



# Raised at Rosings (Elizabeth and Darcy True Love Multiverse #4)

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**Category:** Historical

**Description:** Will a relationship, born from insult, break apart under stress, or will it blossom into something beautiful?

A chain of unfortunate events leads Sir Lewis de Bourgh to take Elizabeth Bennet as his ward. Lady Catherine's sharp disapproval stings, but Elizabeth relishes her new life with Anne and the warmth of the man she now calls Uncle Lewis. Though Rosings might have its flaws, the abundant love she receives there makes it a wonderful place to be raised.

Darcy has known for a long time that most of the people in his life only see him as a pawn to be used to their advantage and not his. The experience has left him jaded, filled with bitter cynicism and disillusionment that fuels his cutting criticisms. Until a clash with his uncle's ward, sparked by his casual criticism, leads to a painful reevaluation of his worldview.

When Elizabeth loses her beloved Uncle Lewis and Darcy loses his father, they're both thrust into unfamiliar roles and responsibilities, the weight of their new burdens settling heavily upon their shoulders. A fragile friendship develops between them, based on shared pain and support for one another. Things become far more complicated for our dear couple when Lady Catherine, released from her husband's hold, begins scheming.

Can they thwart Lady Catherine's schemes before irreversible damage occurs, or will her machinations lead to her victory? What will happen to their friendship along the way?

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# Page 1

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## Prologue

Was this to be her lot? To be abandoned not once, but twice by the people who should have been there to protect her? At least the first time it had happened, it had been driven more by selfish whim than by malice and cruelty, though the outcome was hardly any different. She was alone, struggling to hear anything over the pounding of her heart.

As she scanned the somber street, the weight of lingering gazes lurking in every shadowed corner nearly overwhelmed her. Elizabeth found herself suddenly grateful that her mother had abandoned her at an inn on the road to London, rather than in the dangerous streets of a London slum. But even this small grace offered little comfort, doing nothing to ease the fear coiling in her stomach like a tight knot.

She was not ignorant. Elizabeth was acutely aware of the potential dangers that awaited a woman alone on the streets. Her vulnerability seemed to heighten her senses with every breath she took. Fighting down her panic, Elizabeth forced herself to contemplate all the ways she was capable of protecting herself.

A sudden wave of understanding swept over Elizabeth, and a subtle, ironic smile graced her face. The very act of desertion that haunted her as a child would now become her saving grace in the face of abandonment as an adult. Abandonment had influenced much of the way she lived. With a history of betrayal, Elizabeth struggled with trusting others. However, her eagerness to acquire a means to protect herself compelled her to seek out those who were willing to teach her.

Having recently grown wary of Lady Catherine, Elizabeth had taken two precautions

for her safety before leaving her room that morning—a knife hidden in her boot and money sewn into the hem of her cape. At one time, she had money sewn into several of her garments, but as she grew, so did her confidence in her surroundings. She had been proud to get over her habits, born of anxiety, but recent developments had alerted her to the necessity to reinstate them. With unwavering resolve, Elizabeth knew she would not only survive but find a way to thrive, regardless of whatever hardships lay ahead.

Elizabeth drew a breath to steady her nerves but instantly regretted it as the fetid air turned her stomach and left her coughing. Once the fit had passed, she scanned the street once more, searching for someone who appeared safe to approach. She squared her shoulders and stepped forward.

Elizabeth refused to disappear, to let the danger of the slum wipe her out of existence. She would remain unyielding and fearless in the face of her situation. She knew what Lady Catherine wanted for her, and Elizabeth was not about to roll over and take it. The wretched woman would learn, to her dismay, that she could not discard people as she pleased. Her authority didn't extend that far. Elizabeth knew the woman's last vestiges of power would soon be taken from her.

With a smile, Elizabeth took another step toward the little girl nearby. Despite what she wanted everyone to believe, Lady Catherine was just a woman with a courtesy title. There was nothing special about her and she would be toppled just as easily as anyone else.

## Page 2

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### Chapter One

Jane's fingers gripped Elizabeth like the eagle's talons in the story her papa used to tell her before he died, but she paid it no mind. Elizabeth, a mere seven years old, sensed the gravity of their momma's absence. It was not a good thing to be so very alone in the world, with only a sister for protection. Walking down the busy street with Jane in tow, Elizabeth looked frantically for any sign that she might be mistaken, that her mother was still in the town somewhere.

Most everyone was going about their business, ignoring the two small girls, and Elizabeth made sure that she and Jane stayed out of their way. She did not think for a moment that it was odd that she was taking care of her older sister. It was just how things were. Jane, with her delicate nature, was easily upset, so it came as no surprise to Elizabeth that the situation overwhelmed her.

Wherever she looked, she only saw unfamiliar faces. Not that there would be many people she could recognize. Before everything fell apart, they had been traveling, and now they were in a new town she'd never seen before. Elizabeth did not even know where they were or how far they had strayed from what used to be home.

Elizabeth felt a tug on her arm and glanced back at Jane, who trailed behind with wide eyes and a worried expression. As always, Elizabeth understood her without a word. She offered a reassuring look and sighed, then turned back the way they had come. They had passed an inn not far back—surely it would have a water closet, or at least an outhouse.

It did not take them long before they reached the inn, and Elizabeth tugged on one of

the maid's aprons, trying to get her attention. Raising her voice over the cacophony that filled the inn, she asked, "Miss? Miss...can you help us, please?"

The serving girl looked down in mild surprise, then smiled. "And how can I help the two of you?"

Elizabeth glanced at Jane, who was biting her lip, then frowned and said, "We need to use the water closet, please."

The maid's eyes widened with understanding. "Of course. Let me show you the way." She tucked the rag into her apron and led them through the crowded room toward a closed door. Her voice softened with concern. "Do you need help?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No thank you, we can manage."

While Jane was clearly relieved to finally tend to her need, Elizabeth couldn't ignore the low murmurs drifting through the door.

"Did they have anyone with them?" the new voice asked.

"No, they were alone, and I do not like it," said the original maid. "They are finely dressed. They should have someone looking after them. A nurse or governess should be trailing after them." Biting her lip, Elizabeth wondered if it was a good idea to tell the two women what had happened.

Once they had finished, Elizabeth smoothed out Jane's skirt, then her own, mimicking the way the maid at home always had. It was not as though they could remain in the quiet safety of the water closet forever. With a steadying breath, she opened the door and stepped out with Jane on her heels.

They were promptly greeted by two women, and Elizabeth recognized one as the

maid who had helped them before. Though she feared they would ask something difficult, the maid simply asked, “All better?”

Smiling in relief, Elizabeth easily responded, “Yes, thank you.”

The opportunity for further conversation was cut short when an authoritative voice called, “There is a large group arriving. Beatrice, Hattie, get out there and make yourself useful!”

The two women exchanged a glance, rolling their eyes before forcing matching smiles as they adjusted their caps and began to walk away. But one paused, glancing back at Elizabeth and Jane lingering in the empty hallway. “Why don’t you find a table,” she offered, “and I’ll bring you something to eat?”

Ignoring Jane’s hopeful gaze, Elizabeth shook her head and replied, “We do not have any money for food.”

Nodding, the woman offered a warm smile, but Elizabeth saw the sadness in her eyes when she said, “At least sit down at one of the tables and take a rest.” Shepherding the girls back to the common room, she encouraged them to sit down on a bench, away from the hustle and bustle.

After the woman left, Jane leaned over to Elizabeth and whispered, “Do you think something happened to Momma?”

Despite her young age, Elizabeth possessed a remarkable level of pragmatism. It did not help that the adults in her life often overlooked her, and she heard much of what she should not have. She had heard her mother complaining ever since the sickness that took their Papa and younger sister Mary. Her mother was not happy with the life of a widow and wanted to remarry, especially after the strange man arrived claiming their home as his, all because Elizabeth had no brother.

They had to leave. At first, Momma had said they were going to visit their uncle in London, but he had not been at home, so they returned to their carriage and continued on their way. The night before, her momma told them she had an idea about how to fix everything. Now, it appeared that abandoning her children had been her momma's plan all along. When they had stopped to water the horses and let them rest, Momma had told Lizzie and Jane to go pick flowers in the nearby woods and that she would come collect them when it was time to leave, but she never came to get them. They waited for what felt like forever, but eventually Elizabeth told Jane they had to go look for momma because she was not coming.

When they arrived at the small stable on the edge of the town, there was no sight of their carriage or their mother and her maid. Their only source of security in the world seemed to have vanished without a trace. Walking the length of the town had done nothing but wear out their small feet and crush their hopes.

Elizabeth was too young and too tired to try to protect her older sister from the truth. Shaking her head, she said, "No, Jane. I think Momma left without us."

Jane laid her head on Elizabeth's slight shoulder and asked, "What are we going to do, Lizzie?"

Elizabeth felt a twinge of resentment but pushed it to the back of her mind. It was not Jane's fault that they were in the situation they were in, nor was it her fault that Elizabeth was the stronger of the two sisters. Sighing, Elizabeth murmured, "I do not know, Jane." It was terrifying for a young girl, who always prided herself on knowing things, to suddenly be faced with the unknown.

Lewis de Bourgh paused, dragging a hand down his face before following his wife into the inn. She was already casting a scornful eye at their surroundings and scolding their daughter for trying to catch up with her cousins as they explored. In moments of honesty, he could not help but acknowledge that the allure of Lady Catherine's dowry

could not compensate for the trials of being married to her.

Even the travel returning from her sister's funeral had been fraught with complaints and reprimands. Between that and the difficulties he always experienced when he traveled, it had not been an easy journey. He glanced over to find his brother-in-law also watching Catherine, shaking his head before meeting Lewis's gaze with a resigned shrug. Reginald didn't like Catherine's rants any more than he did.

Smiling at his brother-in-law's antics, Lewis walked into the inn despite his morose feelings and tingling limbs. At least they were traveling with the earl and his family. It gave him a bit of an outlet, an escape from the viciousness that was Catherine. If she went too far, Reginald would rein her in, and to Lewis's dismay, he was the only one who could. It was no small blow to a man's pride to know he held no sway over his own wife.

Part of it stemmed from the fact that she thought herself above him. As only a baronet, he was beneath her in status, and she treated his wishes with disdain, confident in her superiority as the daughter of an earl. Fairness aside, she tended to look down on everyone except for dukes and the royal family. Even then, her respect was bestowed begrudgingly.

Moving over to Anne, he told her to go sit with the young viscount Felton and his younger brother Richard. He loved the way her eyes lit up at his permission before she rushed over to sit with her cousins. While she had never been a healthy child, Lewis believed half her problem was her inability to be herself and do childish things. Her lack of time in the sun probably did not help either.

Catherine immediately turned to him with a huff and spat, "Lewis, I just got her behaving as a proper young lady should. Why would you do that?"

