefully skirting the plump bosom that tempted his gaze—searching for damage to her person.

She shook her head, her cheeks pink, and replied, “I am quite well, sir, I assure you. I am more worried about you.”

“Me?”

“You were out in the elements for some time. I...we were all most concerned.”

The sincerity brimming in her fine eyes confirmed the truth of her words. She was worried about me! Although Darcy did not like the notion of distressing her in any way, a certain warmth filled his breast that she had actively wished for his safe return.

Gently, daringly, Darcy reached out and clasped her hand. He gave it a squeeze and was further satisfied to see her heightened colour intensify. “I was never in any danger, I assure you.”

“Then why did you not immediately return to the house? It seemed you were out in this dreadful weather for ages.” She raised her face, fixing him with a gaze swirling with worry and censure.

“Not so very long, in actuality. I assume you were told, but one of the groundsmen tripped and twisted his ankle, rendering him unable to reach aid by himself. I assisted young Willis to the stables, where he could be tended to, then attempted to wait out

the downpour. When it seemed I would either have to brave the elements again or sleep in a pile of hay, I made a run for it.”

“Well, you look as if you have been swimming in the lake again! We really must stop meeting like this, sir.”

“I suppose you are correct,” he agreed with a chuckle, swiping his free hand through his hair to tame the rampant curls that attempted to obscure his vision.

An odd look crossed Elizabeth’s face, and she looked away, positively bashful. What did I say? Have I mortified her with my attentions? Feeling rather unsure of himself, Darcy withdrew his hand from hers and took a careful step away. “I would escort you downstairs, but I am hardly presentable at the moment. If you would be so kind, please give my excuses. I shall be as quick as possible in my ablutions.”

“Of course, sir. I shall be happy to.”

“I thank you, Miss Bennet.”

With a flickering glance at him over her shoulder, Elizabeth disappeared down the stairs, leaving Darcy standing alone in the corridor. He stepped up to the banister and watched her progression from above as she enquired of the whereabouts of the other guests from a footman and was led out of sight down the hall beneath his feet. Sighing, Darcy whistled at Freddy to follow before taking himself off to the master’s chambers for a bath and a change of attire.

Blessedly, the bathwater was awaiting him when he arrived in his bedchamber, and it was quick work to rid himself of the havoc the weather had wrought upon his appearance. Once clean, he submitted to a shave, even though he had no patience to sit still, then directed his valet to bring him the Prussian blue coat that his sister claimed offset his eyes. It was paired, at Bailey’s suggestion, with a silvery-grey



waistcoat, which under usual circumstances he would have considered too foppish for a dinner at home but was just the thing with a lady in residence he hoped to impress. Not that Elizabeth was particularly enamoured of his wardrobe the way Miss Bingley seemed to be, but Bailey insisted that it complemented his colouring.

Although Darcy had initially cursed the wretched storm that had resulted in yet another humiliating display before Elizabeth, a second consideration brought him more in charity with it. It was highly doubtful—near impossible—that the weather would improve enough to allow the Gardiners and Elizabeth to travel safely back to the inn that evening, so they would be forced to stay the night. A deliberately offhand suggestion to Bailey had resulted in the knowledge that his sister had anticipated him and already requested chambers be made up for their stranded visitors. Good. With any luck, I shall have Elizabeth all to myself in the morning.

Given his houseguests' town habits, it would presumably be only himself and his dearest, loveliest Elizabeth up and about before noon. He was unsure of the Gardiners' customary routine, but he was nearly certain that they approved of his suit and would be amenable to his proposal for a stroll through the gardens with their niece after breakfast. With no one else about, Darcy fully intended to pitch woo at Elizabeth.

It was too soon to propose again, he fully understood that, but he could at least hint at his unchanged affections and gauge her response. He hoped—oh, how desperately he hoped—that she would be receptive to getting to know one another better. Should he appear to advantage, she might even allow him to follow her back to Hertfordshire and continue his courting there. Bingley had already issued an invitation to stay at Netherfield in September, and Darcy meant to take it if there was even the slightest chance that Elizabeth would welcome his attentions. He was determined that, this time, there would be no misunderstanding between them; Elizabeth would know the deepest desires of his heart and, should Fate continue to smile upon him, perhaps return them in some small measure.

Once he was suitably attired, Darcy dismissed Bailey and made to leave. He paused by the hearth rug where Freddy snoozed comfortably and crouched to stroke her spotted head. She snorted in her sleep, and he smiled. The Great Dane was oft caught up in some sort of mischief, but she was a loyal companion. He would make sure that Cook supplied her with a soup bone on the morrow.

As he rose to leave, a glimpse of the portrait above the mantel halted him in place. It was of his parents, dearly departed, a smaller copy of the one that resided in his study on the ground floor. Not for the first time since arriving in the country, Darcy longed for their guidance.

Although he was not superstitious by nature and did not honestly believe they could hear him, Darcy turned to face the painting and said, “I intend to make Miss Elizabeth Bennet my wife. She is not so highly born as you might have preferred, nor does she come with any great wealth, but she will make the most excellent mistress of Pemberley anyone could conceive of. She is kind, warm, witty, intelligent, and Georgiana loves her. She does not take responsibility lightly, and she is loyal to a fault. I think, even with your lofty expectations for my future bride, the pair of you would approve. Even if not, I mean to have her regardless because I simply cannot countenance a life without her. Elizabeth is the only woman in the world who could possibly make me happy, and I aim to make her see that I am the only gentleman, in disposition and talents, who could make her so in return. Such is my vow, and so it shall be.”

There was no response—he did not expect one—but Darcy felt reassured all the same. Speaking aloud his intentions to his parents’ likenesses did away with any lingering fears he might have harboured over disappointing them with his marriage to Elizabeth. They were good people, good guardians, but it was up to him now to decide the manner in which he was to be most happy, regardless of their expectations.

Darcy startled at the feeling of a hand lightly touching his shoulder and whipped

about. He had formed no expectation of whom he would find but was still astonished at what he discovered.

Nothing. No one. The room was entirely empty save for him.

Deciding he must have imagined it, Darcy shook his head and left, ready to seek out Elizabeth and secure her affections.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Caroline entered the drawing room with her bearing straight and her features arranged just so in the event that Mr Darcy happened to be within. Her maid had brought her the news that the master had returned safely to the house just before she had left her rooms, so she could not be too careful in how she presented herself. She had hoped that she might encounter Mr Darcy on her way downstairs but had not been so fortunate.

And her luck continued in the same vein. The Hursts, Gardiners, Miss Darcy, Mrs Annesley, and her brother were all present but not Mr Darcy or that country chit Eliza. Caroline relaxed her stance; there was no one here to impress.

As she moved to where her sister sat, Caroline observed the room with a sneer. More blue! Did Lady Anne know any other colour? At least Egyptian blue was better than the celestial of the saloon, having the advantage of brightness if nothing else, but this space would have been far more impressive done up in a warm sienna or coquelicot with touches of gold, like her gown. Cool shades were dreary and uncultured, in her opinion. No matter, she would enjoy making Pemberley—and Mr Darcy's London house—more au courant .

"I do love the colour scheme in this room," announced Mrs Gardiner to no one in particular, proving Caroline's point; only those of the lowest spheres still preferred blue over more fashionable hues. "I should like to decorate our smaller parlour in a similar shade, though perhaps a bit lighter."

"My bedroom at home is this colour," replied Louisa, to Caroline's shock. "It is a

most soothing place to relax. I can see how it would put your guests at ease.”

“Exactly what I was thinking!”

The two ladies carried on in this manner, much to Caroline’s increasing disgust. To engage on equal footing with the wife of a tradesman was to denigrate all the advantages their parents had fought to provide them with. Even Hurst, who preferred to snore away his evenings in solitude, was speaking animatedly with Mr Gardiner about fishing. Charles would add something to the conversation here or there, which was what Caroline expected from him; but the Hursts? They had always been so much more mindful of their positions in society than this. What is it about Eliza and her lowborn relations that entrances everyone so?

Well, they would remember their dignity once Caroline induced Mr Darcy into matrimony with her feminine wiles. Regardless of what Louisa cautioned, and no matter that she did not support Caroline’s intention to better their standing in the world, it was time to act. If she waited much longer, everything she had ever wished and worked for would be snatched away by that grasping Eliza. Pemberley will be mine!

“Well, I say that we should not hold dinner for her sake.” Miss Bingley’s voice floated into the hall from the ajar drawing room door as Elizabeth approached it, careful not to tread on the length of skirt that exceeded her height. Now that Mr Darcy was returned safely to the house, her amusement at the lady’s expense had returned, and she bit her lip against the assault of laughter bubbling up within her chest. The presumptuous woman complains as if she were mistress of the house! “Guests should be courteous enough to their hosts to arrive downstairs on time for a meal. Perhaps her countrified manners are too lax for the fashionable world.”

Mr Bingley’s voice rose in Elizabeth’s defence. “You have only just appeared yourself, Caroline. I think we can grant Miss Elizabeth a few minutes’ mercy. Darcy

himself is still above stairs.”

Miss Bingley did not respond to this, but Elizabeth could imagine the haughty expression on her face as if it were before her. The lady’s nose would be tipped upwards into the air, of course, and her eyes would be half-lidded in a show of affected ennui as she gazed off into the middle distance. And her mouth—those thin, pale lips—would be pressed together into a firm line. Altogether, she would give the impression of an excessively particular cat refusing to acknowledge a dead mouse.

Elizabeth entered the room in a swish of satin and was greeted by most with warm cordiality. “Lizzy! There you are,” called Aunt Gardiner, patting the cushion on the sofa next to her. “I had wondered whether you had got lost again.”

“Not at all, Aunt,” Elizabeth replied, accepting the invitation to sit. “I happened to encounter Mr Darcy in the hall upstairs as he was returning to his chambers. He bid me to inform you all that he is quite well, though also quite wet, and will be down directly.”

Mr Gardiner’s lips pressed together, hiding his laughter. “Been swimming with the spirits again, eh?”

“Hardly,” Elizabeth replied, her own irrepressible smile spreading across her face. “But I admit that he looks as if he might have been. I daresay if the rain does not stop soon, we shall all be required to paddle about.”

“‘Swimming with the spirits again’?” Miss Darcy asked, her head tilted at a curious angle.

“Did he not tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“Why, the other day when we were touring Pemberley...”

Miss Darcy and most of the other guests seemed to enjoy Elizabeth’s recounting of her inauspicious reunion with their host. The tale demanded a great deal of animation and exaggerated expression, which she did her utmost to provide to her audience. Mr Bingley openly guffawed at his friend’s expense as Mr Gardiner added little asides to her tale—amusing details Elizabeth either forgot or glossed over and that added greatly to its hilarity. His wife shook her head and rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, but there was a thin smile upon her features that belied her exasperation. Mrs Annesley hid a grin behind her fan, and Miss Darcy, likely used to considering her brother as a paragon of all that is proud and serious, kept both hands cupped over her mouth as if she could physically contain her laughter.

Even Mr Hurst abandoned his usual laissez-faire disposition to comment, “I say, do you suppose he was attempting to catch his next meal with his bare hands?” This earned the indolent man some general laughter .

“Certainly not.”

All eyes turned to the doorway to find Mr Darcy standing within it, framed by its contours. His expression was grim.

Elizabeth bit her lip, having only considered for the first time that Mr Darcy, so unused to being teased, might not appreciate having their shared awkward experience canvassed amongst the company. Is he angry?

She glanced about the room and saw matching looks of trepidation on Miss Darcy and Mrs Annesley, chagrined smiles on the gentlemen present, another shake of the head from her aunt, and an embarrassed titter from Mrs Hurst. Miss Bingley, who had been vociferously offended on Mr Darcy’s behalf throughout the retelling, smiled as if in great anticipation of being entertained. They all turned their attention to Mr

Darcy and awaited the set down that was surely coming.

“I was trying to catch it with my teeth.”

The drawing room was silent for a long moment as Mr Darcy’s jest was absorbed by all present. Then, almost as one, the company began to laugh. Elizabeth turned to Mr Darcy and clamped her jaws together, though she knew that her mirth was shining out of her eyes. Upon his own face, a smile was sprouting as he returned her gaze. She felt a bashful flush rise in her cheeks as they continued to look at one another for some extended seconds.

“Ahem,” a stiff voice interrupted. The butler, standing just behind Mr Darcy, bowed as he announced, “Dinner is served.”

“Speaking of which,” murmured Mr Darcy loudly enough for everyone to hear and earning a few more chuckles. “Shall we?”

The occupants of the room rose, each of the gentlemen offering his escort to at least one lady, and proceeded towards the dining room. Miss Bingley hovered by the door, clearly waiting for Mr Darcy’s arm and watching as he instead approached Elizabeth.

“Miss Bennet, may I have the honour of escorting you in to dinner?” Mr Darcy asked with a bow.

Elizabeth gathered a portion of her long skirts in one fist and placed her other hand upon his proffered arm. “I would be delighted, sir.”

Hearing a snort from across the room, Elizabeth peeked over Mr Darcy’s shoulder to see Miss Bingley’s back as she stalked out with her nose in the air. Apparently, she would have Mr Darcy’s undivided attention or nothing at all.



### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“So, Mr Darcy, what have you to say about these stories we have been hearing since we arrived in Lambton? Are the hallowed halls of Pemberley truly haunted?” Mr Gardiner asked as he carved his delectably tender slice of beef into bite-sized pieces. He placed one into his mouth and sighed in appreciation for the flavour.

Mr Darcy raised his head away from Elizabeth on his left, with whom he had been indulging in quiet conversation on various subjects, and fixed her uncle with a quizzical expression. “I beg your pardon?”

“We have heard from two separate sources”—Mr Gardiner flicked a glance at Miss Darcy at the other end of the table where she was speaking quietly to Mrs Hurst—“that this great house is supposedly afflicted with spirits. What say you, sir?”

Elizabeth wished to melt into the floor. Had her silly mother been present, she could not have asked a more mortifying question. Likely excessively vulgar, but not more mortifying. She resisted the impulse to bury her face in her hands and instead focused on the delicious food she no longer wished to eat.

“I have heard several such stories, but they are all rubbish,” Mr Darcy replied. “I have resided here my entire life, save for those years I was away at school or university, and have never seen aught that I would consider supernatural. The townspeople tend to be superstitious.”

After swallowing his bite, Mr Gardiner countered, “Then how do you explain what happened to our Lizzy the other day just before she fished you from the lake, eh?”