With a tilt of his head, Reginald remarked, "Catty, you had her behaving like an



inanimate object, rather than a ten-year-old child.”

Suppressing his amusement, Lewis observed Catherine’s intense glare as she locked eyes with her younger brother. Reginald did not flinch and eventually Catherine looked away before saying, “You have never had the proper sense of decorum. With each passing day, my fear for the future of our family’s title grows stronger.” Disregarding them both, she stood with a haughty demeanor and her nose held high.

Determined not to dwell on the negative, Lewis watched his daughter chat with her cousins, her whole face lighting up as she did. He had wished that he had been able to give her some siblings to play with, but it was not to be. Lady Catherine had closed her door to him as soon as she had confirmed her pregnancy with Anne. Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise, as his wife wasn’t the most nurturing mother. While he cherished the innocence and playfulness of children, his wife held a contemptuous opinion of them and believed they should be tightly controlled and shaped into useful tools.

While Reginald spoke with the staff to arrange for rooms and a private meal, Lewis found his attention drawn to two girls sitting alone in the corner. They were younger than his own daughter, and like his own party, they wore mourning clothes. Interestingly, the younger girl, who resembled a fae child with dark hair and mesmerizing green eyes, appeared to provide comfort to the older girl, an ethereal blonde with blue eyes. Looking around, he could not spot any adults who might be looking after them. Their clothing spoke of wealth, marking them as gentry at the very least, so there should have been someone there watch over them, but there was not.

Signaling to one of the maids, Lewis asked, “Who is looking after those girls?”

Glancing to where he had gestured, the young woman frowned. “They seem to be alone. I have asked around, and no one knows them. They just showed up this

morning.”

Lewis watched the two children, his heart going out to them. How frightening to be so alone. Thinking quickly, he asked, “Did no one come looking for them?”

“No, and I even had one of the stable hands ask around while on an errand. It seems that they appeared in town this morning,” she explained somberly, “but no one saw them with any adults.”

With a nod, Lewis left his group behind and approached the girls, keeping his pace slow and trying to look as nonthreatening as possible. Once again, he noticed the younger girl’s protectiveness as she whispered in the older one’s ear and patted her hand. Kneeling in front of them, he said, “Good afternoon, ladies. My name is Lewis de Bourgh.”

Nodding in an oddly regal manner, the smaller girl replied, “I am Elizabeth Bennet, and this is my older sister, Jane Bennet. It is lovely to meet you.”

“I know this might be presumptuous of me,” Lewis started with a friendly smile, “but I was wondering where your family was. You seem very alone.”

For some reason, this caused the blonde to cry. Ever the nurturer, his sister-in-law, Judith Fitzwilliam, the countess, approached him and stood slightly behind him. She hovered at his shoulder, her need to comfort the girls a tangible thing as little Elizabeth said, “Our papa died and our Momma...” Looking at her sister, she bit her lip briefly before adding, “Mama was supposed to collect us after her errand but...”

Lewis heard Judith murmur under her breath before rushing around and embracing the blonde. His sister-in-law practically oozed maternal instinct and had long wanted a daughter, so he was not surprised she would rush to comfort an abandoned child. Not that he was any less interested in wanting to comfort the two children, though as

a gentleman, he expressed it differently. Reaching out, he patted the younger child's hand awkwardly and said, "I am sure that something has simply detained her, and until we sort it out, my family will care for the two of you."

He was not surprised when he heard his wife screech from behind him, "That is utter ridiculousness!"

Elizabeth studied the expressions on the kind man's face, and the screaming woman's. It was clear they disagreed about helping her and Jane. Observing them with the quiet perception children often have, Elizabeth decided she liked the gentleman, but not the lady at all.

Stomping her foot, the woman continued, "We are a noble family. We have no business associating with the unworthy or undesirable. The town, if it is able, it will take care of it, and if they can't, so what?"

The nice lady who had been comforting Jane gasped and replied, "Even you cannot say something so cruel. These children are neither unworthy nor undesirable. Had you paid attention, you would have recognized that they belong to a well-off family—their clothes alone should have been a clue."

Scoffing, the woman barked, "Really? How well off could their family be if they were abandoned?"

Feeling the need to say something, Elizabeth inserted, "My papa was a good man. He ran our family's estate and took care of everything, just like his papa and grandpapa, but he died with my little sister."

"I am sorry you lost them, my dear. Can you tell me where your estate was or how long you were traveling?" asked the gentleman.

Elizabeth scrunched up her face, searching for the right words. “Our estate was Longbourn, but they said another man gets to live there now because I do not have a brother.”

The man nodded as if he understood the problem, but then the mean woman said, “See, she doesn’t even have an estate to return to.”

That was when a new man showed up and said, “Catty, didn’t your governess teach you to stay silent if you have nothing valuable to contribute? I suggest you keep your mouth shut as we will not be consulting you over the care of these two children.” With a smile that belied his scolding moments before, he pulled out a few candies, offering one first to Jane, then to Elizabeth.

Though Elizabeth was happy to suck on her candy, having something in her mouth suddenly caused her stomach to rumble. Blushing, she pressed her hands into her empty stomach. Embarrassment flooded her when the second gentleman chuckled. “It seems fortuitous that we will have a meal ready for us soon. I insist that you young ladies will join us. As for finding your mother, I am sure my valet can investigate the matter while we eat. How does that sound?”

Elizabeth looked at Jane and saw her eager expression. It had been a while since their last meal. Smiling, Elizabeth said, “That would be very nice. Thank you, sir.”

“Good!” Clasp ing his hands together, the second man offered a genial smile. Once the stern woman had disappeared from view, he inclined his head and said, “I am Reginald Fitzwilliam. The woman who just departed is my older sister, and this,” he paused to gesture to the kind woman who was still consoling Jane, “is my wife. But I don’t believe I caught your name.”

Though she couldn’t explain why, Elizabeth felt the moment held some quiet significance. “Elizabeth Bennet, sir,” she replied. “And my older sister is Jane.”

“A lovely name, my dear, and your sister’s as well.” Looking over, he spotted a maid who seemed to wait for his attention and exclaimed, “Ah, it seems that everything is ready.”

The man’s wife rose and gently smoothed Jane’s dress before wrapping an arm around her shoulders and following the maid. Elizabeth glanced between her sister’s retreating form and the two men still standing beside her. Though she felt small and a bit wary, something about their manner gave her a fragile sense of reassurance. Sensing her hesitation, Mr. Fitzwilliam offered a warm smile and a light touch to her shoulder. “I don’t know about you, Miss Elizabeth,” he said kindly, “but I’m quite famished.” It was rather distressing when her stomach chose that moment to rumble once more, but the two gentlemen were kind enough not to make anything of it.

They had taken only a few steps when Elizabeth noticed some of the older children joining them who appeared just as friendly as the adults. When the younger of the two boys said, “Hello, I am Richard. Would you like to sit with me?” Elizabeth smiled and nodded, feeling some of the worry lift from her shoulders. Hopefully, her day would not end as badly as it had started.

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### Chapter Two

Even with his wife's silent fury lingering in the air, the evening was more pleasant than any Lewis could recall spent in her company. If only he had known that her anger would spare him from enduring her pontificating about topics she knew nothing about, he would have provoked her long ago. To be fair, the enjoyable evening hinged entirely on her brother's presence and that of the public eye. A similar attempt at Rosings would have yielded a very different and far less agreeable outcome.

The conversation between himself, Reginald, and Judith had been filled with laughter and lightheartedness, which would never have happened had his wife had her way. All the children had exhibited excellent manners and had even contributed to the conversation at large on occasion. Despite their recent introduction to one another, the lost little girls had seamlessly integrated with the others to form a cohesive group. Though soft-spoken, little Jane exuded a friendly demeanor and blossomed under the loving care of his sister-in-law, Judith. For all that she was the youngest, Elizabeth effortlessly conversed with Felton, Richard, and Anne, despite the pain that occasionally flickered across her face.

He had never seen his daughter light up so much as when she was talking with Elizabeth. It was as if the little girl had something magic about her, drawing Anne out into a cheerful conversation. In the few meals he had been able to spend with his daughter, she was always so quiet, but he blamed that on his wife's domineering personality.

Frankly, he enjoyed having the children eat with them, and unlike his wife, was quite grateful the carriage with the children's governess had been delayed by a damaged

wheel. He had never been fond of the idea that children needed to be whisked away from their parents as much as possible. He found joy in spending time with his daughter and nephews. He often questioned why people even had children if they would not enjoy spending time with them.

Once dinner was over and the governesses had finally arrived, all the children, including Jane and Elizabeth, were escorted upstairs to be tucked into bed and the adults had retired to their private sitting room. Often the quiet one of the group, Lewis watched the others in the room. There were several meaningful looks passing back and forth between Reginald and Judith that Catherine was purposefully ignoring. With her arms crossed, she simmered as she stared into the fire.

“That settles it then. We will take Jane and Elizabeth with us when we leave in the morning.” After taking a sip of the sherry she had been enjoying, Judith added, “It cannot be too difficult to look after them. Who knows, we might even be able to make them our wards.”

“You cannot be serious!” Catherine practically screeched.

Reginald leaned back in his chair and crossed his feet at the ankles. A person who did not know him would have thought him relaxed, but Lewis knew this was not the case. When Reginald spoke, his voice had a hard edge, and it didn’t surprise Lewis at all. “She is entirely serious, darling sister. Judith and I are going to bring little Jane and Elizabeth into our home, possibly as our wards. The specifics will be decided later.”

Lewis couldn’t help but admire how Reginald and Judith managed to make such a decision without speaking—a kind of silent understanding he had never experienced with his wife. Their thoughts were too dissimilar for her to truly understand him. He did, however, understand that she was about to release a torrent of blandishments on them.

Catherine began her rant with a haughty glare. “While I will admit that it is not unheard of to take a ward, generally there is some sort of prior understanding between the two families. Additionally, those girls are anything but orphans, unlike what is usually expected.” Huffing, Catherine continued, “You do not even know anything about the girls’ mother or where she has gone! She is obviously of a lower class if she was so willing to abandon her offspring. The town must handle the woman’s disappearance as well as the care of the waifs. Surely there is some form of governance to manage things.”

Personally, Lewis believed that despite her high station and pedigree, Catherine would abandon Anne in a heartbeat if she thought it would benefit her in any way. Feeling the need to contribute, Lewis spoke up and said, “I believe their mother is alive and has not come to any harm, only that she found abandoning them the easiest of her options as a widow without an estate to rely on.”

Turning to face him, Reginald asked, “Why would you think so?”

With a sigh, Lewis explained, “I heard Elizabeth ask Felton what a millstone was, and then she went on to explain that the girls’ mother had referred to her and Jane as millstones.”

“How utterly deplorable!” Judith gasped. “How could a mother behave in such a fashion?”

Tapping his thumb against the armrest of his chair, Reginald seemed to contemplate something before he said, “Elizabeth said that another man took over their estate because of ‘tale’. It makes me wonder if the estate had an entail that only allowed male heirs. If the male heir was not closely connected or plain greedy, he might very well evict the widow and her daughters with just the clothes on their backs. In such a situation, even a titled lady might find herself overwhelmed by the situation.”



“Thank heavens Rosings has no such nonsense to contend with,” Catherine said. “There is no chance that I will lose my rightful place. Right, Lewis?”

Lewis smiled blandly, noticing that Catherine did not finish the sentence with the word mistress. He knew she fancied herself the master of their estate, but he had long since given up trying to make her see the truth. She refused to accept anything she did not wish to be true. What she did not know was that the moment he knew of his daughter’s existence, he changed his will. Lewis found no need to grant a grasping harpy control over what he loved. Should he die, his daughter would inherit everything and would have the right to choose which dower house her mother moved to, the one on Rosings’s estate or the one on their satellite estate in Scotland.

Seeing his wife’s glare increase in magnitude, Lewis finally gave in and said, “Do not worry, Catherine, you will get exactly what you deserve.”

Something in his voice must have alerted Reginald and Judith both, because they looked at him carefully. Catherine, on the other hand, simply preened, as if accepting what she saw as her due. Discreetly rolling his eyes, Lewis brought them back to the topic at hand by saying, “Though I know Catherine may disagree, I think it is a good idea to take the girls away from here. This is a small town, and I doubt they have the resources to provide for them adequately. Even though we have made plans, it will be crucial to talk to the girls before we depart tomorrow. It would not do to just cart them away without explaining anything to them.”

Crossing her arms in a childish manner, Catherine objected with, “I still think taking in both girls will not do, no matter what you may think. It is rare that someone of our class takes on a ward and never do they have two wards—it is always one. Taking on both girls is just ridiculous!”

Looking at one another, Judith and Reginald frowned. For himself, Lewis wondered if he had ever heard a case of the nobility taking on two children as wards. It was just

not something that he could remember seeing. There would already be enough trouble with the girls' origin. Would there be more problems with them being taken in together?

Hesitating for only a moment, Judith voiced what she was thinking. "But we cannot just leave one sister on her own with no care. It would be crueler than what their mother has already done."

With a thoughtful expression, Lewis considered the situation. "I think I may have a solution," he said. "Let me contemplate it overnight, as we cannot forsake one girl for the sake of the other."

Elizabeth stared into the nothingness of the dark that surrounded her and struggled not to cry. Despite the comfort of a clean bed and the coziness of a borrowed night rail, sleep eluded her tired body. So much in her small life had changed recently, not the least of which was the loss of her mother. One difficulty after another struck her life. It started with her father's death, followed by the loss of her home, and shortly thereafter, her mother's disappearance.

No matter how brave she was for her age, it was just too much. That Jane was sound asleep did not help any. Elizabeth knew that she could, or maybe had to, be strong for Jane, but with Jane asleep, the haunting feelings seeped into her heart once again. Rolling over, she tried to muffle the sound of her tears in her pillow, embarrassed that she was giving into them at all, even in the dead of night.

Elizabeth felt a sudden touch on her back, accompanied by the soft words, "It is all right if you cry, I will not tell." A slender hand continued to soothe her. "Besides, I think you had a very bad day, and it is all right to cry after a very bad day."

Elizabeth froze for a moment, startled by Anne's kindness. Though she had enjoyed meeting the older girl, Elizabeth had not expected her to be so sympathetic to her

tears. Sniffing, Elizabeth said, "I am sorry if I waked you. I was trying to be quiet."

"Do not worry, I never sleep well in odd places," came Anne's soft reply. "I am sorry that my mother was so mean, speaking about you like that. Please do not think that it was you. I do not think my mother knows how to be nice."

While Elizabeth acknowledged Anne's mother had been cruel, she did not want Anne to feel bad for something beyond her control. "My mother is not much better. At least you did not have to meet her."

It felt odd to say such a thing. Elizabeth knew that she should be a dutiful daughter and think and act as Jane did. She had heard it enough from her mother and their nurse, but she just did not have it in her. Especially not with the situation Elizabeth found herself in. Elizabeth did not know what might have happened to two little girls alone in the world without anyone to rely on, but she knew enough to understand that if Anne's family had not stepped in, it could have been very bad.

Sighing, Anne said, "I guess some mothers do not know any better. Though it would have been nice to have one of the good ones." Repositioning herself, Anne yawned and lay her head on the pillow next to Elizabeth before adding, "I am named after my aunt. She was a wonderful mother. I always loved spending time with her and my cousin Fitzwilliam, but she died. We are on our way back from the funeral. Not that I was allowed to go to the funeral, just the men and older boys."

"They did not let me go to my papa's funeral either," Elizabeth complained, the first hint of feminism growing in her mind as she considered the unfairness of the custom. "I am sorry your aunt died."

"And I am sorry your father died," replied Anne. They lay there together, both quiet for a time, before Anne asked, "Are you worried about what is going to happen to you and Jane?"

Biting her lip, Elizabeth considered the question before answering, “Yes, I am.”

Anne briefly fumbled in the dark before finding Elizabeth’s hand and squeezing it. Reassuringly, she said, “I do not think you will have to worry. My father said that whatever happens, you and your sister will be well cared for.” Giving Elizabeth’s hand another squeeze, she continued, “As horrible as my mother is, my father is good, and he has never lied to me. I am certain he will make sure you and your sister are well and happy, if it is at all possible.”

Hearing Anne’s reassurance went a long way to helping Elizabeth finally drift to sleep. The unknown was frightening, but the conviction in Anne’s voice soothed some of her fears. While Elizabeth still did not know the particulars, the warmth of Anne’s hand and the promise of care calmed her anxieties.

Lewis did not have a peaceful night’s sleep, though he had known that it would not be. His thoughts had been all awirl and when he had drifted off, his dreams had not been pleasant. Although he was hesitant, separating the two Bennet girls was the best solution to all of their problems.

He could tell that Judith had grown fond of Jane, though she harbored quiet concerns about how society would view them for taking on two wards. It was precisely that kind of narrow-minded judgement that had long kept him avoiding the ton. Their treatment of anyone who fell outside their rigid ideals was something he had never been able to stomach. He doubted a family as powerful as the Earl of Matlock would have an issue with taking in two wards. Yet, he feared Catherine’s concerns might prevent them from taking in both girls. So if Jane joined the Fitzwilliam family, that left Elizabeth without a place to call home.

While Lewis had a solution in mind, he still felt guilty for how much pleasure he knew it would bring him. Although he longed for little Elizabeth’s presence in his home and believed Anne would benefit from her companionship, he knew firsthand

that living with Catherine was a punishment. Hopefully, he could make up for Catherine's callous disregard with his own care and compassion. Was exposing Elizabeth to Lady Catherine on a daily basis wrong?

It was that question that had him tossing and turning in the night, and the only answer he found was he would let Elizabeth decide. Yes, she was young, but she seemed to be highly intelligent. It was possible she was capable of making a decision that would affect her life so completely, right?

So he waited for everyone to come downstairs and break their fasts so he could reveal his idea. He already had an idea of how his wife would react, and he had come up with the perfect response. Most things in his life were not important enough for him to feel they were worth the struggle, but seeing Elizabeth well settled was. His health may have been poor, and he might give way to his wife more than he should, but the well-being of a child, any child, was more important than his comfort. He would see it happen if that was what she wanted.

It turned out he did not have to wait as long as he thought he might. Lewis sat in the private parlor the family had obtained, lost in thought, and one of the governesses brought Elizabeth into the room. While he had asked for Elizabeth to be brought to him once she was up and dressed, he had not thought she would be up so early. Thanking the governess, he took a sip of his coffee for fortification before saying, "Good morning, Miss Elizabeth. Were you able to sleep at all?"

Elizabeth shrugged, her luminous green eyes blinking owlily in the dim light. "I had trouble falling asleep," she confessed, "but Anne was really nice, and we talked some."

Sitting forward, Lewis asked, "What did you talk about?"

"She told me I should not be worried because you would make sure I was all right."

Looking down, Elizabeth smoothed the black dress she was wearing and Lewis absentmindedly hoped that it had been cleaned somehow before she had been forced to wear it for a second day.

The thought that Anne had reassured Elizabeth because she had that much confidence in him was heartwarming. It took Lewis a moment to form a response after swallowing the lump in his throat, but at last he managed to say, “Anne was right. I am going to try my very best to make sure you are safe and happy.”

The strength of Elizabeth’s smile when she thanked him nearly took Lewis’s breath away. It dawned on him in that moment that the child before him was just a faint reflection of the incredible woman Elizabeth Bennet had the potential to be. Despite her tender age, she exuded a strength that inspired him. He wanted to be part of her life and help her get wherever it was that she was going.

He also knew that they needed one another in each other’s life and that thought drove him to ask, “What would you think about living with my family and having me take you in as my ward?”

Heart thudding rapidly in her chest, Elizabeth forced words to come out of her mouth. “But what about Jane?” she asked.

“Jane would go with my wife’s family, but for reasons I do not fully agree with, it is not probable that you will be able to stay together. If Reginald was not an earl, it might be different, but he and his wife feel strongly that they must follow societal norms.” Lewis paused, studying Elizabeth’s face. He knew he was using words probably far too big for her, but she did not look confused so much as disappointed. So he continued with, “But that does not mean that they do not want you to be safe and happy, just that it might be best for you to do that with me and my family.”

Nodding automatically when Mr. Lewis stopped talking, Elizabeth contemplated

what he was saying. She had not known that the other nice man was an earl. While she did not exactly know all that entailed, she knew it was important somehow. Hadn't her father said that the people in London, especially the important ones, lived by different rules when he told her mother he did not want to go there? Was this one of the things he had meant?

While she did not want to be separated from her sister, it sounded like it would be a good thing for Jane. If they took her in, she would have so many more opportunities than even she would have had back at home. She would have pretty dresses and maybe even harp lessons like she had been talking about. Elizabeth wanted to see her happy, and the woman's gentle touch and caring nature gave her confidence that she would be a good mother to Jane. Certainly better than their actual mother.

Elizabeth finally asked, "What about our real mother? What if she comes back?"

Sighing, Mr. Lewis said, "I am not sure if she will come back, Elizabeth, but regardless, I will have someone look into the situation and find out what happened to her."

Elizabeth studied Mr. Lewis as she considered what he was offering—a place in his home and his family, which was something she certainly needed. If she did not accept, Elizabeth did not have the first idea of what might happen to her. She acknowledged to herself that she liked the man and found Anne to be very kind, but his wife was not nice at all. Biting her lip, she asked, "What about your wife? I do not think she will like the idea."