Elizabeth could feel Mr Darcy's scrutiny burning into her scalp, but she refused to look at him. "Happened? What happened to Eli—Miss Bennet?"

"It was nothing," she hastily replied, raising her head to affix him with a smile she hoped was charming. "This sauce is divine. Might I take the receipt home to Cook at Longbourn? I know my father would enjoy it."

"Why, she was chased about the house by ghosts, sir!" Mr Gardiner continued as if she had not spoken at all. His tone was infused with jolly amusement.

"Are you still on about ghosts, Miss Eliza?" Miss Bingley broke in from midway down the table where she had been sitting in sullen silence so far. Now her face was split with a smirk at Elizabeth's expense. "I suppose it is no wonder, if you believe you have been beset by them. Poor dear, seeing things that are not really there! Perhaps you ought to engage the services of a physician."

"I never claimed to see a ghost, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth replied with a touch of asperity. The lady raised her eyebrow slightly, increasing the smugness of her expression.

"But something did happen during your tour of Pemberley, Miss Bennet?" Mr Darcy asked in a tone of concern that might have been touching were the subject not so humiliating.

Elizabeth averted her eyes to her plate and speared a potato with her fork. "Not at all, sir. My uncle exaggerates."

"Come now, Lizzy," Mr Gardiner persisted, "it is hardly something to be reticent about! You remember that she was alone when she stumbled across you in the lake, yes?" He said this to Mr Darcy, who nodded, a small frown upon his lips and brow. "She had become separated from us after our visit to your excellent gallery. While

there, apparently, a door opened of its own accord, and a window within the same room slammed itself shut and would not open again. All likely caused by some mischievous wind.”

Elizabeth pressed her fingers to the bridge of her nose, exasperated. At least he neglected to mention the incident with the Bible in the master’s study.

“I see,” said Mr Darcy, turning back to Elizabeth. “I apologise if such events gave you a fright. I shall see to the maintenance of my doors and windows immediately.”

“It was nothing,” Elizabeth repeated with some vehemence, dropping her hand to frown meaningfully at Mr Gardiner. He seemed not a whit remorseful and was probably eager to report this scene to Mr Bennet upon their return. “Truly, as my uncle said, it was likely just the wind. I am sure there is naught amiss in your lovely house, Mr Darcy.”

“Of course not! Pemberley is perfection itself.” Miss Bingley then turned the subject to flattering her host and all his possessions. She was largely disregarded by the party; even Mrs Hurst only seemed to listen to her monologue with one ear.

Elizabeth and Mr Darcy resumed their conversation from earlier, but her embarrassment over the silly matter of her misadventure put a damper on her enthusiasm. She wished she could laugh off her humiliation as he had done, but she felt so self-conscious in his presence that it was difficult for her to do so.

Then again, she supposed it was nonsensical of her to hold on to her mortification when he had not, and she vowed to make more of an effort to overcome it. With that in mind, she took a breath and said, “Pemberley may not be haunted, but I assure you that Longbourn is. Sir, while you were in Hertfordshire, did any of the locals happen to tell you the tale of the ghostly goat?”

Mr Darcy's enigmatic smile spread a touch wider. "I cannot say I had that pleasure."

"Well, it all began when my great-great-granny Bennet put out her washing one fine day..."

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Elizabeth lay in bed late that night listening to the thunder grumble above her like a grumpy old man. The storm had largely worn itself out, but there were still occasional windy sighs or smatterings of rain against the windowpane. It was only minutes until midnight, and still Elizabeth tossed and turned, unable to find repose.

It was not due to the accommodations; of that she could be certain. Never had she been ensconced in such a richly appointed bedchamber. In the daylight, when she had first come upstairs to change out of her wet gown, it had been a soothing space full of light wood furniture and shades of lilac. She had even admired the white lace curtains while the maid had tightened her stays. In the dark, somehow the same room became more foreboding, with shadows lurking in every corner. Perhaps it was all the talk of ghosts, or even her own bizarre experience from the other day, but she was suspicious of every noise, whether it be a footstep in the corridor or a gust of wind brushing against the house. She was frightened, though loath to admit it.

Elizabeth finally conceded defeat and rolled onto her back, huffing at her own foolishness. Why am I being so ridiculous? I am as bad as Kitty after Lydia teases her into a dither with one of those ‘horrid’ novels! Spirits did not exist, and even if they did, she certainly had never seen one, strange coincidences aside. If only I could take a walk to clear my head...

“Well, why not?” she said aloud to the canopy. She could always pace the halls a bit, so long as she was careful not to wander too far. Walking was the only thing that ever truly helped calm her distress, and although it was always most effective out of doors, she had been known to circle the house at home when her usual constitutional was

unfeasible. Pemberley would be even more suited to the task since it was so much larger; she would surely disturb no one, even so late as it was.

Then again, perhaps it was not the best idea to go wandering about an unfamiliar manor in the middle of the night with no guide. She could get lost and never make it back to her room, which would make for an unseemly end to her visit when she was discovered lurking about the corridors in the morning wearing her nightclothes. Perhaps she should simply perambulate within her chambers?

Regardless, she could not simply lie there and attempt to will herself to sleep. There is nothing for it, I suppose. With an exasperated sigh, Elizabeth kicked her covers off, sat up, and lowered her feet to the floor.

Upon standing, she picked up the long train of her nightgown—another too-large loan from Miss Darcy—and moved in the direction of the dressing table where she had left her candlestick. Retrieving it, she shuffled to the low fire and crouched down. She readjusted the shoulder of her nightgown—the troublesome thing kept slipping down her arm, and she did not wish to set more than her candle alight—and carefully lit the wick before drawing back .

Rising from her bent position, she caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the mirror above the hearth as she straightened. Sheathed in fine white cotton, her face half-shaded in the flickering gleam of the flame, she appeared almost as if she were haunting the place herself. She chuckled at the stray thought.

A flash of movement in the mirror ensnared Elizabeth's notice, and her breath caught. Someone is here.

Over her shoulder, Elizabeth could see a tall, willowy figure draped in an old-fashioned gown of vivid cobalt. She—for it was obviously a woman—loomed starkly against the hangings around the bed, as unnaturally still and lifeless as a doll. Her

long, silvery hair fell down to her waist, framing a deathly pale face that oddly lacked any definite features. Lightning flashed outside the window, illuminating the bedchamber in brilliant radiance, and the blue lady disappeared for an instant, only to reappear when the room returned to shadow.

Elizabeth choked and whirled about, her shaking hand losing its grip upon the candlestick, which fell to the floor and extinguished itself on the hearth just as her eyes locked upon the spot where she expected to find the mysterious lady. With the dying fire as her only source of light, that portion of the room reverted to a cloaking blackness.

The only things Elizabeth could hear were the hard pitter-pattering of her own heart, the harsh rasp of her quickened breath, and the low vibration of the heavens. If there was another person in the room with her, they were completely silent and did not make their presence known.

“I-Is anyone there?” she called out.

No answer was returned.

Another flash of lightning brightened the bedchamber for a split second, confirming her solitude. How could that be? Had she imagined the lady in blue ?

A loud crash elicited a shriek from Elizabeth, and she whipped about to discover the source. The window had been closed a moment ago, she was certain of it, and yet it was now thrown wide to the storm. The lovely lace curtains she had so admired earlier in the day danced in a billowing frenzy, reminding her so strongly of the ghastly blue lady in her mirror that she stumbled back a step.

She could not remain in the room another moment, fearful of what lurked out of sight. Without even donning her robe or slippers, Elizabeth picked up the hem of her

nightgown and raced to the door, flung it open, and virtually threw herself out into the hall. She tripped at the threshold but scrambled upright and did not stop.

The clock chimed half an hour past midnight, and still Darcy lay awake, staring at the curtains above his bed. It was not so very late, yet he was frustrated by his inability to sleep all the same. His mind was far too occupied for rest. With Elizabeth, of course—his mind was always occupied with her—but also the conversation from the dinner table. It bothered him greatly that Elizabeth had experienced fear at Pemberley; would she refuse him again because she could not bear to live in his home? She had made light of the incident, sworn that her uncle exaggerated, but ladies tended to believe in fanciful tales of spooks and goblins. His sister certainly did.

“Ghosts!” He snorted at the notion. “Stuff and nonsense.”

The steady pattern of footsteps sounded from close by, and Darcy sat up. “Freddy?” There was no response from his dog other than a light snore from where she slumbered by the fireplace .

He heard the footsteps again; they sounded as if they were coming from the hall. He was not afraid of spectres, but they were not the most likely creature to go bump in the night. Scheming young ladies might, however.

Darcy glowered and ripped open the bed hangings, startling Freddy awake. He was determined to send whoever it was parading up and down the corridor back to their bed. He wished Bailey were there to act as witness, but he would not be so callous a master as to disturb his valet’s sleep over the nocturnal wanderings of a guest. Even were it Miss Bingley prowling in the darkness, he would inform her that he knew what she was about and would not be the victim of any scheme to seduce him. He would also demand her brother send her on her way to her Scarborough relations in the morning; his patience with her was entirely at an end.



Snatching his banyan from the foot of his bed, Darcy donned it and his slippers before stalking to the door, turning the key, and wrenching it open. He stepped out into the hall, prepared to give whoever lurked out there a stern reprimand, but found no one. Dim moonlight shone through various windows along the corridor, so any figure therein should be apparent. Perhaps he had misheard.

Freddy, now fully alert, moved around him into the hall. She stood perfectly still, ears perked as she listened. A soft growl issued from her throat as the hair on her neck rose in warning.

“There, there. Naught to be frightened of,” Darcy said, stroking her back. She refused to be soothed and continued staring fixedly into the void. “Come on, girl. Back to bed.”

He was about to follow his own sound advice when a flicker of light caught his attention at the far end of the corridor. It bobbed there like a will-o'-the-wisp, taunting him in the darkness. I knew it! There is someone sneaking about .

“You there?—”

Freddy's growl became a snarl, and she took off like a shot in the direction of the hovering light. She was absorbed into the blackness before Darcy had collected enough wits to protest. He dashed after her, calling out in a harsh whisper, “Freddy, wait! Heel, girl, heel !”

Caroline woke with a start as the clock chimed one, having unintentionally drifted off in the chair at her dressing table. She blinked many times in succession as the sticky cobwebs of sleep dissipated from her mind.

Her candle flickered fitfully as the flame drew nearer to the puddle of wax surrounding its wick, casting jagged shadows against the wall. How long had she

been asleep? She recalled dismissing Warren once the key had been delivered but nothing after that. Apparently, her plan to remain awake by sitting up in a chair rather than tucking herself into bed had been a failure.

No matter , Caroline declared silently to herself as she stood up and stretched the stiffness out of her lower back. There is still plenty of time.

Caroline turned to the mirror to examine her reflection for any damage caused by her short nap. Aside from a tiny drop of saliva at the corner of her lips, easily wiped away with her thumb, there was naught amiss with her appearance. She stroked the silk nightdress over her hips, smoothing imaginary wrinkles from the expensive fabric, and turned round to inspect the back. It hung a touch loose on her thin frame, and she did not fill it out so well as her sister did at the top, but the peach hue complemented her complexion, and it was revealing enough for its purpose. Nabbing it from Louisa's dressing room had been a stroke of genius; Caroline was glad she had instructed her maid to do so.

With one quick tightening tug to the ribbon that bound her dark hair into its plait, Caroline was satisfied that Mr Darcy would be unable to resist the image she was ready to present to him. That scheming country chit Eliza would not steal such a prize from Miss Caroline Bingley! Whatever arts and allurements she had been using upon him, Caroline would admit a grudging respect for, but that bumpkin would never become mistress of Pemberley. Not after tonight.

She swept the matching robe from the back of her chair and slipped her arms into its sleeves. Once she had belted it securely at the waist, she picked up her guttering candle and moved towards the door, her slippers treading softly upon the carpet.

“Oh!” Halting with her hand resting upon the cool brass knob that would permit her escape, she swirled about, padded back to the dressing table, and snatched a heavy metal key from the gleaming surface. She deposited it into the pocket of her robe and

patted it for reassurance. Had she forgotten this most precious item, her plan would have been ruined.

That crisis averted, she pulled open her door and peeked out into the hall, sharp eyes darting back and forth in search of witnesses. She could hear Hurst snoring in the chamber directly across from hers, absolutely no sound coming from her brother's beside it, and sensed no stirring from her sister next door. The only noise was the wind whistling against the windowpane behind her; all else was draped in the silence of night.

Secure in the knowledge that she was not being observed, Caroline emerged from her room and began her journey down the corridor, confident in her direction. She might be a guest in this house—for now—but she knew her exact destination.

Her future chambers.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Darcy searched for Freddy with only his familiarity with the house to guide him. There was little light save for snatches of the full moon, at last free of the clouds that had hidden it from view, but he knew Pemberley as well as he knew himself, even in the dark. The Great Dane was not in the family wing nor the guest corridor across from it, and she was certainly not downstairs; the scratching of her nails upon the marble would have revealed her position in an instant. The only reasonable place to search once these others had been eliminated was the upstairs gallery.

Upon rounding the bend, Darcy halted in place as a vision in white appeared before him, standing in front of his own portrait with his missing dog at her feet. He rubbed his eyes in case they deceived him, but no, there was Elizabeth, positioned in a shaft of moonlight at the centre of the long hall and verily glowing within its luminescence.

“Elizabeth? ”

She turned, apparently startled, at the blurting of her Christian name. “Mr Darcy!”

“Forgive me, I...” Darcy lost his train of thought for a moment, enraptured anew at the picture that she made in her uncultivated glory. She wore only an overlarge nightgown, and her hair fell in curly waves over her shoulders. It was even longer than Darcy had supposed, ending just above her *derrière* . He glanced quickly away and covered his momentary lapse with a cough. “Forgive me, Miss Bennet, I did not mean to frighten you. What do you do here at this time of night?”

Appearing suddenly self-conscious, she turned her face away and began scratching

Freddy behind her ears. The dog leant against Elizabeth's leg, her tongue lolling out in satisfaction. "Oh, I...I could not sleep, so I fancied a walk."

Elizabeth shivered—no wonder, given how the sleeve of her nightgown slipped to expose her shoulder—and Darcy strode forwards, untying the belt of his dressing gown. "Without your robe or slippers?" He divested himself of the garment and held it out to her.