"My wife has never been a happy woman, Elizabeth, and she very well may react badly to you joining our household, but I promise that I will do what I can to shield you from her and her, shall we say, outbursts. I genuinely think having you in our home will greatly benefit both Anne and me."

The sincerity on Mr. Lewis's face was so compelling that Elizabeth could not help but think it would work. After all, in the home she came from, her mother was not the best mother. How much worse could this other woman be? Her own father enjoyed teaching her but never made an effort to shield her from her mother's nerves, whereas Mr. Lewis seemed genuinely interested in helping her thrive in his home.

Still, she had questions. "Do you play chess?"

Eyes widening slightly, Mr. Lewis answered, "Yes, I do." Then, after a moment's hesitation, he asked, "Do you play chess, Miss Elizabeth?"

With a small smile, Elizabeth explained, "Yes, I was learning how to play from Papa before he got sick. He was also teaching me other things like Latin. Mama said it was not fitting, but I liked it. If I come stay with you, will you teach me too, Mr. Lewis?"

Elizabeth saw from his expression that she had surprised him and for a moment she wondered if he felt the same way her mother did about girls learning. She had just begun to truly worry when he smiled and said, "It would be my pleasure to teach you whatever you would like to learn, whether it be chess or Latin or botany."

"Well then, Mr. Lewis," she started, "I think coming to stay with you will be a good idea. As long as I can see Jane from time to time, I think I will be happy."

Tilting his head to the side, Mr. Lewis said, "I would never want to replace your father, but as you will be part of my family, I would be honored if you would call me Uncle Lewis or something of the sort."

Pinching her lips together as she considered his suggestion, Elizabeth nodded before saying, "I can do that, I think, Uncle Lewis. Would you be willing to call me Lizzie?"

"I can do that with ease." Leaning towards her, he opened his arms, offering her a



hug.

She had spent the previous day trying to appear strong and fighting her anxiety, anticipating the worst outcomes once she understood her mother had abandoned her and Jane. Yet, to her surprise, the situation turned out to be far less dire than she had anticipated, thanks to the kind man before her. It only took a moment before Elizabeth decided a hug would be a good thing and she rushed into Uncle Lewis's arms. The strength of his embrace was not the same as what she had received from her father, but the affection felt the same when he said, "Welcome to the family, Lizzie."

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### Chapter Three

Seven years later

As the sun beat down on Elizabeth, she couldn't help but revel in its radiant embrace, savoring every moment. Each step she took on her walks helped alleviate the weight of Lady Catherine's hatred, bringing her a sense of peace. The recent rain had prevented her from enjoying her normal walk around the garden and left her more overwhelmed than was her wont. But the sun had finally come out and Elizabeth eagerly soaked it in.

Breathing deeply, Elizabeth ran her fingers along the plants on either side of the garden path, relishing in the different textures. She would have loved to explore the nearby wooded paths, but even she was not that bold. Lady Catherine had a tantrum the first time Elizabeth had asked about walking somewhere beside the garden path, going as far as banning her from walking at all. Fortunately, Uncle Lewis stepped in and informed the staff that Elizabeth was never to be prevented from walking in the garden again.

Elizabeth had learned to be circumspect and grateful for what she had in the seven years she had lived at Rosings. Though there was a period of adjustment, the love and affection she received from Anne and Uncle Lewis, who she eventually discovered was a baronet, helped her thrive. By keeping up a constant stream of correspondence with her sister Jane, she was able to bridge the distance between them and feel connected despite being separated. She even managed to visit several times a year.

The initial awkwardness of developing a routine faded as she settled into a

comfortable rhythm, dedicating several hours each day to discussions with Anne. They spent their days in animated conversations about what they were reading, creating dream menus for future events that would hopefully be unhampered by Lady Catherine, and poring over the detailed Rosings ledgers trying to decipher how the mansion was run. Anne was surprisingly skilled in mathematics, accurately performing complex calculations mentally. Music lessons, which Elizabeth enjoyed, and painting lessons, in which she wasn't very skilled, were provided by Uncle Lewis. For at least an hour every day, she'd engage with Uncle Lewis in either a chess match or a conversation about history and social issues.

Reaching the little fountain that she loved so much, Elizabeth was careful to gaze back at Rosings and find Anne in the window, looking down at her. Forcing a smile she did not feel, Elizabeth ignored the ache of seeing her friend so pallid and lifted her hand in a wave. Anne mustered a feeble smile as she waved back, her exhaustion evident in the lack of strength behind the gesture.

It was nearly unbearable to watch the girl who had grown to be like her sister sicken and lose strength with every day. More and more, the time they spent together had to be cut short. While Anne had never been what one would call robust, and Lady Catherine wanted to do everything possible to keep her looking delicate, her health had taken a turn for the worst after she caught scarlet fever the winter before. Lady Catherine had stubbornly refused to seek medical help, convinced that her noble lineage shielded her daughter from any grave illnesses. However, her conviction wavered when a troublesome rash manifested alongside her sore throat and swallowing difficulties. At the first sight of the angry, red rash spreading across her daughter's skin, Lady Catherine's shrill cries, high-pitched and piercing, echoed through the vast halls of the mansion.

Elizabeth struggled to comprehend how the doctor's actions were supposed to help poor Anne. All he did was purge and bleed her, which seemed counterintuitive to Elizabeth. Anne was already ill, and the old man was just making her suffer.

Elizabeth, who had been spending time with her friend trying to keep her spirits up, eventually caught the illness herself. However, she managed to recover much faster as she had always been of a robust health, which only fueled Lady Catherine's anger. She suspected that the local herb wife and the staff who loved and cared for her might have something to do with it. That and the fact that she was spared the curative treatments of the doctor.

While Anne, forever changed by the lingering effects of the fever, felt drained and weak, Elizabeth had fully recovered her usual energy. She remained by the window, smiling at Anne and exchanging playful expressions, until Anne offered a final wave and stepped away. Her nurse then drew the curtains, allowing Anne to lie down and rest. Continuing her walk, Elizabeth hurried her pace. If she moved fast enough, she could say hello to the horses before she was to meet with Uncle Lewis.

She was about to turn the last corner when she heard two deep voices. She immediately recognized the first voice as Richard Fitzwilliam's, but the second voice, though offering a sense of familiarity, eluded her. "You are not an heir, Richard. You simply do not understand."

Richard's deep chuckle made Elizabeth smile as he said, "I might not be an heir, Darcy, but I am the son of an earl. I have some small understanding."

The second voice continued, grumbling, "I am not even of age, and yet it seems wherever I go, young ladies are ever eager to make their affections known. Last week, while I was at Hatchards, a young lady wearing a monstrosity of a hat tripped and landed in a heap at my feet. If that was not an attempt at compromise, I do not know what one is."

"I do not think you know what one is. The poor thing probably just tripped because she was nervous around you. Not everyone is as self-assured as you are," reasoned Richard.

“No, I will not believe your argument. There is nothing in any of their heads but gossip and lace.” That comment had Elizabeth frowning, but for some reason, she still did not come out of hiding. She had only recently turned fourteen, after all. It was not really her place to put the unknown man in his place, even if he was in her home.

“There have to be women and girls that you respect, Darcy. You are just frustrated with the situation you find yourself in. What about Jane?” Richard suggested. “You have met her on a number of occasions. You cannot deny that she is skilled and intelligent.”

“I will allow that your adoptive sister is not wholly objectionable,” Darcy replied, and Elizabeth found it difficult to hold her tongue. She managed to remain silent, only to have the gentleman continue with, “She plays the harp with skill and can hold a decent conversation, but she smiles too much, and I do not think she sees the bad that exists in the world around her. More than that, she is the most beautiful young lady I know, so I will say she is an adequate example of a young woman. You will have your hands full once she makes her bow to the queen in the next few years.”

“You do not know her as well as you think you do, Darcy, and if I did not know you were in a bad mood, I would throttle you for insulting her.” After a pause that had Elizabeth creeping forward, Richard continued, “With as intelligent as you are, it would make sense that you would want someone in a match who could challenge you intellectually. Do you remember Jane’s younger sister, Elizabeth? She was at our house last year when you visited for a few weeks with Georgianna. In a few years, she may prove to be just the sort of woman you seek. She does not smile half as much as Jane and is quite aware of the state of the world.”

Hearing Richard tell someone she would be a good match for them left an odd feeling in her stomach. She knew it would be several years before there would be any thought for her to join the marriage mart. Still, that Richard thought she would be

worthy of a friend of his was nice somehow. Her uneasy excitement turned to rage as she heard the man Richard referred to as Darcy say, “You must be jesting. She is, what, only twelve or thirteen years of age? With Lady Catherine as her guardian, she has no chance of receiving an education or developing any abilities. Like Anne, she will be nothing more than a timid wallflower with an empty mind, not even tolerable for a dance partner at a ball.”

How dare he? Elizabeth did not know what was more insulting—what he obviously thought of her, which was based on unfounded supposition, or what he thought of Anne. Flying around the corner, Elizabeth acted before she could think better of it.

It was only after the words left his mouth that Darcy realized that Richard’s expression morphed from annoyed to furious. In the midst of his attempt to apologize, a sudden flurry of movement caught his eye, causing him to lose track of his thoughts. Before he could make sense of the situation, an intense, blinding pain shot through his shin, leaving him hopping about in agony.

Blinking tears out of his eyes, Darcy was able to catch sight of a smiling girl giving Richard a tight hug before saying, “I had no idea that you were coming to visit. How is the family?”

Chuckling, Richard said, “They are all well and send their love and, of course, I have a letter among my things for you from Jane. As for my visit, Uncle Lewis summoned Darcy and me to see him, though I do not know why.”

“That is odd. He did not mention anything of the sort to me.” Shrugging, she continued, “Regardless, I will be happy to have you here for a visit.”

As Darcy observed the lively young woman chat with his cousin seemingly unperturbed, he couldn’t help but grimace and bend down to massage his aching shin. Was he losing his mind or had she delivered a sharp kick to his shin and then

completely disregarded him? He studied her as she ignored him. At first, he had thought her quite young, but the maturity around her emerald eyes and the set of her shoulders made him doubt his earlier assumption. Despite her youth, there was just something about her, a sort of vitality that almost drew him in.

That is until he became annoyed by his reaction to her. He was Fitzwilliam Darcy. Women, especially not half-grown ones who kicked him in the shin, did not fascinate him. But then he caught her looking at him, her bearing regal and disapproving, and he frowned at her disregard for him. Standing, Darcy glanced at Richard, an eyebrow raised, wondering why he was not introducing the two of them.

Chuckling, Richard said, "Darcy, you remember Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She is Uncle Lewis's ward and sister to my adopted sister Jane. I do believe you met her last year at the family gathering."

Nodding his head to Miss Elizabeth, Darcy watched her curtsy and eye him with a dismissive air before turning back to Richard to say, "If I do not go, I will be late for my lessons. It is always good to have you here, Richard. I will see you and your friend at dinner." After giving Richard a kiss on the cheek, she departed, leaving Darcy utterly perplexed.

As soon as she was out of range, Richard burst into uncontrollable laughter, his guffaws echoing through the air. Darcy had to wait until Richard paused and was catching his breath before asking, "Am I wrong or did Miss Elizabeth kick me in the shin?"

"Yes," Richard smirked, "yes, she did."

Rubbing at his forehead, Darcy felt like he was in some other world, a world different from what he had come to expect. "She attacks me, is pleasant with you, and you laugh at the entire exchange. Forgive me for not understanding what is going on."

“What else did you expect, Darcy? You were acting entirely insufferable. Not only insufferable, but dismissive of women in general. You went so far as to be insulting to several of the people she is closest to in the world.”

Internally wincing, Darcy racked his brain, desperately trying to recall the exact words he had uttered. He knew he had said Jane Bennet smiled too much. Then there was something about Anne and the young lady herself. A pang of guilt surged through him as he recognized his actions had not been honorable. However, he quickly suppressed it, determined not to let it overpower him. His actions had not been that bad, only slightly dismissive, and so he countered with, “She should not have been listening to our conversation.”

Expression turning dark, Richard said, “We are visiting her home. She is allowed to wander where she wishes and you insulted her in the open, where anyone could hear. That is not proper behavior, and you know it.” Stepping closer, Richard ground out, “Elizabeth is only a handful of years older than Georgianna. If someone visited Pemberley and was overheard saying she was an uneducated and unskilled wallflower not even tolerable enough to dance with, what would it do to her? What would you do to them?”

Darcy felt as if someone had punched him in the gut. Put that way, he could see the damage behind his words. Georgianna, already very shy, would be devastated if someone spoke about her in such a way. Looking up at Richard’s angry expression, he admitted, “It was wrong of me. I am sorry.”

Shaking his head, Richard took a step back and said, “I am not the one you should be apologizing to. You need to find a way to apologize for your poor behavior and ill-chosen words before we leave.” Then, chuckling, he added, “You should probably thank her as well.”

Darcy followed after his cousin as he moved into the mansion in search of the rooms



that had been prepared for them. Settling for talking at Richard's back, he said, "Thank her? I do not think so. I will grant you I was wrong, and I should apologize to her, somehow...but I will have you know my shin is still throbbing."

Richard paused and glanced over his shoulder before smirking. "You should be grateful to Elizabeth for multiple reasons. She could have chosen any number of more painful methods to teach you a lesson. Kicking you in the shin is one of the gentler things I taught her to defend herself. Besides, had she not hit you, I would have, and rest assured, my blow would have been far more severe than hers." Richard paused, raising his eyebrow, which made Darcy realize his expression must have been one of disbelief. Shaking his head, Richard added, "Do you realize, Darcy, that you had just insulted the three women I hold dearest in the world besides my mother? I can guarantee you a broken nose from me would have been a worse punishment than a sore shin from her."

Eyes squinted in concentration, Elizabeth studied the black and white battlefield before her, her mind sorting the eventualities the way the maid sorted linens to be put away in cupboards. Certain moves would be sufficient, but not quite what she wanted, and she suppressed her desire to growl in frustration. There was a way to win in fewer moves. She could feel it, but she could not yet see it and it taunted her.

"You are distracted," commented Uncle Lewis.

As her eyes shifted from the chessboard, they landed on the man who had filled the role of a beloved father in her life. Knowing he would see the lie in a smile, she let her frustration surface with a roll of her eyes. Taking a breath, Elizabeth muttered, "I will admit I am put out. I came upon Richard and his friend Darcy, and it did not go well. In fact, neither Mr. Darcy nor I exhibited proper behavior. Really, only Richard came out from the meeting completely unscathed."

Smiling fondly at her in a way she had come to appreciate, Uncle Lewis said, "I know

you, Lizzie; you are not one to act without reason. If your behavior lacked propriety, it would suggest you were deeply distressed. Would you like to tell me what happened?"

As she spoke, Elizabeth sighed and avoided Uncle Lewis's gaze. "I couldn't help myself," she confessed. "After overhearing a conversation between Mr. Darcy and Richard, where Mr. Darcy was being utterly rude, I reacted by kicking him in the shin."

Elizabeth watched Uncle Lewis's mouth twitch, and she knew he was only just keeping himself from laughing. Eventually he said, "Young men aren't always praised for their rationality, and their conversations can be quite unrestrained at times, especially when they think they are without an audience. Nonetheless, Darcy is a good four years older than you and should be learning how to behave himself around others by now. I have enough faith in you to realize a kick in the shin was likely warranted."

Considering his insults not only to her but to her sister and the girl who she had adopted as one, Elizabeth certainly felt justified in her actions. While at the same time, she felt guilty for acting in such an unladylike manner. The image of Lady Catherine's disdainful sneer and her plate-throwing tantrums were imprinted on her mind. She had enough examples of bad behavior in Lady Catherine and even her own mother to know that she did not want to grow into the sort of woman who behaved so.

"You know, he is her nephew, just like Richard," her uncle reminded her, bringing her back to their conversation.

Startling, Elizabeth asked, "Mr. Darcy?"

Shoulders drooping slightly, Uncle Lewis said, "Yes, Fitzwilliam Darcy. Named for

his mother's family, he has more than a little of his aunt in him, but I have long believed he acts the way he does to protect himself. His mother's death had a profound impact on him, and he has struggled to cope with his father's haughty demeanor in her absence. I do not think he is easily able to see the joy in the world, only the duty and the avarice of others seeking what he has."

Elizabeth stilled, pulling apart what he said and what he did not say. Elizabeth appreciated that Uncle Lewis not only taught her but also guided her toward unraveling mysteries and searching for deeper significance. She had learned to step back from a situation and see things as they were to other people, and not only how they looked to her. In the past, it had helped her understand more about the tenants and the people she met in the nearby town.

Now though, Elizabeth realized she needed to step back from her anger and look for why Mr. Darcy might have acted so unacceptably. After some consideration, Elizabeth responded, "You think he can only see the darkness in the world around him? That he might not have learned to recognize the good?" It was not hard to sympathize with the man when she looked at it that way. It was not as if her life had been all sunshine, but at least good things had happened, and Uncle Lewis had been there to help guide her along the way. Elizabeth couldn't help but imagine the void that would have consumed her if Uncle Lewis had never entered her life.

Smiling, Uncle Lewis said, "I am not asking you to like Darcy, Lizzie. Only be careful not to hold a grudge because of a baseless remark that you know to be false. No one benefits from holding onto grudges." Then, pushing back from the chessboard, Uncle Lewis stood and added, "I am sure your music master is here by now. Why don't you go find him and work on something beautiful for me?"

With a nod, Elizabeth stood and gave Uncle Lewis a kiss on the cheek before leaving his study, her mind full of things to consider. This Darcy seemed quite full of himself, but maybe he needed someone to show him the humor in life before he turned into his

aunt? It certainly seemed he was moving in that direction. The world needed fewer of her sort, not more. Perhaps she could help him while he was at Rosings?

Realizing she still had some time, Elizabeth decided that she would go check on Anne before she had her music lesson. Perhaps Anne would be up to listening to her play later before dinner. Turning the last corner before she got to Anne's suite, Elizabeth groaned as she remembered dinner would be an excessively extravagant affair, as Lady Catherine would want to show off to their guests. Elizabeth despised extravagant dinners and knew the sentiment was shared as rich cuisine never sat well with Uncle Lewis or Anne.

Really, Elizabeth did not know why Uncle Lewis might have summoned Richard and Darcy. Surely, he was capable of taking care of everything at Rosings on his own. Pausing before she knocked softly at Anne's door in case she was still asleep, Elizabeth shrugged. She supposed she would find out soon enough. Or not. Uncle Lewis did sometimes keep things from her.

### Chapter Four

Darcy looked at his reflection in the glass without really seeing it. Had he really crossed that far over the line? Darcy observed a rare intensity in Richard's eyes that contradicted his usual laid-back personality, indicating he really would have inclined to throw a punch, as he said. That he had pushed his cousin so far made Darcy stop and question his actions.

While he initially thought he was speaking the truth, he was slowly coming to the realization that there was more to the situation than he had initially considered. He had not lied per se; he did feel that Miss Jane Bennet smiled too much and the likelihood that Miss Elizabeth Bennet would ever amount to anything was slim. His aunt was known for saying that she would have been the most proficient had she learned this or that. She would not support learning things that would make a word of her husband more skilled than herself. It would take a miracle for a girl growing up in such an environment to become anyone of significance. His aunt would most likely drain anything remarkable about her out of her with daily bouts of cruelty and restrictions.

On the other hand, Richard was correct. If someone had said as much within his hearing about Georgianna, he would have thrown them off his property. It did not matter whether what they said was true or not, he would have reacted the same. He had always prided himself on being honest, but was there more to it than that? Had he become cruel in his dealings? He would hate to think that he had, but evidence was pointing in that direction. Despite fading, his significant shin pain proved the point.

Regardless, he had somewhere to be. He could not just keep staring at his reflection.

He was there because Uncle Lewis had specifically requested his presence, and now that he had cleaned himself up from the dusty journey, he knew he should be making his way down to the study as instructed. Not they had any idea why he was there.

With one last adjustment to his hair, Darcy hurried down to his uncle's study, where he found his uncle and Richard deep in conversation. Looking over, Uncle Lewis said, "Darcy, Richard, and I were wondering if you would ever show up."

Hoping that he was not blushing, Darcy said, "Yes, I am sorry. I got lost in thought."

"I wondered if you might have. It seems that you have had an interesting visit already." Then, chuckling at his discomfort, Uncle Lewis added, "Take a seat, my boy. I will not torment you anymore. We have much to discuss before we must dress for dinner in order to appease my wife."

Taking the seat next to Richard, he faced his uncle across the desk, grateful that he would not make a larger deal about his earlier blunder with his ward. He and Richard waited in silence as their uncle seemed to prepare himself for what he was about to say. As the time stretched out, Darcy began to grow uneasy. What words, heavy with unspoken emotion, did the man of quiet strength struggle to utter?

Finally, with a small shrug, Uncle Lewis said, "I have asked you both here because I am dying, and I wish to have you both prepared for the ramifications."

Leaning forward in his chair, Richard exclaimed, "Is it certain, Uncle?"

Running his hand down his face, Uncle Lewis said, "As certain as anything in this life can be. I even got a second opinion the last time I was in London, and my physicians are in agreement. I have some form of cancer. A mass in my abdomen is increasing in size, and though the doctors have conflicting treatment plans, they all acknowledge my impending demise. I will not live to be an old man."