"Oh no, I could not?—"

"I insist." Instead of arguing his point, Darcy wrapped it about her himself, swathing her in the warm navy fabric. He was left in only his night shirt, but he felt no chill. On the contrary, he was flush with heat. "There now, is that better?"

Darcy tilted his head to catch her gaze, only to find it averted to the ground. It occurred to him then that Elizabeth had likely never seen a man in his nightclothes before, and he suffered a momentary pang of discomfort on her behalf. There was nothing for it, however; he could either protect her modesty or her health, and the latter was non-negotiable. He could not allow her to become ill from the cold .

"Much," she softly replied. It was too dark to tell whether her cheeks were rouged with bashfulness, but it was not a great leap to suppose they were. His own were burning so fiercely he thought they might be glowing.

Desperate to distract them both from the awkwardness of the situation, Darcy led her to a settee just behind her, placed there for those who wished to consider the art at their leisure. Freddy followed with a wagging tail and settled again at Elizabeth's feet once she sat, her large head resting upon the lady's knee. After a moment of hesitation, Darcy took the liberty of sitting beside her, to which she made no objection.

“I am sorry you could not sleep. Were your chambers not to your liking? Is there anything I can fetch for your comfort?”

Elizabeth shook her head with eager emphasis. “No! Not at all. It is a perfectly lovely room. I...goodness, you will think me the veriest ninny!”

“I could never think that. Tell me, what troubles you?”

With a slump in her shoulders, Elizabeth admitted in a reluctant mumble, “I saw a ghost.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“A ghost. I saw a ghost in my bedchamber.”

If Darcy was astonished by her pronouncement, he was further shocked by the tale she told of being stalked in the night by a faceless lady in blue. The window, he supposed, must have been worked upon by the wind, but he could not account for her supposed visitation by a menacing phantasm. Perhaps a trick of the moonlight?

“I can see that you do not believe me.” She held up a hand as Darcy opened his mouth to offer reassurance, continuing, “I cannot blame you there. I am not sure I quite believe myself! It is in every way fantastic.”

“Perhaps you suffered a terrible dream? They can often be quite vivid.” Rather like my own recent visitation by a mysterious lady in blue. What are the odds that we would conjure the same terrible figure?

“I suppose that makes as much sense as any explanation. More, even, than any I can conceive.”

Darcy, although less convinced than he had been even a moment ago, shook away his doubt and offered further reassurance. “Perfectly reasonable.”

They fell into a short silence, the only sounds between them the rustling of Elizabeth burrowing deeper into his banyan and Freddy softly whining for attention.

“Do you think...” Elizabeth raised her face to him, the moonlight reflected in the shining surface of her remarkably fine eyes. Darcy swallowed and forced himself to speak of his own fears. “Could your dream have been caused by the frightening experience you endured during your initial visit here? Are you...afraid to be at Pemberley?”

A crinkle formed on her brow as she considered this. “I suppose I cannot say for certain, but I do not believe so. I shall not say that visiting Pemberley did not cause me some discomfiture, for I think we both know that it did, but I am not fearful of being here. For every strange incident or disconcerting dream, there is another occurrence that brings me joy. This is a magical place, and you are most fortunate to call it your home.”

You may call it yours if you would but accept my hand. The words were teetering on the tip of his tongue, but Darcy could not bring himself to open his mouth and let them spill out. It was too soon to speak of his affections, so wholly unchanged from when he first confessed them, as he was not yet assured of hers. She claimed to like Pemberley, but did she dissemble so as not to insult him? What lady would wish to be mistress of a house she believed beset by ghosts? And the setting was not particularly conducive to romance either, with the stern countenances of many generations of Darcys glaring down upon them. Surely she would also wish to be properly dressed—and him as well—when he poured his heart out to her. No, it was not the right time—not the right time at all.

Standing, Darcy held out his hand to Elizabeth. “Come, allow me to escort you back

to your bedchamber.”

Elizabeth glanced at his face, then at his proffered hand before placing her own upon it. She appeared unaccountably disappointed, though he could not say why he thought so. “I suppose that is best.”

Squeak .

A shrill creaking noise rent the air, and Darcy turned towards it, finding the door to his mother’s study ajar at the far end of the corridor. Elizabeth’s hand clamped down upon his, and she shifted closer. Beside him, Freddy began to growl, and the fine hairs on his nape rose with some indefinable unease. “Was that door open when you arrived?”

Elizabeth’s response was a hoarse whisper. “No. That was the room I wandered into on my first visit here. The one where the window nearly closed upon my fingers.”

Darcy turned so quickly to look at her that his neck made a cracking sound. “ That was the room?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

“It was once my mother’s study. She used to write her letters in there every morning. I recall visiting her there on numerous occasions.”

Elizabeth shuddered and nestled closer to his side, all but pressed to his chest. “I should like you to take me back to the guest wing now.”

“Of course,” Darcy replied, his voice somewhat strangled. It felt as if his heart was throbbing in his throat as he took her arm with the intention of leading her away .



Before he could take so much as a step, Darcy spotted a light, akin to a guttering candle flame, winking at him from the depths of his mother's darkened study. Knowing what it must be, he was immediately incensed; someone was spying on them. He thought he could guess the identity of their 'wraith' as well—Caroline Bingley. It made perfect, if somewhat deranged, sense; it was she Darcy had heard lurking in the hall outside his chambers earlier—she who had frightened Elizabeth out of her wits. She was exactly the sort of slender build and prodigious height as the ephemeral lady Elizabeth had described, as well as the one he himself had spotted skulking about the willow grove previously. He had not thought Miss Bingley capable of such despicable, underhanded ploys to dissuade her rival from accepting Darcy's attentions, but clearly he had underestimated her ambition to be mistress of his house.

Darcy released Elizabeth and began to stalk towards the taunting light, but he was stayed by a clutching grip upon his sleeve. In a hissing whisper, she demanded, "What are you doing?"

Turning to Elizabeth, Darcy placed his own hand over her white-knuckled fingers. "Someone is hiding in that room, and I mean to roust them. I will not abide being spied upon."

"You cannot go in there! You do not know who, or what, is in that room."

"On the contrary, I believe I know exactly who stalks us and why. Even if I am wrong, the person must be someone from the household and ought to be sent back to bed. There is nothing to fear, I assure you."

Darcy again attempted to pry Elizabeth's fingers from his person, but she held fast. "I beg of you, do not leave me here alone."

This plea, spoken on a trembling note, tugged at Darcy's heart. He drew closer and

brought her hand to his chest, where he kissed the tips of her fingers. “You need not be afraid, Elizabeth. Nothing will ever harm you whilst I am about.”

Her eyes, wide and iridescent, beseeched him as strongly as her words did. “At least allow me to come with you.”

A glance over his shoulder revealed the bobbing light to be exactly where he remembered it. It winked at him impudently.

“Very well, but remain behind me. You are in no danger, but I would prefer it all the same.”

Elizabeth nodded and, maintaining her hold on his hand, trailed along in his wake as Darcy steadily approached the door. Freddy followed, head lowered and a growl rippling on the air.

Up close, the door stood as a silent sentry between them and the chamber within. Darcy reached out with his free hand and pushed it the rest of the way open, squealing on its hinges. Inside, his mother’s study was cloaked in darkness save for that blasted light, which hovered near the window resembling nothing so much as a will-o’-the-wisp, luring them closer. He could not see an accompanying face, which was odd, but Darcy supposed Miss Bingley—or whoever it was—might have hidden elsewhere in the room when she detected their approach.

Clearing his throat, Darcy adopted his most commanding tone when he said, “Come out and show yourself.” There was no reply to this entreaty, so Darcy repeated it, this time with the force of impatience. Still no response.

Elizabeth clutched at the back of his night shirt, her breaths coming fast through her nose. “Mr Darcy, I think we ought to go. ”

“Nonsense, we have not yet ousted the miscreant. You may step out into the gallery if it would make you more comfortable, but I intend to investigate further.”

“No! I wish to remain with you.” He could feel her fists tightening in the material at his back.

“Very well, but stay close.”

Darcy moved deeper into the room, Elizabeth shuffling along just behind him, watchful for any shifting shadows that might give away the interloper’s position. Freddy did not cross the threshold but stood guard just beyond with her ears at attention.

The instant they were clear of the door, several things happened at once. First, said door swung shut with a clamouring bang. Second, the taunting light winked out of existence. And finally, Freddy let loose an ear-splitting howl.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Elizabeth perched on one of the armchairs next to the hearth, observing Mr Darcy as he struggled to force the door open. She could hear Freddy scratching and whining on the other side, but neither man nor beast seemed to effect much change in the situation. She had lent aid herself for some quarter of an hour before giving the endeavour up as pointless, but Mr Darcy would persist despite all reason. Men .

A hurried search of the room had revealed no other exit besides the window—and Elizabeth was of no mind to slide down the rain-slickened sandstone face of the manor from such a height, nor did she deem it advisable for Mr Darcy to make the attempt either. The bell pull had proved useless as well; surely, if it were working, someone would have heard it below stairs by this point. In essence, they were trapped. By meddling spirits, of all things.

Elizabeth had naturally been anxious at first, but the presence of Mr Darcy made their confinement more bearable. “You need not be afraid, Elizabeth. Nothing will ever harm you whilst I am about.” She had taken this declaration, and the earnestness with which it was said, entirely to heart. The intensity of his gaze when he had said it, the way he had clasped her hand to his chest, implied a sincere vow to shield her from harm. Her pulse fluttered like a butterfly in the wind as she recalled that heady moment.

Even the idea that ghosts had lured them into this trap held little terror for her any longer. It seemed they were more mischievous than menacing, and honestly, she felt safe so long as Mr Darcy was with her. Perhaps it was an unreasonable notion, yet Elizabeth trusted it was so.

The only real risk, in Elizabeth's mind, was to her reputation. She chewed fretfully at her thumbnail as she considered the sort of ruination that would befall her should the wrong person discover them here after a long night in one another's sole company. Her aunt and uncle would believe her when she said Mr Darcy was naught but a gentleman, and the upper servants seemed utterly devoted to their master, but what of the other houseguests? It was doubtful that Mr Darcy would ever consign his name to the likes of Caroline Bingley, and should the lady realise this, she might feel inclined to do something angry and unwise in retaliation. Much as Elizabeth was coming to learn that Mr Darcy was the best sort of man, the only one she would ever wish to make her husband, she could not countenance the thought of forcing him into a union to preserve her from infamy.

"You need not be afraid, Elizabeth. Nothing will ever harm you whilst I am about." Mr Darcy's words again echoed through her mind; did his vow extend to protecting her good name? She had already rejected him before, and surely it would be a degradation to ask again, but...had she cause to hope?

"Damn!"

Elizabeth sat up straighter as Mr Darcy's curse, coming on the heels of a wrenching snap, drew her notice. He stepped away from the door with the knob broken off in his hand.

"Forgive me, Eliz—Miss Bennet, for my slip just then. That is no language for a lady's ears." He shook his head and tossed the useless bit of brass upon a tall table next to the door.

"Do not fear for my sensibilities, sir, for I have heard the Lucas boys say worse in our youth. I am not so delicate."

Mr Darcy fell into the chair across from hers with a defeated sigh. "I am still sorry,

both for swearing and for not being able to free us. I suppose there is nothing to do but wait until morning for rescue.”

“I suppose not,” Elizabeth agreed quietly.

He must have heard some of the despondency she attempted to disguise in her voice, for he leant forwards and gazed at her intently. “I swear to you that your reputation will not suffer after what has happened here tonight. I shall take responsibility and give you the protection of my name, should it come to that.”

Tears burned at the back of Elizabeth’s eyes, and she was forced to look away. How she longed to accept his implied offer! “I cannot ask that of you, sir. To be connected forever to a woman who...no, it is beastly unfair. You have no obligation to a foolish girl who led you into this farce.”

Mr Darcy’s hand appeared within her vision and rested itself upon the knot of fingers in her lap. “Miss Bennet... Elizabeth , I can assure you that nothing would make me happier than to make you my wife. Far from an obligation, it would be the greatest pleasure of my life.”

Elizabeth raised her bleary gaze to Mr Darcy’s face and blinked away the intruding wetness. “Are you in earnest, sir?”

“Very much so,” he replied, lifting her hands to kiss them both. He inhaled a sharp breath and launched into a harried speech. “You are too generous to trifle with me. If your feelings are still what they were last April, if you cannot countenance taking me as your husband, I swear to you that I will ensure that your name remains unblemished from this encounter. If, however, you think you could find your way to loving me one day, or even caring about me, I beg you to marry me. I need you, Pemberley needs you, Georgiana needs you, I daresay even the spirits who supposedly dwell here need you—do say that you will.”

He still loves me! Laughing through her tears, Elizabeth nodded her head vigorously. “Yes! Yes, of course I shall marry you, Mr Darcy. And never fear that I could not love you, for I already do!”

Mr Darcy was out of his seat before she could say more, his mouth pressed to hers in a hungry kiss. When he withdrew, his hands framing her face, he moved back only far enough to whisper against her lips, “Fitzwilliam. Call me Fitzwilliam.”

“Fitzwilliam . How I love you.”

Elizabeth quite lost her capacity for speech after that.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The door slammed with a reverberating bang, causing the female apparition to visibly flinch. Their son's dog howled with outrage at the abrupt separation. She then fixed the long-deceased couple with a baleful glare before setting to work scratching at the secured door in a pointless effort to free her master.

"For heaven's sake, George," Lady Anne said as she hovered above the carpet, her long, flowing cobalt gown wafting about her as if caught in a soft breeze. "You will scare them both to death! Be more gentle."

"Me?" replied George Darcy with a scoff, silver and transparent in the bright moonlight. His voice echoed softly, as if from far away. "Anne, I believe you were the one who frightened our son's future bride so thoroughly that she fled her bedchamber in terror without a dressing gown or slippers. Imagine, showing yourself in the mirror like that..."

Lady Anne pinned her husband with a haughty glare as if he were a simpleton. "How else was I supposed to effect the planned rendezvous? She needed to leave her room, so I chased her out."

"You could have lured her with a will-o'-the-wisp, like I did for Fitzwilliam."

"Please. It was not our son whom you lured with your parlour tricks but his dog. Had she not chased your light like a rabbit down a hole, you would have been forced to adopt an alternative solution yourself."



“And here I took the parson at his word when he said ‘til death do you part’.”