Copying Richard, Darcy leaned towards his uncle and asked, “Have you told anyone? My father or the earl?”

At this question, his uncle seemed to slump slightly in his chair and, taking a deep breath, explained, “You are the first to know besides my valet.” Holding up a hand, he forestalled any further questions. “I will tell my brothers-in-law soon enough, but I wanted to speak with you first because my passing will affect you the most. Richard, I have drafted a will stating that should Anne pass before she is twenty-five or remain unmarried at thirty, you will inherit Rosings.”

“Surely neither of those will take place,” murmured Richard.

“What you do not know is that Anne is unwell, severely unwell. We have had several doctors come to see her and while my wife is in denial and would like to fill her days with tinctures and purging, there is really nothing we can do. The scarlet fever that she contracted damaged her heart and she will not recover. If she manages to lead a peaceful existence, she could possibly live until twenty-five or thirty, but any attempt to conceive a child would result in her demise. Making any idea of marriage out of the question. So what I’m saying, Richard, is that one day you’ll be master of Rosings.”

“But why me? Surely there is someone better suited to the task.” Darcy could hear the anxiety climbing in Richard’s voice. Richard had long ago decided to join the military to support himself because practically everything his parents had would be going to his older brother. Inheriting Rosings would change all that he had planned out for his life and be a large shock besides.

Uncle Lewis smiled at Richard and said, “Like you, I was a second son, expected to shift for myself. When my brother died without an heir, after having nearly run our family into bankruptcy, I was wholly unprepared for the challenge of taking everything in hand. I believe that allowing you to know now that Rosings will be

yours will only benefit you. Besides, I am the last of my line. Darcy and Felton will both have their own estates soon enough, so it makes sense that you will get one too. I know you will treat it well and take care of the tenants and various staff.”

Darcy observed his cousin for a moment and could tell from his downward gaze and tense posture that Richard was feeling uneasy with the information. Though frankly, nothing about this conversation was easy. He may not have been close to his uncle, but the news of his deteriorating health still affected him deeply. There was also the feeling that Darcy was waiting for something, as his uncle had asked for them both. Now he was left with a sense of dread, wondering what else his uncle would bring up next.

Turning to Darcy, Uncle Lewis smiled softly. “I can see your mind working, Darcy, and yes, there is a reason I wanted you here as well.” After hesitating for a moment, his uncle pushed forward and said, “I am not sure if you have ever paid much attention to Catherine’s insistence that a cradle betrothal exists between you and Anne or not. Regardless, one does not exist. It is not something that your mother wanted for either of you. She wanted you to be able to fall in love or, if that was not possible, to find your own way to happiness in a marriage that you chose. Catherine is entirely against such an idea. She wants you to marry Anne because she thinks that you are not bold enough to stand against her when she wants to retain control over Rosings.”

Darcy stared at his uncle in shock. There were so many things about what he just said that he wanted to question. When his mouth opened, the first thing he said was, “Does she not understand that Anne will die if she marries or rather attempts to have children?”

This caused a look of anger to flash across his uncle’s face before he said, “Oh yes, I have had a conversation about it with her when she mentioned having her go to London and have a season next year. While she agrees that with her recent illness, it



is too early to plan anything that might put a strain on her heart. My wife believes that Anne's illness should not prevent her from marrying. In fact, she stated that women died in childbirth all the time. In Catherine's perspective, it is a woman's obligation to bring together two influential families in marriage and endeavor to bear an heir, even if it means accepting death as part of God's divine plan."

"She would kill her daughter or see me without an heir because she thinks that she can control me?" gasped Darcy.

Shaking his head, Uncle Lewis clarified, "Sadly, Darcy, she thinks of all her sibling's children you are the most like her and would agree to her plans. It does not help that you are rather quiet in company and can be easily overwhelmed in social settings. She thinks that she can use that against you."

Collapsing back into his chair, Darcy rested his head in his hands. His aunt, known for her cruel and manipulative nature, was also filled with an inflated sense of pride. He couldn't help but question what he had done to make her see him in the same light.

It seemed to Elizabeth that something was off about Richard and the Darcy fellow. Richard poked at his dinner with an absent air that was unlike him, and Elizabeth suspected that there was more to it than simply not enjoying the heavily sauced dish. While Elizabeth found the meal to be not to her liking and knew that it would most likely turn Anne's stomach, the two of them at least were able to pretend that they had partaken.

At least Lady Catherine had not noticed that she was the only one relishing the richness of the food. She was too busy pontificating to care that none at her table enjoyed the meal as she had wanted them to. Elizabeth had long ago realized that the haughty lady cared little for the enjoyment of others. She looked more to gaining recognition for her wealth and power. Lady Catherine wanted those around her to

bow before all that she was, or at least what she thought she was. Though in the grand scheme of things, Lady Catherine was a much smaller person that she presumed.

It made Elizabeth angry to look at all the food spread across the table meant to impress Richard and Mr. Darcy that would most likely just go to waste. She knew that Lady Catherine saw it as a show of power to present such a spread even if it would be mostly uneaten, but Elizabeth knew that the money would be better used to care for the people that relied on Rosings. Sighing, Elizabeth put her fork down and eyed Anne, who sat across the table.

Elizabeth did not like how pale Anne looked sitting between Richard and Mr. Darcy. She suspected that Lady Catherine sat her between the two to encourage a match, but it did not seem to be working the way she intended. Calling from her spot at the foot of the table, Lady Catherine chided, “Anne, sit up straight. You do not want your cousins to think that you are slovenly!” Then after a beat she added, “In my day you could tell a lady’s breeding by the way she presented herself. A well-bred lady had erect posture, her dress was pristine, and her grooming was all that it should be.”

As typical of a meal where Lady Catherine had a captive audience, she barely drew breath between speeches she was so intent on cramming her opinions into the minds of others. “I despair over what the world is coming to lately. You know that we received a call from Mrs. Smythle and her daughter, and the dresses they wore were utter embarrassments. It goes to show just how far the family has fallen since they allowed their son to marry as he wished.”

Serviette covering her smile, Elizabeth met Anne’s eyes. They both knew how much Lady Catherine hated the recent changes in fashion. She was stuck in the last century and refused to see that the world was leaving her behind. Anne and Elizabeth, on the other hand, were quite fond of the more comfortable looking styles and would peruse the fashion plates that Jane sent to Elizabeth whenever they got the chance.

In fact, Jane and Lady Matlock frequently sent Anne and Elizabeth clothing items to supplement their wardrobes, but Lady Catherine insisted Anne wear only what she selected, creating a distinct contrast in their styles. Elizabeth managed to get away with a few modern dresses as long as they were subdued enough. Sadly, Lady Catherine did not think much of her, no matter what she wore, and so she had more leeway.

Eventually, Lady Catherine was forced to call an end to the meal and remove herself and Elizabeth and Anne with her to allow the gentlemen to enjoy their port in the absence of women. Everyone had managed to survive the meal, though Elizabeth was very glad that she and Anne had partaken of a light respite before coming down to dinner with the others. In no time at all, Elizabeth found herself seated at the piano playing for Lady Catherine and Anne.

There was something very encouraging, Elizabeth thought, about playing for someone who truly enjoyed it, and Anne loved listening to Elizabeth play the piano. Lady Catherine viewed listening to music as a required aspect of high society, but never did she seem to enjoy it. Anne, on the other hand, closed her eyes in near rapture when she could hear music played. She had once shared that it was almost as if she could be carried away by the freedom of the notes. It was Anne's enjoyment that had Elizabeth practicing so very much and had her skill ever improving.

When the gentlemen arrived to the room, Elizabeth was in the middle of a complicated piece, so she paid little attention to them until the last notes hung in the air and the gentlemen clapped for her along with Anne. Smiling, Elizabeth inclined her head gracefully before asking Anne what she would like her to play next. It surprised her when Mr. Darcy jumped from his seat and offered to turn the pages for her.

"Do you think to unnerve me, Mr. Darcy? Beware that my courage always rises when there are those that try to intimidate me." It was impertinent she knew, but the words

had left her mouth before she could censor herself. Sometimes Elizabeth wondered if she would ever get a firmer grasp of her tongue.

She was startled when Mr. Darcy only smiled faintly and said, “I probably deserve such a defensive comment.” Then, reaching out, he turned the page for her as her fingers flowed across the keys.

Elizabeth attempted to focus on the music and not the large bulk of Mr. Darcy next to her and only said, “Oh?”

“Yes, I was rude earlier and insulted both you and people you care about. It was badly done and must have given you a poor opinion of me. I am sorry.” Elizabeth’s fingers flubbed over several notes as she fought off the confusion caused by his apology. It seemed that she might have misjudged Richard’s cousin. Unable to form a proper response, Elizabeth continued to play.

After a slight hesitation, Mr. Darcy continued, “As a gentleman, I know that I must strive for better. I recently experienced not a disappointment per se but a hard realization about how I am viewed by those around me, and I have found it difficult to accept. It is not an excuse for my behavior, but rather an explanation.”

Finding her voice as her fingers continued to move, Elizabeth said, “I have seen firsthand how harsh the world can be. I will not add to your burden. I accept your apology.”

Walking into the parlor to the sound of an impassioned piano concerto made Darcy feel even guiltier than he had before. He had stupidly said she would be nothing more than a timid wallflower, with an empty mind and not even tolerable for a dance partner at a ball. Miss Elizabeth was young yet, but she was no wallflower. It was obvious she was gaining skills despite his aunt, Lady Catherine.

Now he stood next to her as she played and he struggled not to say that she was a better player than his little sister, who was considered a prodigy by her masters. Miss Elizabeth's playing wasn't flawless, but the passion she poured into each note brought the piece to life and carried him along with its powerful melody. She would always be called upon to play at gatherings, and he had called her a wallflower. At least she had accepted his apology and did not seem to hold a grudge. He found that he would like to know more about the girl that his uncle had brought under his wing.

A glance in the direction of his cousin Anne made him feel even worse. He had belittled her, a dying young woman who needed his support, and he had belittled her. Just who was he allowing himself to become? He was determined to improve himself, to become a better version of himself. To become a better man and not just settle for the sort of man that his father required. If only he knew how to do that.

From across the room, Darcy saw his aunt take a deep breath, and he braced for another diatribe. Lady Catherine, not content to listen to the music, spoke over it and said, "The mark of good breeding lies in the mastery and proficiency displayed in one's actions. Everything I do I do it with the utmost skill, so I know that had I ever learned to play the piano, I would have been highly proficient. While some people might aspire to greatness, their breeding will always show in those little errors they exhibit."

Turning the page for Miss Elizabeth as she continued to play, Darcy looked to see if she seemed affected by his aunt's not-so-subtle dig. Catching his gaze, she discreetly rolled her eyes and continued to play. Schooling his face as best he could, Darcy struggled not to smile at the way Miss Elizabeth shrugged off Lady Catherine's insulting remarks.