Lady Anne’s head whipped in George’s direction, sending the tendrils of her loose snow-white hair flailing about her. It moved as if submerged in water, caught in a tide that none but the dead could feel. “What was that?”

“Nothing, dear.”

The squabbling spirits did not even notice the rattling and shaking of the closed door as their prisoners struggled to escape, caught up as they were in the heat of their bickering. Lady Anne persisted, “It is not as if I could simply sit Miss Bennet down to tea and politely invite her to a midnight assignation with our son. There are strict limitations to revealing ourselves, as you well know. I did what I could, and I still say the mirror trick worked splendidly.”

“Oh yes, a perfect plan,” George replied, eyes rolling to the ceiling. “Though what we would have done had your little visit stopped Miss Bennet’s heart, I do not know. I suppose she could have continued here with us, watching Fitzwilliam slowly die of misery and grief. Then the Darcy line would have ended, and we could all haunt Pemberley for eternity.”

Lady Anne dismissed her husband’s point with a regal wave of her hand. “Nonsense. You are entirely too melodramatic. Miss Bennet is a hale, healthy girl! Were she not, she could never become the mistress of Pemberley. Though I do think that silly Bible trick was a touch over the top. I thought she would expire on the spot when she read that verse.”

George laughed, his deep voice ebbing away into the darkness like rings on a pond. “I disagree! I thought it was rather clever, myself.”

“You would think so. You were always teasing poor Fitzwilliam as a boy, pulling

childish pranks. Between you and that awful Wickham brat, I am frankly amazed that he is not some nervous little thing now. He was so sensitive.”

“Exactly!” cried George; a painting on the wall behind him rattled slightly as he slapped his hand upon it. “He needed some toughening up. It worked, did it not?”

Lady Anne shook her head, and several wisps of her hair swirled around her as if floating upon the surface of reality. “No, he simply learnt to hide his feelings better. Had you not taught him to keep everything so bottled up inside, I am convinced that he would have received Miss Bennet’s acceptance the first time he asked for her hand. She did not even know he liked her!”

“Yes, well...”

“You recall how downtrodden he was after Easter? How often he took to drink late at night, bemoaning his heartache to our portrait? I might have detested Miss Bennet forever had he not detailed his own failings.”

“No one is perfect, as the good book reminds us.”

“Do you remember the way he insulted Miss Bennet upon first meeting her?” Lady Anne shook her head, her tresses swaying lazily with the motion. “I cannot even repeat it. To think that our son could ever speak of a lady in such a way, and in public too! But she might have forgiven him that had your favourite ”—Lady Anne sneered at this oblique reference to Wickham—“not poisoned her against him. ”

George’s groan shuddered on the air. “Not this again.”

“Do you deny that your godson is a scheming, lowly snake? Of course, he might have turned out well enough had you not given him notions of a life above his station. You treated him as a second son, so he learnt to expect more than he was reasonably

entitled to. You were blind to his devious dealings with Fitzwilliam, but I saw every lie, every theft, every mean trick as I haunted these halls. Who do you think kept locking the boy out of the house?"

"Anne—"

"That whelp was always jealous of Fitzwilliam?—"

"Enough, Anne, enough!" George interrupted whatever chastisement was coming next with a huff. "You have adequately made your point."

A loud snap and a doleful clunk drew Lady Anne's attention to the door once again, and she peered through the solid oak with sight unencumbered by physical barriers. She smiled as she watched her beloved son approach Miss Bennet, take her hands within his own, and assure her of his undying devotion. The girl's response was no less touching, and just like that, their engagement was sealed. Lady Anne withdrew her gaze to afford them privacy. "She has accepted him at last. Thank goodness!"

"There you have it," George replied with a single nod. "All's well that ends well, as the Bard says. We have succeeded."

"And none too soon. I should hate to resort to more drastic measures than we have already employed."

"Mm."

When he said nothing more, Lady Anne raised an eyebrow at her husband. "Do you intend to release them now? Fitzwilliam has received his acceptance, so I see no profit in keeping them trapped in my study."

George shrugged, an impish grin spreading across his handsome face. "Consider it a

wedding present to Fitzwilliam.”

“Oh, George.”

“Come now, my dear,” he said in a rumbling tone, levitating closer to his long-dead wife. He raised her pale hand to his transparent lips and brushed a kiss upon the back of it. She flushed silver at the contact. “You recall what it was like to be young and in love. Allow them some time to themselves.”

“What if they get carried away?”

“Then I am happy for them.”

“George!”

“Anne, dearest, what could it hurt? If anything, they will be married and settled here more quickly as a consequence.”

Lady Anne shook her head, but a smile was spreading across her ethereal face. “I suppose when you put it like that...”

“If we are very lucky, there will soon be little ones about, and they can visit us here, like Georgiana used to do before she grew too old to see us clearly.” In life, he had been greatly concerned about his youngest child when she had claimed to pay visits to her mama in the gallery, but he had understood better when he had been at the threshold of death himself. Somehow, the veil was thinner for the very young and those on the precipice between this life and the next.

Lady Anne sighed and rested her head upon her husband’s shoulder. “That would be lovely indeed.”

George kissed Lady Anne upon her temple, whispering, “That’s the spirit.”

All of a sudden, the tranquillity of the moment was broken as a shudder of revulsion wracked Lady Anne’s noncorporeal form. It was as if someone had trodden upon her grave.

“Anne?” George’s voice was thick with concern. “Dearest, what is the matter?”

“Someone has trespassed into my old bedchamber.” She convulsed again, her image rippling as disgust overwhelmed her. “It is that horrid Bingley chit! The audacity, the impudence! I shall make sure to teach her a lesson she will not soon forget.”

“Anne—”

Lady Anne disappeared in a swirl of mist and fury.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Caroline smiled to herself, predatory like a spider stalking a fly as she proceeded on her way. As she had suspected, there was no one about at this time of night; perfect for her plan. All she needed to do now was?—

She halted in the middle of the hall, her candle sputtering as a drip of wax fell to the floor at her feet. A door ahead, the one to the room assigned to that trollop Eliza, was standing open.

She crept closer, carefully quiet, and listened for any sound that might indicate her nemesis was awake. Should that awful nobody raise the alarm, Caroline would have an awkward time explaining why she was out of bed at such an hour. No one would believe that she was on the way to the library to retrieve a book, and it was even less likely that she intended to traipse down to the kitchen for a morsel of food, so her motives would be rather transparent. Why else would a lady with a reluctant beau leave her chambers but to pay him a clandestine visit? She supposed she could always effect that they had planned a rendezvous and engage his honour that way, but Caroline suspected that Mr Darcy would not be trapped so easily. No, she would have to convince him with her charms, as intended. Failing that, she would tangle him so tightly within the gossamer threads of her web that he could never escape.

There was no sound from Eliza's bedroom as Caroline tiptoed past—one might have even suspected that the chamber was empty—but she could not be easy until she had reached the corner and disappeared around it. Once past that obstacle, she could breathe more freely.

She made it round the bend without incident and unleashed a soft sigh of relief. It was not far to the family wing now; only the landing at the top of the magnificent main staircase separated her from her goal.

The key weighed heavily in Caroline's pocket and bumped against her upper thigh with each step she took, reminding her of her purpose. It was all so simple, really: let herself into the mistress's private chambers, enter Mr Darcy's bedroom via the internal door that united the two, then climb into bed with him. He would wake up, become overtaken by animal lust, and the deed would be done.

She had not intended to ever embark upon so desperate a stratagem. She had been ready to rely strictly upon her arsenal of accomplishments and subtle charms to garner her that coveted proposal from Mr Darcy, but the sudden appearance of Eliza at Pemberley had changed everything. Instead of a summer of delicately flirting with her prey and recommending herself to him with her grace, poise, and talents, she had been thwarted at every turn by that over-ambitious upstart. If she stood by and did nothing, Eliza's schemes might actually meet with success, and that, Caroline could never allow.

Well, Mr Darcy would not, could not, propose to Eliza after finding himself beholden to Caroline instead. He would, perhaps, be a bit testy over her methods, but one day—likely sooner rather than later—he would thank his bride for saving him from making a wretched, wretched mistake. After all, what was infatuation compared with maintaining his good name?

Caroline halted in front of the door she had been searching for, and a smirk bloomed upon her face. Inside this room was her destiny.

With her free hand, she dipped into the pocket of her robe and retrieved the key that had been so graciously purloined by her maid from the housekeeper's room below stairs. She had hoped that Warren might have got her hands upon the key to the

master's chambers, but that, apparently, was kept in the sole possession of Mr Darcy's valet. Having been unable to secure it from the gentleman's gentleman, she had settled for an alternative choice. Caroline would have been more grateful had Warren obtained what she had specifically requested, but she supposed this one would do.

The key turned in the lock, the mechanisms within squealing in rusty disuse, and Caroline triumphantly gained entrance. She pried the door open and slipped inside.

She sneezed as her footsteps raised dust from the rug, which, upon closer inspection with the candle, was yet another ghastly shade of blue. She covered her mouth with her sleeve, sneering into the peach silk; she would put the servants straight to cleaning this chamber thoroughly in the morning, once she had the right to direct them, and she would insist that they scour every trace of blue from this place. She would replace it with gold—the only hue elevated enough for the lady of the manor.

All the furniture, large and overbearing in the darkness, was draped in white covers to protect it from the grime accumulated over so many years of neglect. She chuckled at the notion that it looked as if she were surrounded by spirits. “Ghosts, indeed! Superstitious nonsense!”

Moving deeper into the room, Caroline looked for a place to deposit her dripping candle but found nothing that was not already swathed in a sheet. Not that the furniture within the room would be worth keeping—it would all have to be replaced, quite frankly, for none of it was likely to be in the current style—but it would hardly do to set fire to her chambers. Not only might she damage the structure, but it would inevitably distract Mr Darcy from her seduction.

With this thought in mind, Caroline approached the covered item that looked most like a dressing table and pulled the cloth from it with a swift rush. She coughed as dust rose up in a cloud around her, creating a miasma of dirty fog, and closed her



eyes against the particles that attempted to invade them. Disgraceful! Did no one ever clean this room?

She set the candle down upon the dull surface of the light oak table, still hacking in a most unladylike manner in an attempt to dislodge the grime from her throat, and braced herself upon the edge. She struggled to catch her breath; it would not be appealing to Mr Darcy were she to climb into his bed wheezing.

Once her struggles had abated, Caroline stood erect and considered her reflection in the mirror before her. It was badly in need of a polish, and the edges were crusting over, but she was able to determine that her appearance was not too disgraceful after her little fit. She searched for dirt upon her robe, tucked a few loose hairs back into place, and dabbed at her dripping nose with a handkerchief before declaring herself satisfied enough .

Now, to business.

She loosened the knot of her dressing gown and released the cord from around her waist, allowing the garment to fall open. She then permitted the cool silk to slide from her shoulders and drop to the floor, uncaring that the borrowed item would very likely become sullied with filth as she surveyed the lacy peach negligee underneath. It was unspoiled by any of her adventures of the night and would surely tantalise her prey.

It was time. Leaving her sputtering candle upon the dressing table, she turned to look for the door that would lead to the master's chambers. "Ah ha!" There, against the far wall; her access point. With her feral grin firmly in place, she strolled towards it with confidence. By the time the sun rises, I shall be engaged! She was giddy with anticipation.

The brass knob was cold, virtually frigid, in her hand as she attempted to turn it, but it

would not oblige her. Believing it must be stuck after many years of disuse, Caroline rattled the metal orb and twisted sharply back and forth, but to no avail; the door would not open. Thinking that she might, perhaps, be missing a key, she searched for a hole to insert one, but there was none; it could not possibly be locked against her. In mounting frustration, she hissed and cursed at the contraption as she shook it as violently as she was able, but no amount of her pitiful force could dislodge the door from its frame.

With some derision, Caroline postulated to herself that Eliza, hoyden that she was, might have been able to wrench the thing from its hinges, but it was hopelessly impossible for a delicate lady such as herself. Should she knock? Mr Darcy would answer the summons, and she could encourage him to invite her in, though it was hardly certain. Still, she was wearing a most enticing nightgown...

She would do it. She had come too far to give up the chase now, and moreover, she had great confidence in her looks. Surely Mr Darcy would be unable to resist the lure of so much tantalising flesh encased in lace and silk.

Caroline arranged her expression into one of invitation and raised her fist to rap upon the wood. Before her knuckles could make contact, however, she was distracted by a trickle of cold running down her spine and an inarticulate whisper from somewhere behind her.

“...out...”

Caroline stiffened; had she somehow been discovered? If so, she could always claim that Mr Darcy had invited her—yes, that would do—and they could still become engaged. With a fixed smile upon her face, she turned to deliver her proclamation, but no one was there. How strange.

In the dim light cast by her dying candle, the room surrounding her was draped as

much in shadow as it was in white sheets. She could not see into all the corners, the chamber being as vast as was suitable for the mistress of Pemberley, so she could not certainly say that she was alone, but Caroline saw no sign of anyone besides her own reflection in the dressing table mirror. Perhaps those silly ghost stories had tickled her imagination just enough to create a few ghouls in the dark.

She shrugged and turned back to the door, raising her fist again to knock.

“Get...out...”

Caroline spun round again, this time calling out into the darkness, “Come out and show yourself.”

No one stepped forwards to admit their presence. She swivelled her head back and forth, from wall to window, but she could see no one else in the room. Although not at all inclined towards superstitious belief, an unaccountable trill of fear tickled the back of her mind .

“I-I insist that you show yourself,” Caroline said again, her eyes searching the bedchamber for any movement aside from her own. Still, there was no one to be seen.

She stepped away from the door to the master’s chambers and made a quick journey to the dressing table to reclaim her candle, feeling more secure in the glow it exuded. She grasped it firmly and picked it up, shining her light in every direction to aid her search. Hot wax dripped down the back of her hand, but she barely noticed the sting.

Nothing.

Caroline relaxed a touch as the light revealed her own silliness. The storm had ended, but perhaps the wind was still a bit wild. Wild enough to create whispers in the dark.

She set the candle back down upon the dressing table and forced herself to take a calming breath to ease the stuttering of her heart. There is no such thing as ghosts. There is no one here. Superstitious nonsense.

“Get out!”