His aunt, on the other hand, did not react so well to their inattention to her comments. Before the last strains of the music had finished, she said, "That is enough music for the night. Too much attention on a girl of your age is immodest and inappropriate.

Come sit down.”

Smiling kindly, Miss Elizabeth put away her music sheets and moved to go sit next to Anne, leaning over to whisper with her. While Anne had seemed to enjoy the piano playing provided by Miss Elizabeth, talking with her did even more. Anne brightened in her presence as they whispered. It was heartening to watch.

From behind him, Darcy heard his uncle say, “Darcy, my boy, come join me for a game of chess. It has been too long since we have matched wits.”

Darcy crossed the room and settled into the seat opposite his uncle at the chessboard. They often played chess when in company, and Darcy always found it a more relaxing endeavor than playing against his father. When his Uncle Lewis challenged him to a game of chess, it was purely for the joy of playing, in contrast to his father’s calculated matches to assess Darcy’s worthiness as an heir and intellectual ability.

Tapping the back of one of his uncle’s hands, Darcy selected his color and began setting up the board. Having selected white, Darcy took the first move, sliding his pawn into play. They moved along at a comfortable pace, talking a little until his uncle commented, “It seems that your skills have not grown rusty since the last time we played. Have you been playing with other students at Cambridge?”

Darcy moved one of his pieces and said, “I play often at school. In fact, I have joined the chess team and hold one of the best records for wins.” When his uncle made an unexpected move with his bishop, he added, “You seem to have been keeping your skill up as well. Do you have another chess partner that I did not know about?”

Chuckling, his uncle said, “Would you believe that I have been playing with Elizabeth daily for the last five years?”

Eyes widening, Darcy slid his gaze over to where Anne and Elizabeth still talked in

hushed tones. He had never heard of a woman playing chess before, let alone one so young. Turning back to his uncle, he exclaimed, “Even I was seven when my father began teaching me chess. Did you encourage the endeavor, or did she?”

“I think you mistake her age, Darcy. Despite her fourteen years, Lizzie's slight build and delicate features gave her a look of someone younger. Between that and her enchanting aura, it has always seemed to me that belonged to a different realm.” Fiddling with a pawn that he had captured, Uncle Lewis continued, “Regardless, Elizabeth had always had a fascination with my chessboard, and I eventually asked if she should like to learn the game. From the beginning, Elizabeth was an eager pupil. Thirsting for knowledge and learning chess was no different. I have always thought that by the time she reaches your age, she would be able to defeat me on a regular basis.”

Darcy moved his knight without really thinking about it, his mind more on the young woman across the room who was so unlike the woman he knew from society. He was still lost in thought when his aunt stood with a huff and declared, “I am retiring for the night. Anne, You will retire as well. You look pale and need your sleep if you are going to impress your cousins tomorrow.”

She left Anne and Miss Elizabeth following in her wake and Darcy turned back to his uncle, his brows drawing together in question. “With Aunt Catherine as contrary as she is, how did you arrange it just so Miss Elizabeth could join your home? It is obvious that she practically despises her.”

“Ah, that took some maneuvering on my part. I will admit.” Lewis de Bourgh looked up at Darcy and away from the board. “I simply told my wife that it was what was happening and I let her know in no uncertain terms that if she did not like it, she could go elsewhere. I told her that she could live at the dower house or return to her brother's home.”

Darcy watched his uncle eye's wide. It was not that his uncle did not have the right to do as he wished, rather that Lady Catherine was so very contrary. Darcy simple could not imagine telling her something so contrary to her wishes. Uncle Lewis, sensing Darcy's amazement, let out a laugh. "Your aunt," he explained, "acts like she has more power than she really does. She may tout the fact that she is the daughter of an earl, but she is married to me. Any power that she has is only what I grant her."

Darcy knew that in reality, a woman only had as much power as her husband or family gave her. His upbringing instilled in him the belief that dominating the women in his life was a form of safeguarding vulnerable individuals, such as his younger sister. But suddenly he saw the darker implications. Clearing his throat, Darcy said, "While I like that, you were able to care for Miss Elizabeth. I do not know if I like the way you had to go about it."

It was not like a chessboard where a queen had the most power. With a nod, his uncle said, "I would never abuse my wife the way so many men of the world do, not even merely by words. However, I have the right to see to it that certain things go the way I want in my own home. For the most part, I ignore Catherine's drama and declarations, but that doesn't mean I will allow her to hurt those weaker than herself. Even in my death, I have seen to it that Elizabeth will have a home and will be provided for and no matter what my wife attempts to do, both Elizabeth and my Anne will have recourse. It is why I brought you and Richard here, because I know that you will uphold my wishes to the best of your ability."

Though Darcy nodded and they returned to the chess match, he knew that he did not play to the best of his ability. His mind was too preoccupied. Darcy had never really thought of how little power women had. Nor had he considered the abuse that some of them, possibly many of them, might suffer under the cruel authoritarians in their lives. Darcy could imagine the terror of knowing you have no control over how your life might unfold. He, however, would never treat a woman cruelly. He wanted someone who might share his many burdens, not cower before him. Thankfully, it



would be some time before he would have to worry about a wife or even choosing a wife.

Still, he dreaded having to take Lady Catherine in hand. Hopefully, his uncle would live a good long while.

### Chapter Five

Three and a half years later

The boundary between numbness and pain was blurry, leaving her unsure of where one sensation started and the other ended. Elizabeth appreciated when she was able to embrace the numbness. It allowed her to keep going. Despite the grief that Elizabeth felt lost in at times, she knew that there were things to do; she did not have the privilege of collapsing.

Even just overseeing the household required more than Lady Catherine was willing to comply with. She had always viewed responsibility that was something below her. Despite knowing that there was a competent housekeeper, Elizabeth knew that she still needed things to be approved and arranged. Even at only seventeen, Elizabeth knew that Uncle Lewis's death left many responsibilities to her. Because, of course, Lady Catherine would not oversee the upcoming harvest, nor did she care about the tenants' ability to survive the winter.

Not long after Uncle Lewis called for Richard and Mr. Darcy, he started instructing her in far more than she imagined she would ever need to know about running an estate. Now with his recent death, it all made sense. Knowing his wife's tendencies and Anne's fragile health, Uncle Lewis understood that Elizabeth would be the one left to bear the brunt of all the responsibilities.

Elizabeth had been knowledgeable enough to be able to step up when Uncle Lewis became bedridden six months ago. Despite her youth, the staff quickly turned to her for any and all needs. Even before he was bed bound, Uncle Lewis could not move

about much at all, and so Elizabeth had done his walking for him inspecting thatching after the storms and speaking with the steward and housekeeper and even the tenants for him.

Elizabeth ran her hands down the smooth fabric of her black dress as she made her way to her uncle's study. She needed to get his account book if she was to go over expenses with the housekeeper that afternoon. Nearing her destination, the sound of raised voices in the study made her slow her pace; a nervous feeling tightening in her chest. The study was supposed to be empty. Curious, Elizabeth approached carefully.

"This is not to be born! How dare you say that Rosings is not mine to direct, mine to control!" It was easy to recognize Lady Catherine's voice.

The second voice, more timid and unfamiliar, responded in a hesitant and servile manner. "While you have been severely wronged, my lady, your deceased husband, insured that his will was irrefutable. Rosings goes to your daughter, Anne. Should she pass before she is twenty-five or remain unmarried at thirty, Rosings then goes to your nephew Richard. You are not in the line of inheritance."

"I did not marry that fool for nothing. I am mistress of this estate, and I will continue to be so. It is your responsibility to see that it happens," came Lady Catherine's callous demand.

Elizabeth cast furtive glances around, ensuring her presence went unnoticed as she covertly listened in on the crucial argument. Sneaking over to the nearby window, Elizabeth slipped behind the thick brocade curtains. Ugly as they were, Elizabeth acknowledged their potential as the ideal cover for her eavesdropping.

"I understand, my lady. That is why I bribed the clerk to see your husband's will." Elizabeth pictured the subservient man bowing and scraping before Lady Catherine. In all the years Elizabeth had known the woman, she had never seen her choose to

work with anyone who had a backbone.

Lady Catherine huffed, “Why can you not switch his will with one that is more suitable?”

“My Lady, even if the clerk would be willing to allow it, multiple copies of the will were made up and sent to various people, your brother among them. Any forgery would be easily spotted.” Pausing, the timid voice hesitantly added, “I do have an idea, though.”

“Now, out with it!”

“Although your daughter has officially inherited, the staff and she herself would need to know for her to behave as mistress. Suppose she is not at the reading of the will? Your daughter is not in the most robust health after all. You could offer to attend on her behalf and convey whatever information you deem necessary.” Alarmed by the man’s outrageousness, Elizabeth’s hand shot to her mouth, stifling a gasp.

There was a moment of silence and Elizabeth imagined that Lady Catherine was tapping her fingers together as she did when thinking. Eventually, Lady Catherine said, “That would work rather nicely. Anne is often unwell, and it should be a simple matter to ensure that she is not available for the reading of the will. Then things can proceed as they should with me in control.”

Elizabeth could imagine the man nodding like the puppet he was before hesitating and saying, “There are, of course, a few issues. Your husband elected your nephew Mr. Darcy and your brother as trustees. They will be required by law to visit your daughter and the estate at least once a year to see that things are being well managed and to assist her, should she have any obstacles arise.”

“I am sure I can manage a few visits.” A slight shuffle of movement had Elizabeth

picturing the older lady, her lips pursed in disapproval, peering down her nose at her hapless stooge. “I do not foresee any problems, but what about Richard’s inheritance? What steps can we take to stop him from getting it?”

Clearing his throat, the man, who Elizabeth assumed was some form of barrister, said, “Nine years is a long time, my lady. I am sure that in your magnificence you can devise a plan. Though it would be wise to ensure that your daughter stays healthy and unwed. Unless you can, of course, ensure that you retain the Rosings in the marriage settlement.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. She certainly did not like what she was hearing. Her mind instantly went to how she was going to tell Richard what was going on. Surely if she asked Jane to pass him a letter, she could get him word of Lady Catherine’s plots. Mind occupied, Elizabeth was startled when she heard her own name.

“What about that useless girl, Elizabeth? Did my departed husband mention her in his will?”

“My lady,” came the hesitant reply, “she was mentioned. According to your husband’s wishes, she must be guaranteed a lifelong home at Rosings, with all her needs taken care of. The will also references a codicil, shedding light on his specific instructions to be revealed to her when she comes of age.”

“And just what does this codicil say?” demanded Lady Catherine.

“I... I do not know, my lady. It was sealed in such a way that I could not look at it without showing evidence of my perfidy.”

“I suppose she will have to stay for now.” After a pause, Lady Catherine sighed.