She jumped and swirled around in a full circle; that had most certainly not been the wind! It sounded like a woman’s voice—one that was raspy with malice. No doubt the trespasser lurked somewhere deep in the shadows that Caroline’s eyes could not penetrate. “Who are you?” she cried, louder and more tremulously than before. “Come out and show yourself! As the future mistress of this house, you shall obey or forfeit your position immediately!”

The response was immediate and violent.

She screeched at the top of her voice as all the items in the room surrounding her—furniture, sheets, forgotten knickknacks—lunged themselves in her direction and crashed to the floor around her. She had to scurry out of the way of a falling wardrobe lest she be trapped beneath it and jump over the splintered remains of a small table as she rushed to escape from the avalanche of possessions. A porcelain figurine cast itself at her head in a suicidal mission to injure her, and Caroline ducked just in time to avoid receiving a bloody nose.

A sheet rose up in a fog of dust and attempted to cast itself upon her like a net, sending Caroline diving onto the hated blue rug to evade it. Her luck had run out, however, and the fabric wrapped itself around her ankle, pulling her across the floor with a sharp jerk. She screamed again as her nightgown rose up her legs in a most undignified way, and she skidded across the hardwood with it bunched up around her waist, her foot caught in the sheet’s trap. The door to the hall sprung open of its own accord, ready to swallow her up if the muslin got its way.

Caroline managed to grab hold of one of the four posts on the bed and held on tightly as the fabric tugged and yanked to dislodge her. She struggled hard enough to kick her leg free of the sheet and scrambled up into a crouched position by the heavy piece of furniture, panting and terrified.

She glanced towards the door that led to Mr Darcy's bedroom, wondering why he had not come to her rescue. Surely the racket caused by the furnishings destroying themselves and her own cries for help could be heard all the way to the guest wing! He was far less gallant than his reputation suggested.

No time to dwell on that now. The items in the room appeared to be positioning themselves for another assault, and Caroline was not about to stay put and take their abuse. She dragged herself upwards, digging her nails into the wood of the bedpost, and found her footing as the furnishings surrounded her .

Caroline's eyes darted towards the door that led out into the hall, but she was indecisive; should she abandon her grand plans to become mistress of this horrible place and seek safety with her relations in the guest wing? Or should she make another attempt to rouse Mr Darcy in her defence and use this circumstance to her advantage? She could always insist that they live in London year round, or possibly take up residence at one of their many satellite estates. Mr Darcy was the type of man who had choices at hand for himself and his family.

As if sensing her thoughts, the tormenting spirit made its opinion on the subject known to her in a way that could not be misunderstood. Caroline shrieked as the glass of the dressing table mirror shattered, splintering into a spiderweb pattern from the centre of the pane, and reflected her image back to her in many pieces. From between the shards seeped a dark, viscous substance that was almost certainly blood. It pooled upon the tabletop, surrounding her candlestick in a sea of glimmering red, and dripped onto the floor in rivulets.

She released the bedpost and stumbled backwards until she collided with something heavy and wooden—the door leading to the master’s chambers—and she froze there, too petrified to make a dart for the hall.

“This cannot be real.” Caroline panted and squeezed her eyes shut tight, blocking the horror from her vision. “This cannot be real!”

A chill began to prickle against her skin, rising up from the soles of her feet to her ankles, calves, and knees. It was as if a fog were rising from the floor around her and surrounding her with a damp cold. She could feel her shuddering breaths escape her and caress her cheeks in a warm cloud .

“Get...out...!”

Caroline’s eyes snapped open as the ghastly voice whispered directly into her ear. Immediately before her was a pair of large, grey eyes, stormy and wild. They were set in the face of a delicate woman who would have been undeniably beautiful had she not also been horrible in every way. Her hair, long and white, flared about her like the untamed blaze of a fire, framing an expression contorted with rage. She verily glowed in the darkness, like the full moon upon the surface of a lake, both soft and bright while also somewhat distorted.

In the background, the flame of her pitiful candle finally snuffed itself out, leaving the room cloaked in darkness once more.

“ Get out! ”

She finally found the wherewithal to flee as the otherworldly shriek echoed and reverberated about the chamber, causing the walls to shake. She tore the hem of her sister’s negligee as she raced through the icy mist of the spirit but did not stop even to collect her balance properly. Instinct drove her forwards and out into the corridor,

away from the phantasm's wrath. The door to the mistress's chambers slammed shut behind her.

Caroline collapsed against the wall outside the cursed room, sliding down the delicate azure paper she would have replaced as mistress, and trembled. Seated there like a quivering lump of jelly, she wondered—could that have been real? Had she actually encountered a ghost? Phantom, spectre, apparition, banshee, demon, wraith—a departed soul who roamed the land searching for her lover after a tragic end? How could it possibly be, yet how could it possibly be otherwise? There was no rational explanation for what she had just encountered.

“Miss Bingley?”

Caroline started so violently that she yelped and nearly overturned herself. Only the reflexive hand that darted out in her own protection prevented her from crumpling entirely to the floor.

Although terrified of what she would find, Caroline raised her bulging eyes to the person who had interrupted her ghastly musings—all the while silently praying that whoever it was would be made of flesh and bone rather than mist and moonlight—to find Miss Darcy standing over her in a long white nightgown, her blonde hair plaited and hanging over one shoulder. Her grey eyes were shadowed with confusion and concern.

The sight of a tall lady with pale hair and eyes caused Caroline to flinch back. Indeed, there was something of a resemblance between Miss Darcy and the wraith who had just tormented her, though she supposed that must be likely if Pemberley were haunted by its former inhabitants.

“Are you well?” the girl enquired, her eyebrows folding down as she observed her houseguest cowering on the floor. “Have you somehow become lost?”

Caroline lunged forwards and gripped the skirt of Miss Darcy's nightgown, startling the girl enough for her to stagger back. She clung tightly to the younger lady to prevent her escape. "There is a ghost! In there!"

"A ghost?" Miss Darcy repeated, tugging fruitlessly at the fabric tangled in Caroline's grasping fingers. "In where?"

"The mistress's chambers!"

Miss Darcy looked to the closed door, blinking at it with apparent surprise, before returning her attention to Caroline. "You have been inside the mistress's chambers?" she asked then, her expression darkening into a scowl. "At this time of night?"

Stupid, stupid girl! What difference did it make what Caroline was doing there in the middle of the night? "Yes! It is everything horrible and—what are you doing?" Her voice raised to the pitch of a screech as Miss Darcy, now disentangled from her houseguest, approached the door in question and reached for the knob.

"I am going to look inside," she replied with more intrepidity than Caroline would have expected.

"Have you gone mad?" She lurched to her feet and grasped at her hostess's nearest arm, attempting to drag her away. "Did you not hear me say that there is a ghost in there?"

Miss Darcy tugged her arm free and attempted to calm Caroline with a soothing voice. "I am sure there is nothing amiss. I have been into my mother's rooms many times and have seen no sign of anything horrible. I shall take a look inside and show you that there is nothing to fear."

"No!"



Caroline was growing increasingly hysterical—and not only from fear of the apparition within; if Miss Darcy did not believe her about the haunting, there would be no reasonable explanation for the wreckage that she was soon to discover. How could Caroline explain a shattered mirror, broken armoire, and the general disorder of a space to which, technically, she had no rights? Would she be ejected from Pemberley? That might not be so terrible considering recent events, but to be cut off from the patronage of the Darcys would be intolerable!

The door opened with a shrill creak under Miss Darcy's direction, and she stepped inside, holding her own candle aloft. Caroline waited for the girl to exclaim at the chaos, but no such rebuke was forthcoming.

"I see nothing unusual," said Miss Darcy, pivoting her head to look in Caroline's direction.

"What?" She peered over the girl's shoulder, careful to remain on the corridor side of the threshold, to observe what Miss Darcy was seeing. Surely she could not have expected to find the place in pieces!

However, the surprise was all Caroline's; not a single piece of furniture, figurine, nor sheet was out of place other than that she had moved herself. Her candle rested upon the uncovered dressing table, its wax hardening now that the flame was out, and her sister's dressing gown lay crumpled on the floor beside it. The filched key lay upon the dull surface immediately beside the base of the candlestick, accusatory in its placement. The mirror was whole, and there were no traces of the blood that had been dripping down its surface and puddling on the floor. The rest of the room looked as untouched as she had found it.

"I do not understand," said Caroline, stepping forwards as if to breach the room. A cold, tingling sensation overwhelmed her suddenly, raising goose-flesh upon her skin, and she thought better of it. She stumbled back a step.

“Perhaps you were sleepwalking?” replied Miss Darcy, her eyes darting downwards for an instant to indicate Caroline’s scantily clad form. When her gaze rose back up to her houseguest’s face, it was rather severe and reminded Caroline strongly of the disapproving Darcy ancestors who kept scornful watch over the gallery.

“I...ah...” She could not very well tell her prey’s sixteen-year-old sister that she had been intent upon seducing her brother, so she accepted the gift of Miss Darcy’s excuse with as much grace as she could muster. “I suppose I was.”

“And you will take greater care in future to prevent yourself from wandering the halls at night?”

Caroline grudgingly nodded. “Yes, I shall make a point of not, um, sleepwalking.”

“Very good,” replied Miss Darcy as she stepped into her mother’s old chambers and retrieved the objects littering the dressing table and floor. The guttered candle and robe she passed to Caroline, but the key she kept within her possession. It swiftly disappeared into her pocket, though her gaze remained firmly and coolly affixed to her trespassing guest. “Now, shall I see you back to your room?”

### CHAPTER THIRTY

“ T here now, Anne,” said George as his wife slammed the door shut behind the interloping Jezebel. “Calm yourself. That Bingley girl cannot cause any further harm. At this moment, our son is secure with his future bride and well away from her clutches.”

“I know,” Lady Anne replied as the aura around her calmed, “but she has no right to be in this room. It is reserved for the lawful mistress of Pemberley, not some upstart from trade.”

“Miss Bennet has family in trade, if you recall.” They hovered before the entryway that would lead into his former bedroom, the one now occupied by their son as he presided over the estate, blocking it from any further trespass from low class young women.

All around them, the room was righting itself and regaining its former orderly, if dirty, appearance. The broken furniture pieced itself back together, not a single seam visible once it had fused into wholeness again, and moved back into position. The porcelain figurines, shattered upon the floor, came back together and retreated to their places. Dust covers flew about the room as if they were full of spirits themselves and swaddled the newly restored furnishings. The only items left alone were those the trespasser had disturbed or abandoned. Reality had knitted itself back together flawlessly.

Lady Anne waved his comment away, huffing with exasperation. “That is neither here nor there! Miss Bennet was raised as a gentlewoman and, more to the point, is

not after our son simply for his fortune. Were that the case, she would have accepted him in the spring and saved us all much trouble.”

“Ah, but she would not be such a charming, worthy young lady had that been the case,” George replied, taking his vexed wife’s hand and bringing it up to his face. He caressed his luminescent cheek against it and bestowed a kiss upon her fingers. “And it did the boy some good to be humbled. I believe he has been spending too much time with your brother and sister and has acquired a swelled head.”

“Hmph.”

The pair fell silent and observed as the door to the hall opened again, prepared to frighten away any unwanted visitors. They smiled, however, when their daughter, sweet Georgiana, stepped inside and peered about the room as if looking for a disturbance. She moved back out into the hall and could be heard to say, “I see nothing unusual.”

“What?” cried the interloper’s voice. “I do not understand.”

They could both sense her draw near the doorway, and Lady Anne tensed, ready to torment Miss Bingley within an inch of her life should she have the nerve to enter a second time. George placed a steadying hand upon his wife’s arm and projected a cold, creeping sense of menace to keep her out. The hint seemed to work, for Miss Bingley approached no farther.

“Perhaps you were sleepwalking?”

“I...ah...” Miss Bingley paused. “I suppose I was.”

George snorted. “Sleepwalking, my eye!”

“And you will take greater care in future to prevent yourself from wandering the halls at night?”

“Yes, I shall make a point of not, um, sleepwalking.”

Lady Anne glowered at the doorway. “See that you do.”

“Very good,” replied their dear girl with a firmness her father could be proud of, either alive or dead. Georgiana marched into the room and collected together the detritus left behind by Miss Bingley’s encroachment, removing every sign of their unwelcome guest’s presence within the chamber excepting the displaced sheet. She slipped the key into the pocket of her dressing gown with one hand and returned the personal items to Miss Bingley with the other. “Now, shall I see you back to your room?”

The door closed behind the two ladies, leaving the pair of phantoms alone, hovering just slightly over the carpet. There were no words between them for several minutes.

“I do wish she could still see us.” Lady Anne’s forlorn voice reverberated around her old chambers, though the living could not hear.

George nodded as he placed a hand upon his dearly departed wife’s lower back and drew her closer. She floated towards him as if gliding upon a breeze. “As do I, my dear, but perhaps it is better this way. The living should not be so involved with the dead. Georgiana has much life to live, after all, and we would not wish to take her away from it.”

“Easy for you to say.” Lady Anne sniffled as her head drooped upon his shoulder. “You had much more time with her than I did. She remembers me not at all, save for as a wraith she has discounted as a dream. ”

George pressed his cold lips to her equally frigid forehead. “Perhaps not, but Fitzwilliam has told her all about you, and it is as if she knows you. She tends the rose garden as you once did. She is forever gazing at your portrait. And she certainly has your commanding manner—did you see how well she managed that Bingley woman?”

Lady Anne’s laugh was as haunting as her person. “Yes, though I believe she learnt such behaviour from our son.”

“True, but whom did he take it from? I have never been able to look so severe.”

“I just wish...” Lady Anne paused, gathering her words from deep within her departed soul. “I just wish that I could truly be part of their lives, rather than a mere shadow that stalks them from another realm.”

“As do I, my love, as do I.” George sighed but continued on a more positive note, “However, I believe our intervention this night has been invaluable to our children. Fitzwilliam will now marry that lovely young woman and raise a family. Georgiana will thrive with Miss Bennet as a sister. Truly, although we are no longer of this world, we have made it better for our descendants.”

Lady Anne nodded as they both faded into the darkness, leaving not a trace of their existence behind.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Darcy groaned in protest at the sunlight attempting to seep through his closed eyelids; he was still tired and had no intention of rising just yet. He meant to utilise his arm to deaden the glare but found it immovable. Cracking open one bleary eye, he could not resist a broad grin as he beheld the hindrance. Elizabeth.

After she had accepted his proposal the night before—and oh, how his heart swelled in remembrance of that tender interlude—they had, at length, restrained their ardour, but not before Darcy had lowered Elizabeth to the hearth rug in a panting heap. It had taken the full strength of his mighty will to stop before bringing them both the ultimate pleasure, but he had managed it because his dearest, loveliest Elizabeth deserved better than being taken on the floor of his mother's former study. He would wait until their wedding night, much as it pained him to delay, and show her every ounce of consideration she was entitled to as his wife. A comfortable bed was the least of what she was owed.

Darcy's smile softened as he brushed a curl away from Elizabeth's cheek. It would not be long—mere weeks if he had his way—before he would wake up to this cherished face every day. The mistress was afforded her own chambers, to be sure, but Darcy meant to keep Elizabeth with him as often as she would allow it. He might even argue that the mistress's apartments ought to be transformed into a sitting room or study, just to prevent them from spending their nights apart. He would cede to her wishes, of course, but he intended to be most persuasive in this pursuit.

Elizabeth made a delectable little moan and rolled deeper into his embrace. Her countenance was now hidden from his view, but Darcy did not mind; he buried his

nose in her voluminous hair and inhaled deeply of her honeysuckle scent. I may be a wealthy man, but until now, I have never felt so rich.

Once their passion had cooled and their breathing calmed, the pair of them had lain awake on the plush hearth rug, snuggled together to ward Elizabeth from the chill of the room, and spoken for hours. He was not sure how long they had staved off sleep in this manner, but they had managed to canvass all sorts of topics they had each been too awkward to broach before. Darcy had apologised, most profusely, for the manner of his previous proposal, and Elizabeth had, in turn, begged her own forgiveness for how she had responded to it. He still felt himself burdened with most of the blame from that encounter, but it was agreed between them that they ought to absolve one another forthwith and never dwell upon it again. “Let us remember the past only as it brings us pleasure,” Elizabeth had wisely counselled, and Darcy had been happy to comply.

After that, they had spoken only of lighter subjects, such as how soon they wished to marry—“On the morrow,” had been Darcy’s suggestion, for which he had received a chiming laugh—and how they planned to announce their impending nuptials to the household. Nothing was yet decided upon, but they had succumbed to the arms of Morpheus with smiles upon their faces.

Now, on this most glorious of mornings, Elizabeth was stirring against his chest, and Darcy was peppering her with soft kisses. She moaned again and he chuckled; despite being an early riser like him, it seemed as though she was difficult to rouse. “Good morning, my love.”

Elizabeth stilled a moment, then relaxed against him. “Good morning, Fitzwilliam. Have you been waiting for me to wake?”

“Not very long, and I cannot say that it was a dreadful experience.”



“Then you cannot have seen my hair yet!”

This quip was met by yet another kiss to the crown of her head, which was, indeed, sprouting in every direction. Darcy found it uncommonly charming. “I assure you that I have, and my affection has not diminished a whit.”

Elizabeth tilted her head up to rest her chin against his chest, her striking blue-green eyes sparkling in the sunlight. “That is most reassuring, given that you will be subjected to it for the rest of our lives. And possibly beyond, should we overstay our tenure here like some of your ancestors.”

Darcy chuckled. “I assure you, two centuries from now, I shall still find you eminently enchanting as we roam these halls playing tricks upon our descendants.”

“I believe you are teasing me, Mr Darcy.”

“I believe I am.”

Elizabeth propped herself upon one arm, her hair falling about her in bountiful waves. Her nightgown, weighted by his banyan, slipped down her shoulder again, drawing Darcy’s wandering eye. “Well, I still say that our little mishap last evening cannot be explained as a mere accident. There were other forces at work to bring us both to the gallery then trap us in here.”

Forcing himself to return his gaze to Elizabeth’s face, Darcy replied, “I remain sceptical that restless spirits exist, much less that they roam the halls of my home uniting unsuspecting couples.”

“And yet, here we are.” Elizabeth flicked her wrist to indicate the room around them, a saucy smirk curling along her mouth.

“Yes, behind a stuck door in a room that is rarely used. The latch no doubt requires some oil.”

“Even so, you could not budge it at all.”

“The wood must have swollen because of the storm.”

“And the light that lured us in here?”

Darcy pondered a moment before snapping his fingers. “The reflection of moonlight upon some item within the room.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You have an answer for everything, sir! How neat and tidy of you. I, however, am not so convinced that we were entirely alone last night.”

“Certainly not. Freddy was with us.”

She lightly smacked his arm. “You know very well what I mean.”

“I might concede that Fate played a part in bringing us together,” he replied, snatching her hand and pressing a kiss to her palm, “but why should long-dead spirits have any stake in our happiness?”

“So you believe in Fate but not ghosts?” Elizabeth bubbled over with mirth when he shrugged his agreement. “Perhaps they are merely romantics, or...” Her voice trailed off, and the smile slipped from her face.

Darcy sat up. “What is it? ”

“Oh no, it is a silly thought.”

“Tell me. I shall not think ill of you, no matter what it is.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. “I was only thinking...what if the ghosts are known to you?”

Darcy felt a sharp thrust of discomfort in his gut, but it was gone in the next instant. Even so, it must have shown on his face, for Elizabeth rushed to apologise and comfort him. He silenced her contrition with a soft kiss. “Never fear, my love, I am not upset. It is only that I miss my parents so very much and dearly wish your conjecture might be true. That is all.”

Elizabeth crawled into his lap and embraced him. “I am still sorry that I brought it up. I had not meant to pain you.”

Wrapping her tightly in his arms, Darcy pulled her flush against him and buried his face in her neck. After some time spent in this position, with Elizabeth rubbing soothing circles on his back and cooing words of love in his ear, he drew back. “The house will be waking soon, and we ought not to be discovered here, even if our intent is to marry. If the door still will not open, I shall hide so you can draw attention to yourself and be rescued.”

“Your servants will not think less of me for being in here, unescorted, overnight?”

“Certainly not! Especially when they learn you are to be their new mistress.”

With this plan in mind, Darcy stood, helped Elizabeth to her feet, and crossed to the door. In the light of day, the mechanism was more distinct, and he was able to reaffix, however impermanently, the knob in place. A few jiggling motions later, he easily pulled the door open with no apparent resistance. On the other side, Freddy climbed to her feet with a happy bark and leapt upon him, sending them both staggering backwards.

“I see that the spirits have seen fit to release us,” Elizabeth said in a teasing manner as Darcy wrestled the dog from his person.

Once Freddy was back under proper regulation, or at least not bathing his face with her tongue, Darcy replied, “The storm is over, and the door is no longer swollen. It is not so marvellous.”

“You believe that, if it gives you comfort.”

“Minx,” Darcy playfully grumbled before grabbing Elizabeth about the waist and pulling her against him, not yet willing to abandon their private haven after all. She squealed but submitted willingly to his affections and made no attempt to escape.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Caroline rose at the ungodly hour of seven in the morning, unable to withstand even the pretence of sleep any longer. She had not slumbered since her encounter in the mistress's chambers the night before—who could after such a fright?—and had merely waited for the sun to fully rise, surrounded by the glow of several candles that kept the darkness at bay.

She had spent the intervening hours between her encounter with the apparitions and daybreak pacing back and forth in her apartment, muttering to herself as she tried to rationalise her experience, and she was more physically and mentally exhausted than she had ever been. However, she was eager to be with living, breathing human beings, and only her sister's locked door had prevented her from achieving this aim sooner. Louisa was a notoriously deep sleeper, so Caroline had retreated back into her own bedchamber, where she had fidgeted and fretted until morning.

Only once the sun had crept over the horizon, peering shyly above the peaks in the distance, did Caroline determine it safe enough to venture forth into the house. She had called for her yawning and confused maid to dress her for the day, disregarding all the girl's questions about the success of her plans from the night before, then fled the room.

Now she haunted the corridors, alone except for the understated presence of the servants, who flitted from room to room, dusting, polishing, and whatever else it was that they did. No one of any worth was yet awake, leaving the fidgety Caroline to wander aimlessly.

Not far from the guest wing was the gallery, which had at least the benefit of something to gaze upon, so Caroline bent her steps in that direction. She breathed more evenly as she entered the hall full of invaluable works of art, finding relief in the flood of sunlight that spilt into the space through the many tall windows. There was nothing supernatural in this part of the house, thank heavens.

She scanned her eyes over each portrait, almost involuntarily searching for a resemblance to the phantasm she had crossed the previous night. Aside from the glossy image of her young hostess, none of the former Darcys looked even passingly like that horrifying spook. In the warm, shining light of a new day, she wondered whether it had been some terrible dream after all.

A giggle. “Fitzwilliam, stop! I must return to my...mm...”

Soft murmuring in return. “Come back inside, my love. I have not quite finished with you yet.” This was accompanied by a soft whine and a more commanding, “No, Freddy, down. Down, I say.”

She stopped where she was, her contemplation of Miss Darcy’s features on hold at this interruption, and pivoted her head towards the source of the unexpected voices. At the end of the corridor, a door stood ajar, bathing the carpeted floor in cheerful sunlight.

There was a rustle of fabric—Caroline flinched as she recalled the abuse she had taken from a sheet only hours ago—and another bubble of feminine laughter from just beyond the door. “The house is already stirring! We agreed that I must get back to my chambers before we are discovered.”

“I changed my mind about that,” replied the second voice; it was deep and rumbled like a man’s. “Let them find us. We shall be married that much sooner.”

There was a high-pitched squeal and a bark before the lady spoke again. “Fitzwilliam, what a thing to say! You have scandalised poor Freddy.”

“Freddy, look away.”

There was some more scuffling just beyond the door, another muffled shriek of laughter, then some comparative silence. The only sounds Caroline could hear aside from the distant clatter of servants about their business were quick, panting breaths from within the occupied chamber.

Caroline felt rather ill all of a sudden. Even a simpleton could discern the context of this uncomfortable scene, and she would hardly classify herself as such. Moreover, those voices were disturbingly familiar.

It seemed that Eliza had succeeded where she had failed.

The door at the end of the hall gaped open a little more, as if grinning smugly at her, to reveal to her eyes what her mind had already deduced. There were Mr Darcy and Eliza, scandalously dressed in their nightclothes as they amorously embraced. Mr Darcy’s horrid dog pranced about their feet, but she was largely overlooked save for a few impatient hand signals from her master. The entire scene was bathed in the magical golden glow of early morning sunlight; even the dust motes swirling around them seemed to dance in celebration of their newly kindled romance.

“How vulgar,” Caroline muttered to herself, her lip drawing into a sneer. Mr Darcy, so wealthy and respectable, was acting like a heathen in his own magnificent—if haunted—home. Far from deigning to kiss Eliza chastely, he appeared to be devouring the lower half of her face, his tongue visibly delving into her mouth for the purpose. And his hands—oh, his hands! They were both clasped firmly upon her backside and had pulled her close to the lower portion of his body, which he rubbed against her.

Worse, Eliza was clearly encouraging this behaviour by grasping hold of his hair and responding fervently to his kisses. She was even returning some friction by gliding her body up and down, bouncing merrily upon her toes to do so. Caroline had always suspected that her rival was a wanton trollop, and this proved it beyond all doubt.

The pair carried on with their mutual fondling, clearly unaware of Caroline's presence, so she made a point of coughing to gain their attention. "Ahem."

There was no response at all.

She coughed again, this time with more asperity. "A- hem !"

Still disregarded. This was not to be borne!

"I beg your pardon!" she finally said at the top of her voice. It was unladylike, but she hardly cared; the man she was supposed to marry had clearly been seduced by someone else, so she had no one to impress.

Finally, the couple who had been fused at the lips sprang apart. It was Eliza who spoke first. "Miss Bingley! I—how long have you been there?" As she said this, Mr Darcy grasped her hips from behind and repositioned her to stand in front of him .

"Long enough," replied their reluctant viewing party with a sniff. "I suppose I am to congratulate you on your betrothment?"

This time, Mr Darcy took the initiative to answer, though he kept Eliza firmly before him. Cowering behind a woman! He was becoming less and less admirable to Caroline's eyes every moment. "Yes, we thank you." An awkward pause. "Tea and coffee will be presented in the dining room at any moment, Miss Bingley. Please do partake at any time."



Caroline lifted her nose proudly into the air and proceeded towards the staircase; she was perfectly capable of taking a hint. She did not bother to dismiss herself from their presence with words, for they deserved no such attention.

“Fitzwilliam...”

“Never fear my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth. I shall speak to your uncle in the course of the morning and...”

Their simpering voices faded away as Caroline flounced down the marble steps, huffing with derision. Miss Eliza Bennet could have Mr Darcy and this spirit-infested Bedlam! Miss Caroline Bingley would set her sights higher.

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Once freed from their mysterious confinement, Elizabeth and Darcy reluctantly separated with the promise to reunite downstairs an hour later, properly dressed. Their accidental meeting with Miss Bingley during their amorous parting had left Elizabeth worried all over again for her reputation, but her betrothed had reassured her that no tittle-tattle the lady could impart would be enough to tarnish her good name when his own was so closely connected to it. With this, Elizabeth was forced to be satisfied. She had returned his banyan to him amidst his protests—“Miss Bingley telling tales is one thing, but how could we possibly explain your clothing in my room?”—and adjourned to her bedchamber.

By the time Elizabeth had descended to the ground floor, well before the appointed time, Darcy was already waiting for her at the base of the staircase. Upon her appearance, he had marched directly to her and offered her a heartfelt greeting. There was no trace of fatigue in his features and, had she not known better, she would never have believed him awake for most of the night. “Have your aunt and uncle risen?”

“Yes, they are preparing for services. When I visited her chambers, my aunt assured me that they would both be down shortly.”

“Good, good.”

The plan was for Darcy to draw Mr Gardiner to his study—hopefully free of ghosts for the present—and confess their mishap to him. Mr Bennet would need to be applied to for his blessing, of course, but it was hoped that Mr Gardiner might at least allow them to announce their engagement to those within the household, in case there

were any rumours flying about. From there, Darcy intended to write to Mr Bennet to discuss any further particulars.

“My ears are burning.”

The pair of them pivoted to see Mr Gardiner leading his wife down the stairs, both of them dressed in their freshly laundered clothes from the day before. There were no traces of the foul weather to be found on the gentleman’s attire; the laundress at Pemberley knew what she was about.

Darcy stiffened and snapped to attention like a soldier surprised by his commanding officer. “Good morning, Mr Gardiner, Mrs Gardiner. I do hope your night was a restful one.” The couple returned his greeting and assured him that their accommodations were everything they could have wished as they trod the final steps to the ground floor. “Excellent. Mr Gardiner, might I request a private word with you?”

Elizabeth bit her lip, amused both at the startled response of her relations and Darcy’s haste. His eagerness was utterly endearing.

“Of course! Is aught the matter, sir? ”

“No, no, nothing like that, I assure you. Merely a...a request.”

Mrs Gardiner’s eyes jumped from Darcy to Elizabeth to her husband and back again, her smile growing incrementally with each pass. Elizabeth knew she must have discerned the purport of Darcy’s ‘request’—not that it required a great intellect to deduce, given recent events—and was basking in the superiority of being proved correct. Her aunt would demand details the moment they were alone, and she was prepared to deliver them, though she was not especially anticipating the inherent awkwardness of such a communication. Mrs Gardiner would give her the benefit of

the doubt, she was sure, but that made it no less mortifying to relate.

“Come, let us see the ladies to the music room before adjourning to my study. The gardens are especially lovely just after the rain.”

They traversed the length of the house, each gentleman escorting his favoured lady, and let themselves into the music room only to stop short upon finding an unexpected presence therein. It was Miss Bingley, and she was behaving rather oddly, pacing back and forth before the wall of windows that looked out onto the grounds and muttering indecipherably to herself. She halted at their entrance, eyes wide and countenance pale, and merely stared at them without any semblance of a polite greeting.

After a long few moments frozen in time, Elizabeth dipped her knees and offered an uncomfortable, “Good morning.”

Still, the lady said nothing, but she did at least return a curtsy. Caught as she had been in Darcy’s earlier ardent playfulness, Elizabeth had not noted the subtle signs of distress in Miss Bingley the way she did now. The lady appeared to have suffered a sleepless night, evidenced by the dark smudges beneath her eyes, and Elizabeth did not think she had ever seen her so informally attired. She wore an amber frock trimmed in lace and tassels, but there was no other adornment in her hair or jewels at her throat. Her hair was up but twisted into the sort of knot Elizabeth might have been able to perform on herself. Why, there was not a single feather upon her person, so far as she could see. Generally, she was presentable but not at all the peacock Elizabeth was accustomed to enduring.

Gently, haltingly, Elizabeth asked, “Are you well, Miss Bingley?”

The other woman bristled, and her usual hauteur fell into place. “As well as can be expected.” Elizabeth felt the pinch of that slight in her gut. No doubt Miss Bingley

saw her as snatching something precious from her grasp. “If you will excuse me, I think I shall see whether my sister is awake.”

With that, Miss Bingley brushed past them and out of the room, lightening the atmosphere considerably.

“My goodness,” said Mrs Gardiner with a hand pressed to her heart. “She looks as if she has seen a ghost!”

Elizabeth’s immediate reply was a warbling laugh. “Or something of that nature.”

“On that note...” Darcy turned to Mr Gardiner. “Let us see to the ladies’ comfort and adjourn to my study.”

Darcy led Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner to a settee near the window—sadly, it was far too wet to sit on the terrace—before bending over his betrothed’s hand and placing a soft kiss upon the back of it. Elizabeth flushed, and the prickling heat was all the more prominent for the self-satisfied way her aunt observed their interaction.

With no other fanfare, the gentlemen departed, leaving the ladies to their inquisition. It began immediately thus: “Out with it, Lizzy. Has Mr Darcy spoken? ”

“I do not know what would bring you to that conclusion, Aunt.”

“None of your teasing, if you please! I demand satisfaction.”

“Very well, I shall not deny you, but it is quite the strange tale...”

The remainder of the household had risen for services within the hour, necessarily cutting the interviews short. Even so, they were fruitful, and the matter of Darcy and Elizabeth’s engagement was as settled as it was possible to be without Mr Bennet

present. It was agreed that they would announce their understanding at breakfast in a quiet fashion, including only those guests in residence. Elizabeth rather suspected that Mrs Reynolds had guessed their happy news, for she had caught the elderly lady looking upon her and Darcy with tearful fondness once or twice, but otherwise it was fairly contained.

The response of their friends and relations was somewhat mixed. Mr Bingley was as effusive in his congratulations as his brother was indifferent—in keeping with their characters. To Elizabeth's surprise, Mrs Hurst's felicitations were not much more subdued than Mr Bingley's, albeit perhaps less sincere. Darcy postulated, and Elizabeth felt that he must be correct, that Mrs Hurst was mindful of retaining her rights of visiting Pemberley and was thus inclined to be gracious to its incumbent mistress. Miss Bingley, having already given her reluctant well wishes, said very little.

Miss Darcy, who absolutely insisted that Elizabeth must call her Georgiana henceforth—a privilege that was immediately reciprocated—was nothing short of ebullient. Throwing off her customary shyness, she had rushed to Elizabeth and embraced her, exclaiming how pleased she was to have a sister at last. “Oh, you will absolutely love living at Pemberley! And now you can go walking through the woods and gardens every day, just as you wished you could, and assist me in tending the roses...” On and on she went for several minutes, her joy inexhaustible.

It was with longing and regret that the Gardiners deemed it necessary to return to their lodgings after this short period of exquisite felicity. The Darcys protested that they might remain at Pemberley for the remainder of their holiday, but her aunt and uncle were firm; it would be inappropriate for the betrothed couple to remain under the same roof. A rather stern look from her uncle reminded Elizabeth that their misadventure had not been entirely overlooked, and she was chastened. In the end, the parties reached the compromise of daily visits, which was satisfactory enough, though not for Darcy.

“I wish you did not have to leave,” Darcy said as he escorted Elizabeth out to the carriage. The Gardiners were already settled inside, waiting patiently while the lovebirds bid their temporary farewells.

“I feel the same, but my aunt and uncle are correct—we have already skirted the line of propriety enough as it is. Oh, but how I shall miss you! It is silly, I know it, but I cannot help myself.”

“If you are silly, then so am I, for I shall miss you terribly. I am absolutely dreading the day you are required to return to Hertfordshire, for it is unlikely that I shall have the liberty to follow immediately with the harvest to organise.” He sighed. “I know not how I am to bear it when five miles alone feels like five hundred.”

Elizabeth slowed to a stop as a notion occurred to her. “What if I did not have to return to Longbourn? What if we could be married from Pemberley?”

Darcy’s brows rose high on his forehead. “You do not wish to be wed in your home parish?”

“It is not so much that I do not wish it as that I would prefer not to leave. It is strange to say, but I already feel as though Pemberley is my home. I feel as if I belong here. Besides,” she shot him an impish glance, “I should not like to deprive certain guests of an invitation, especially when they worked so diligently to bring about our union. Their spirited presence would be sorely missed.”

Darcy chuckled and shook his head. “You are the only ‘spirited presence’ that I require. However, as I am devoted to your every happiness, I shall not gainsay your wishes. Let us hope that your father is as amenable to them as I.”

“Tell him of your library, and I daresay he will be on your doorstep within the week. But do remind him to bring my mother and sisters with him.”

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Mr Bennet did not, in fact, rush to Pemberley directly, with or without his wife and daughters, but he was convinced to allow Elizabeth to marry from there. He was not initially inclined, but a pleading missive from his favourite, full of horror stories of the frippery he would endure should the wedding be hosted from Longbourn, persuaded him. Mrs Bennet had been far easier to convince, Elizabeth had reported with some amusement. After describing the splendours of Pemberley in a detailed letter, her dear mama had become convinced that the scheme was all her idea. Admittedly, Darcy was somewhat apprehensive to receive Mrs Bennet and the younger girls, but the benefit was worth any drawback.

Several weeks later, they met the Bennets on the front steps in a pandemonium of noise and flailing hands, much of which was due to Mrs Bennet alone. Mr Bennet and his eldest daughter embraced Elizabeth more sedately, though it was clear how well pleased they were to see her again by their warm smiles and glistening eyes. Miss Mary and Miss Lydia were received with the same apparent joy, but Elizabeth turned to her second youngest sister with a more tender regard. Little wonder, given what Miss Catherine had recently endured at Brighton.

Upon visiting Elizabeth at the Blue Lady the day after their engagement was announced, she had greeted him with tears rather than the expected jubilation. Upon asking, most anxiously, what grieved her, he had been relieved to learn that she was not regretting their new understanding, only dismayed by a letter from her eldest sister, which had arrived after Elizabeth and the Gardiners had left for Pemberley on that fateful day. Miss Catherine had run afoul of Wickham at Brighton. Apparently eager to depart his regiment over some debts of honour he could not pay, the wastrel



had attempted to seduce Miss Catherine into running away with him so that he could secure her pin money—and, presumably, a pleasant companion for however long he intended to hide. Miss Catherine, to her credit, had changed her mind at the last moment and refused to go with him—not the first time his charms had failed him, Darcy noted wryly to himself—at which time Wickham had attempted to force her into submission. She was only saved by the intervention of Colonel Fitzwilliam, who happened upon the scene of Wickham wrestling Miss Catherine into a hackney.

Darcy had wondered at the coincidence of his own cousin being in exactly the right place at the right time to intercede, but subsequent communications from Fitzwilliam had informed him that his presence in Brighton had been no accident. Darcy had, some months ago at Rosings, mentioned Wickham joining the militia, and Fitzwilliam had taken it upon himself thereafter to keep abreast of the miscreant with his not inconsiderable army resources. Upon learning that Wickham was destined for Brighton, and desirous of a trip to the seaside himself, it had been easy enough to get himself assigned there also. From there, he had trailed Wickham, realised the lout was poised to flee, and...well, Miss Catherine was fortunate that the colonel always got his man.

Wickham was set to face military justice, and although Fitzwilliam was confident that he would, at last, be required to bear the consequences of his actions, Darcy had sent his cousin all the debts he had accrued on his erstwhile friend's behalf over the years. Should the army fail to either jail or transport Wickham for his crimes, the amount he owed Darcy ought to be enough to see him confined to Marshalsea instead. Anything to keep the villain from preying upon any other unsuspecting young women.

Once they returned to the saloon where Georgiana, Bingley, and the Gardiners waited, Mrs Bennet began exclaiming over everything in sight. Bingley—who had remained behind to attend the wedding while his sisters and Hurst travelled on to Scarborough, at Miss Bingley's vehement behest—was the first to receive her effusive praise, but the wallpaper and curtains were no less remarkable to her than he.

“I might have added a bit more lace here and there, but...well, the effect is quite lovely, all the same. And I do admire this shade of blue! What is it? Cerulean? I should very much like to decorate my favourite parlour in this hue...”

While Mrs Bennet continued to praise Pemberley to the skies, she quite overlooked the reunion of her eldest daughter and their former neighbour. This was perhaps for the best, as the bit Darcy witnessed from surreptitious glances was rather awkward, and Mrs Bennet’s contribution would hardly have been helpful. Bingley at first seemed to stumble over his words and wave his hands unnecessarily, and Miss Bennet would barely look at him— another thing that was likely fortuitous, for otherwise she might have taken one of Bingley’s gestures in the nose, and the entire endeavour would have been even more unfortunate.

Some minutes after Darcy had last grimaced and forced himself to look away from the uncomfortable scene, he felt the sharp poke of Elizabeth’s elbow in his side and turned to her. She tilted her head subtly in the direction of the hapless couple, and he was pleased to note that the situation between them had apparently improved. Bingley’s hands, while still in motion, were more controlled as he sat perched on the edge of his chair and gazed with besotted wonder at Miss Bennet. The lady, her cheeks flushed lightly pink, gazed back with more feeling than Darcy had ever given her credit for. It seemed that all had ended well, despite the meddling of friends and relations.

At length, Mrs Bennet’s voice tired, and she was required to take a sip of her tea, which she had already declared splendid prior to actually tasting it. Grabbing her chance, Miss Lydia asked a question she had been all but bursting with. “Mr Darcy, is your cousin the colonel coming to the wedding?”

A glance at Miss Catherine and her ashen features gave Darcy a pang of pity for the girl. “Unfortunately, no. Fitzwilliam has some remaining...business in Brighton and cannot be spared from his duties at this time. We expect to see him next month, when

he has leave.” In truth, Fitzwilliam was determined to see Wickham punished severely for his latest transgression, though Darcy could not say as much in present company.

Miss Lydia loudly voiced her disappointment, but Miss Catherine sagged in apparent relief. Elizabeth, far more sensitive to her second youngest sister’s feelings, immediately changed the subject. “Mary, I believe you would appreciate the music room here. The pianoforte is exquisite, and the view from the terrace...”

After partaking of refreshments, the Bennets were shown to their guest chambers, while the rest of the party dispersed to change for dinner. The Gardiners, with the arrival of their Hertfordshire relations, had at last settled their account at the Blue Lady and retired to Pemberley with Elizabeth, bringing them all under his roof. Darcy had been forced to promise no more midnight rendezvous with his betrothed, but at least they were no longer separated. How he longed to have Elizabeth to himself! But such would have to wait until Monday when they were properly wed.

At the landing that divided the family and guest wings, Elizabeth brought them to a halt, allowing her relations to proceed down the corridor without her. Surreptitiously, she whispered, “Once you are dressed, meet me in the gallery.” So saying, she winked and relinquished his arm, following a bemused Miss Bennet to their assigned chambers.

Or perhaps not! Darcy’s heart galloped at the thought of a private moment with his beloved. He set off to rush Bailey through the necessary ablutions.

A short time later, though far longer than Darcy would have preferred, he marched into the gallery to find Elizabeth already there, perusing his portrait with a soft gaze. “Were that not my own likeness, I should have to call that gentleman out for stealing your affections from me.”

Elizabeth turned her head, her tender regard shifting into impish amusement by the time she faced him. “None of that, good sir, for you know where my heart truly lies.”

“And where might that be, my love? ”

“Why, with Pemberley, of course! I believe I fell in love with you upon first seeing your beautiful grounds here.”

Within three strides, she was gathered up in his arms and giggling against his lips. It was not long before her amusement was quieted and her fingers were tangled in his hair, devoting herself to the bliss of their stolen moment.

At length, when they were both properly dishevelled but before their clothing became terribly disarranged, Darcy drew back, trailing kisses up Elizabeth’s throat and back towards her mouth. They were both breathing heavily, and their hearts, pressed against one another, were racing at the same fevered tempo. With great effort and a resigned moan, he ceased his attentions and buried his nose in the crook of Elizabeth’s neck. “Remind me why we must wait until Monday to marry?”

Elizabeth stroked his hair and nuzzled at his temple, easing his frustration. “Because it is already too late today, and tomorrow is Sunday.”

“I ought to have sought a special licence.”

“I sincerely doubt the archbishop would have granted one to an untitled landowner, regardless of his wealth.”

“He would not have denied me,” Darcy grumbled against her shoulder. “I can be rather persistent when I choose to be.”

He was rewarded with a laugh for this observation. “I cannot deny it, but taking your

cause to the Archbishop of Canterbury would have deprived me of your company, and I know you would not be so cruel.”

Darcy sighed and pulled back enough to see Elizabeth’s face. It was full of adoration, and he could not help stroking her cheek with reverence. “As ever, you are correct, my love.”

“Best you remember that through our years together. Your life will be all the happier for it. ”

“Minx.”

Creak .

Darcy was just leaning in for another kiss, when a sharp squeal followed by the pitter-patter of disembodied footsteps caught his attention. Someone, be they guest or servant, was approaching just around the bend of the corridor.

Unwilling to relinquish their privacy just yet, Darcy scanned the length of the gallery for a likely hiding place. There were no pedestals large enough for the office of concealing both of them, nor was it at all tempting to crawl beneath the settee in the centre of the space. His gaze alighted on an open door at the far end—his mother’s study. The knob and associated mechanisms had been replaced, but there was still no satisfactory explanation for their entrapment the previous month. Dare I risk it?

A glance at Elizabeth decided him. As the footsteps drew nearer, he grasped her hand in his and tugged her towards their convenient haven. They darted through the gap between the door and its frame, ducking quickly out of sight, but Darcy made a point of leaving it open. Just in case.

Elizabeth laughed at him. “Fitzwilliam, what are you doing?”

Wrapping his arms about her waist, Darcy pulled her flush against him before responding, “Keeping you to myself.” With this declaration of intent, he resumed his earlier ministrations with gusto. When the door snapped shut a few seconds later, they were both too occupied to mind.

### EPILOGUE

Even as Elizabeth tugged her shawl more securely about her shoulders to protect herself from the chilly air, she sighed in wonder at the early signs of spring as she strolled along the banks of Pemberley's infamous lake. Although the locals whispered stories of ghosts dwelling within its depths, it was brimming with new life as winter gave way to warmer weather. The first shoots of daffodils were breaking through the dirt along the edge of the path—bright patches of verdancy peeking out of the shade. The budding willows swayed gently in the breeze, a preponderance of birds sheltering within their branches as they built their nests. A pair of swans paddled out on the water, nuzzling one another the way lovers do.

Elizabeth sighed again, this time with more wistfulness. “And to think, I nearly missed my chance to become mistress of all this. 'Tis a good thing Fate led me here against my own wrongheaded notions.”

Fate, as her dear Darcy was wont to claim, had reunited them above six months ago and performed whatever magic was required to result in the only possible conclusion of their love story. Had it not, they may have spent the rest of their lives wallowing in regret and longing for what might have been. Instead, they were married, settled, and?—

Elizabeth stumbled to a halt, her hand reflexively flying to her abdomen. Could it be? She held painfully still, her heart thudding heavily in her chest, and waited. A few seconds more rewarded her impatience with the delicate, barely perceptible sensation of butterfly wings fluttering just below her navel.

Instantly, joyful tears welled in her eyes as her dearest suspicions were at last confirmed. The hand not pressed to her belly rose to cup her mouth as a stuttering gasp fell from her lips, followed quickly by a sob. “A babe,” she whispered as a tear rolled down her cheek.

The wind kicked up, sending the willow branches into a swirling frenzy. The sun shone brighter, the birds twittered a jubilant melody, and leaves rained down upon her. Elizabeth thought she heard an ethereal whisper of congratulations tickle at her ears, though she was too overcome to swear by it.

More tears cascaded down Elizabeth’s face even as she laughed. She wiped them away and exclaimed, “Oh! Oh, I must tell Fitzwilliam he is to be a father. A father!”

With one hand upon the spot where she had first felt the fluttering signs of life within her body and the other lifting her hem out of the way, Elizabeth turned round and dashed back the way she had come. Sense prevailed soon thereafter, and she slowed to a more careful pace, but her journey to the house was swift even so.

Knowing that Darcy was sure to be at his desk, Elizabeth made directly for the pair of doors that led into his study. She grasped the knob, gave it the necessary tug, and threw herself inside once the door was worked free. How surprised he will be! We have not been married seven months yet and ? —

Darcy was exactly where she expected him to be, seated behind his desk with a letter in his hand. When he looked up, however, his countenance was far more grim than she was accustomed to. Perhaps at one time she had considered him solemn and unsmiling—but not since well before their marriage.

A glance at the paper in his hand caused her to swallow convulsively. It was edged in black. “What news?” Dear Lord, let it not be from Longbourn.

Darcy stood from his chair and crossed the room to stand before her, the dreaded



letter still clasped in his fingers. A passing cloud drifted across the sun, dimming the room. “It is my cousin Anne. I have received word only this morning that she has died unexpectedly.”

Elizabeth’s initial response was relief that her parents and sisters were all well, followed immediately by a sickening sense of guilt. There ought to be no celebration that Miss de Bourgh was gone and others spared.

“When? How?” Anne de Bourgh, as Elizabeth had known her, had not been a healthful creature, but no one had suspected she was so close to death. The way Darcy told it, most of her complaints were believed to be fabricated for the sake of feminine delicacy. How humbling and terrible to be so wrong!

“Only two days ago, or so my uncle writes. She suffered one of her bouts and...” Darcy paused, his eyes glassy as he stared down at the letter. “Did not recover.”

Setting her own announcement aside, Elizabeth folded herself into Darcy’s embrace and held him tightly. “I am so sorry, my love.”

He cradled her to his chest and kissed the crown of her bonneted head. “Lord Matlock insists that we attend the funeral, but I am uncertain whether we would be welcomed. It might be kinder to remain at Pemberley.”

Darcy had deemed it better to wait until after their nuptials to inform Lady Catherine of their union, just in case she intended to meddle, and her response to the intelligence had been extremely indignant. She had given way to all the genuine frankness of her character, sending him language so very abusive, especially of Elizabeth, that Darcy had declared all intercourse at an end. They had heard from neither Lady Catherine nor Miss de Bourgh since. With this report, it was time to put any lingering animosity aside.

Gently pulling back to see his face, Elizabeth cupped it between her palms. “We must

go and pay our respects. Miss de Bourgh was your cousin, Lady Catherine your mother's sister."

Darcy turned his head to kiss one of her hands. "I cannot condone the way Lady Catherine spoke of you. I will not endure her disrespect or allow her to treat you with less than the honour that you are due."

"She was angry and spoke unwisely. You must forgive her and show her the compassion you wish she would feel. If not for yourself, then for our family." Our growing family. Elizabeth bit her lip to contain that last thought; this was not the moment to bask in their own happiness.

Darcy sighed, his shoulders drooping. "I know you are correct, little though I like it. Lord Matlock says the very same in his letter. To Rosings, then, I suppose we must go."

The news of his cousin's demise cut Darcy deeply. Not because he harboured regrets of a romantic sort—certainly not, especially since meeting and falling desperately in love with Elizabeth—but due rather to a nebulous feeling of guilt. Guilt for dismissing her frailty as fictitious. Guilt for neglecting her. Guilt for not protecting her. Much as he told himself that he was being ridiculous, that he could not possibly have prevented her death, he still felt somehow responsible.

Lady Catherine, he was sure, would agree with this estimation of his culpability. She had said as much in her horrid letter:

It was the fondest wish of your mother, as well as hers! In abandoning Anne in this way, you have destroyed her every chance at happiness. I should not be surprised if she dies of a broken heart.

It seemed her grim prognostications had come to pass.

Darcy shook his head to dispel his aunt's haunting words. If he took to heart all of Lady Catherine's pronouncements, he would be no wiser than that addlepate Collins. Anne's sudden death was an unfortunate twist of fate, not a consequence of following his own inclinations. Further, it was not as if Anne had desired the match any more than he, which she had made perfectly clear nearly a decade ago. She would not have him when he had dutifully asked, and he had not felt an inclination strong enough to pursue the matter further. Not at all like with Elizabeth.

Recollection of his beloved wife urged Darcy to look at the mantel clock, which read half past ten in the evening. He had not intended to brood in his gloomy solitude for so long; Elizabeth was almost certainly asleep already. He breathed a heavy sigh of disappointment. At one time, he could expect her to be awake and waiting for him in their bed, full of amorous energy, but of late she had been more fatigued and could barely keep her eyes open past nine. At least I shall be able to take comfort in holding her.

Swallowing the last of his brandy, Darcy stood and set aside his glass on the table next to his chair. The fire was low, but its embers still glowed brightly enough for him to find his way to the door without lighting a candle. He left his study and climbed the grand staircase on the way to the suite of rooms he shared with his wife.

Rather than enter through the master's side, as had been his former practice, he let himself into what was formerly the mistress's bedchamber. Closed up for many years and suffering from neglect, it had been in a terrible state between his mother's occupation and Elizabeth's. He had spent the weeks of their courtship diligently overseeing its repair—following the directives of his betrothed and her aunt, of course—until perfection had been achieved.

It was no longer a bedroom, however. Elizabeth had indulged his fancy to share a bed, and so what would have been the room in which she slept had been converted into a shared sitting area. Although the bed had been removed, many of the old furnishings had been cleaned and repurposed; Darcy fondly recalled the softness of

that Prussian blue rug upon his bare feet as a lad, as well as the soothing cream, willow-patterned wallpaper that made him feel as if he were inside a china teacup.

Even so, the room was not entirely as Lady Anne would have designed it; Elizabeth had left her own mark, and the familiar was favourably blended with the new. Green accents were added to the blue—cushions, armchairs, tassels, and the like—which his wife assured him created more contrast in the palette, whatever that meant. It looked well, which was all Darcy could intelligently speak to. Whitewashed bookshelves, filled with their most perused tomes, had been built into the wall surrounding the marble fireplace. The portrait of his parents, which had once hung in his bedchamber, had been moved to a place of prominence above said fireplace, which was just as well; he would not have wished to enjoy his wedding night with the pair of them benevolently looking on. In place of the bed, furniture more suited to lounging had been brought in to fill out the space.

The most prominent piece was an emerald and ivory striped sofa facing the hearth, upon which he discovered the reclined figure of his beautiful wife. Already in her billowing white nightgown with her hair coming loose from its braid, she was the very image of home and comfort. She was stretched out beneath a blanket, with a book splayed upon her abdomen, snoring lightly, and he could not but smile.

I could never regret marrying Elizabeth.

Darcy trod lightly over to the sofa and sat down near her feet. Reaching out with two fingers, he softly stroked the curls resting upon her cheek, tucking them behind her ear. She snorted, eyes blinking rapidly, and his smile widened. “Dearest, wake up. It is time for bed.”

Elizabeth moaned and swatted playfully at his hand. “I was already sleeping—there was no need to wake me.”

“So you would prefer to spend the entire night on the sofa?”

Rolling away from him as she tugged the blanket up over her shoulders, she made a disgruntled sound in response.

Chuckling, he rose and scooped her up into his arms, eliciting a startled squeak. She thrashed and complained without conviction before settling into his hold, her head lolling onto his shoulder. “Come now, you will regret sleeping anywhere but our bed in the morning.”

The door between the master’s and mistress’s chambers had been removed, leaving an open arch for Darcy to cross through as he carried her to bed. His—now their—bedchamber had suffered little renovation upon his marriage, with Elizabeth assuring him that it was unneeded. A few of those green accents had been added and curtains made to match the ones in their sitting room, but otherwise it was largely what it had been in his bachelor days. Except so much more with his beloved in residence.

Darcy laid his bride gently upon their bed, tugging the blankets free so as to cover her. He drew them up to her chin, and she charmingly snuggled deeper into their warmth. “There now. Is that not much better?”

Around a yawn, her words lightly indistinct, Elizabeth said, “You are so high-handed, Mr Darcy.”

“I confess I am.” So saying, he pressed a kiss to her forehead and stood to back away, tugging at the knot in his cravat. He did not mean to go far, only to strip down so he could join her imminently. Bailey would not be pleased with the state of his wrinkled clothing, but then he must forgive his newly married master for the lapse—as he had done often these past seven months. A larger bonus on Boxing Day had paid for it.

“I suppose you will need to be...”

“Oh?” he queried, working free the buttons of his waistcoat. “And why is that? Do

you intend to be naughty?” The last was said with an impish smirk that Elizabeth could not appreciate with her eyes closed.

“Mm...no, for the baby.”

Darcy’s hands stilled on the fall of his trousers. “W-what?”

Elizabeth did not answer at first, merely grunted and turned her face away. When Darcy prodded her again, her eyes fluttered open, and she squinted at him as if bewildered by his presence. “What?”

Darcy’s heart drummed in his chest. He leant forwards, caging Elizabeth between his arms where she reclined upon the mattress. “You said ‘for the baby’. What baby?”

Elizabeth tensed, and the haze of sleep dissipated from her expression. Her mouth dropped open in apparent alarm. “I had not meant to say that.”

“Say what? What baby do you speak of?”

Cringing slightly, Elizabeth replied, “ Our baby.”

“Our...? Elizabeth, are you...?”

“Yes.” She inhaled a deep breath, a trembling smile breaking across her face. “I am pregnant.”

Before his wife had even completed her declaration, Darcy had pulled her into his arms and begun kissing her fervently. “Dearest, loveliest Elizabeth! Is it true? Are you certain?”

“As certain as it is possible to be, yes.” She laughed, a warbling sound of relief, as she brought her arms up to wrap around his back. He could feel her fingers digging

into the fabric of his shirt. "I felt the quickening this morning."

"Why did you not say?"

"I was on my way to tell you when...well, you had just received the letter from Lord Matlock about Miss de Bourgh, and...it did not feel like the proper time."

Darcy kissed her again, tangling his fingers into her hair, which had almost entirely unravelled from its braid during their impassioned celebration. When he pulled back, it was only far enough to rest his forehead against hers. "I understand your hesitation, but...my God, a baby! I thought nothing could redeem this awful day, but this...I love you so very much."

Elizabeth nuzzled deeper into his embrace, pressed against his galloping heart. Exactly where she belonged. "As I love you."