The man’s voice was quick to interject, “You may rejoice to know that the will does

not say what type of life she must have here, only that she is provided one.”

Lady Catherine let out a cold chuckle and said, “Oh, that is lovely, thank you, Dunn. I have long thought that girl was more suited for work than gentility. Now I can see to it that she learns her place in the world.”

Elizabeth held her breath, her senses on high alert as she heard the faint rustling of footsteps and the door slowly opening. The two conspirators left the study, their footsteps echoing down the hallway, while Elizabeth remained hidden, her heart pounding in her chest. Elizabeth realized that if Lady Catherine caught wind of her eavesdropping, the punishment would be severe, far beyond mere servitude.

Darcy sighed as he sat down at what he still thought of as his father’s desk. It had been six months since his father had died and Darcy had come to grudgingly appreciate how much his father had drilled into his head growing up. Taking over Pemberley proved to be less challenging than he had anticipated for someone with his limited experience and so recently graduated from Cambridge.

The most difficult thing thus far had been cleaning up the mess left behind by Wickham. There had been two maids left with child and a number of debts in both Lambton and Kympton. His treatment of his once playmate had caused a rift among the staff. His steward, Wickham’s father, believed that his father would have never turned his back on his favorite, saying that his father would have forgiven Wickham for his high spirits and the man was sewing dissension among the staff. It had taken explaining the depth of the debts Wickham had racked up and disclosing the fact that he had promised marriage to no less than five of the local girls to get them on his side.

While Darcy could have just dismissed him, he did not want to have to dismiss anyone because of Wickham’s bad behavior and his own father’s intentional blindness. It had taken effort, but he had been successful. For the moment, at least

things had grown into a new normal. His relationship with his sister had even started to improve.

Oddly enough, it took him opening up about his struggles and explaining the reasons behind Wickham's banishment from Pemberley to improve his relationship with Georgianna. Darcy's usual inclination was to hide how much he struggled with things, but Mrs. Reynolds had informed him that his constant need to appear faultless was straining his connection with his sister. Mrs. Reynolds had explained that Georgianna did not need a faultless brother to be observed from afar. She needed someone who had made mistakes and conquered challenges, not someone whose apparent perfection made her feel inadequate.

That had been an eye-opening conversation. Darcy had wanted to be someone that Georgianna could have confidence in. He never considered that his act of having everything under control was actually worsening things with those close to him. What had surprised him even more was that Mrs. Reynolds wanted him to explain why Wickham was no longer visiting. Despite his initial hesitation to expose his young sister to the darkness in the world, Mrs. Reynolds, who acted as his mother would have more than once, had convinced him it was for the best. So he had explained. Not all the horrid details, of course, but enough so that she knew Wickham was not someone to be trusted.

Looking through his latest stack of correspondence, Darcy froze when he saw the black seal on a letter from Kent. Even without opening it, he knew his Uncle Lewis had died. Opening the missive, Darcy confirmed the news with a sad sigh. Despite Uncle Lewis's prolonged illness, the news of his death still came as a blow to Darcy.

There was nothing for it. He would have to head for Kent. Pulling out a clean slip of paper, Darcy penned a note to his cousin, Richard, who would be at Matlock. If he stopped at Matlock on his way to Kent, he and Richard could travel together, as they were both needed at Rosings.

Taking the missive with him, Darcy went out into the hall and approached the footman positioned at the bottom of the stairs. Handing it to him, Darcy said, "See to it that this gets to my cousin at Matlock." With a nod, the footman moved away towards the stables, where one of the stable hands would be available to run the message. Matlock was not so very far away. The rider was sure to get there before dark.

With a burst of energy, he took the stairs two at a time, each step echoing in the stairwell. Darcy made his way to his sister's suite, where she was sure to be studying with her governess. Peeking his head in, he watched as she read out loud from one of the bards works. He held his breath, patiently waiting for her to come to the end of the poem, and then finally spoke, "Good morning, my sweet. Are you delighting in the bards' words?"

Looking up from the page she was studying, Georgianna grinned and getting up, she rushed to him, embracing him in a tight hug. It was only after their embrace that she looked up at him with her nose scrunched in distaste before she said, "I do not know why he could not have just said what he meant. It would be much easier to understand if I did not have to ponder over his every word."

Darcy replied with a burst of laughter, his voice filled with amusement, "I suppose that does make it difficult to understand his work easily. I presume he wanted people to think about his work. It does not help that he wrote it a very long time ago and people talked and wrote differently then."

Shaking her head, Georgianna exclaimed, "I do not know if I am ever going to like his poetry."

"Perhaps you will find his plays more to your taste." Darcy exhaled and proceeded to share, "Georgianna, I just found out that Uncle Lewis has died."



Her pale blue eyes widened and began to tear up. As far as Darcy knew, she had always been a sensitive child, or at least that is the phrasing Mrs. Reynolds had used to explain her spells of high emotion. Regrettably, Darcy had been away at school much of the time she was growing up, but he was determined to grow closer to her.

“Poor Anne,” Georgianna began, “I know he was very sick, but it is still sad that he died. Are you going to Rosings?”

Nodding, Darcy answered, “Yes, sweet. It’s important for me to check on Anne and see how she is handling the loss of her father. Things may become complicated with Aunt Catherine.”

A grimace twisted Georgianna’s face as she said, “Aunt Catherine is terrible. I do not envy Anne having to live with her. At least Miss Elizabeth is there to help her.”

As he tilted his head, Darcy couldn't help but wonder how she had come to know Miss Elizabeth, though he said, “Your concern for Anne shows your compassionate heart. I will be leaving first thing in the morning and traveling to Kent.”

Looking briefly at her governess, Georgianna responded, “I can manage well enough with Mrs. Fletcher, and you know Mrs. Reynolds can handle Pemberley. Go take care of Anne and Miss Elizabeth, make sure they are safe from Aunt Catherine. Please convey my sympathy to them both.”

Darcy forced himself not to smile at his little sister’s serious expression and leaned over to kiss her forehead, reassuring her, “Do not worry, I will handle Aunt Catherine and make sure Anne and Miss Elizabeth are well.”

Following a brief exchange with Georgianna’s governess, Mrs. Fletcher, Darcy left the room and sought out Mrs. Reynolds and his valet to get things in order for his departure. There was much to do if he was going to do as his sister requested and take

care of Anne and Miss Elizabeth and handle Aunt Catherine. Fighting a shudder, Darcy was grateful that he would be picking up Richard along the way.

“I would like to say that I am surprised by mother’s machinations, but I am not.” With a sigh, Anne pushed aside the ledger, the lines of numbers forgotten, and picked up her teacup. After a slow sip, she said, “We will have to come up with a plan. You know I do not have the energy for a confrontation with my mother and yet I do not want to banish her completely from life. I have only just lost one parent, and I could not bear to lose the other so soon. For all that, she is not the best example of motherhood.”

For Elizabeth, a mother was an unnecessary concept. Many years without a maternal figure had taught her to navigate life alone. The lack of a mother’s love was an invisible scar, but it no longer bled, but that did not mean she would thrust such a wound on her friend should she not wish it. In the years since their sisterly bond had blossomed, Elizabeth realized that despite their closeness, their perspectives on shared experiences often diverged, a subtle but significant difference. Anne had proven to be quite attached to whatever crumbs of warmth that her mother was willing to offer.

Then, too, there was Anne’s health to worry about. Elizabeth studied her almost sister, carefully. Anne was pale and Elizabeth worried that Anne had not yet recovered from the shock of her father’s death. Anne was correct. She would not be able to confront Lady Catherine, her heart could not withstand the stress of it.

For all that Anne did not want to lose her mother entirely, it was the lack of motherly affection that had helped both girls to develop a close sisterly bond. That deep connection, a bond forged in years of shared experiences, drove Elizabeth to protect Anne, regardless of her desires. “I thought of sending Richard a letter through my sister, but I have a feeling that he will come. His father might also come, but I am uncertain of the earl’s opinion on women managing estates.”

Tapping a finger on her pale lips, Anne thought for a moment before saying, “I think Richard will come, and possibly Darcy. If we can successfully deal with my mother, then handling my uncle should be no problem at all.”

While many people were only exposed to the reserved Anne who gave way to her mother in all things, Elizabeth knew the real Anne. She knew Anne was a thinker whose failing health had forced her to find an alternative means to accomplish what she wished to. When necessary, Elizabeth served as her legs, eyes, and ears.

Tone curious, Elizabeth inquired, “Would you like to disclose your mother’s plotting to Richard and Mr. Darcy?”

Nodding, Anne said, “I think it will be necessary. I do not want Richard to be caught off guard by my mother and swoop in and accidentally destroy whatever we have in place. I am displeased by the idea that my mother is planning to withhold his inheritance from him. It makes me wonder just how far she might go to get what she wants. Besides, if I speak to Richard about my concerns, it is only logical that we bring Darcy into the fold.”

“I suppose that makes sense. Richard tells me he shares nearly everything with Mr. Darcy, and he trusts him more than his own brother, who has become a bit of a fop.” While Elizabeth had known Felton for most of her life, they had little to do with one another. The last time she had seen him while visiting Jane, he had been all style and no substance. It made sense to her that Richard, who was completely unlike his brother, would rely on his cousin for companionship and support.

Scrunching her mouth, Anne said, “Sometimes I fear for the earldom, though for different reasons from my mother.”

Elizabeth skillfully steered the conversation away from Anne’s potential tangent on the clash between self-expression and sacrifice by proposing, “Why don’t we invite

your cousins to join us for tea in your sitting room once they arrive? That way, we can convene our own little war council?"

Anne leaned forward in her chair, grinning slightly. "That sounds like a brilliant plan. Mother can discuss things with uncle in loud tones, accompanied by flying tea sets, and we can have a civil conversation away from all the chaos."

"Speaking of tea sets," Elizabeth frowned at the tea that had grown cold while they had discussed their latest problems. Pushing her teacup away from herself, Elizabeth scooped up a scone from the tray and, after taking a bite, hummed briefly, adding, "We may have let our tea grow cold, but the cook's pastries are still as grand as ever. You know how hard she works to tempt you. Please do eat one."

"You know I have very little appetite anymore, but I will try one." They both knew that Anne would be wasting away if not for all the small things the cook did to tempt Anne. Taking a bite, Anne smiled and, after chewing and swallowing, she exclaimed, "It seems that Mrs. Pitcher can do no wrong in the kitchen. The only things she makes that I do not like is what she makes by mother's order to appear fancy, and that is not at all her fault."

Finishing her scone, Elizabeth forced herself not to act the gluten and take another one off the tray. Licking crumbs off the corner of her lip, she said, "Yes, it really is a pity that your mother has no real taste for good food."

"My mother has no real taste for anything, Elizabeth. Have you seen the way she decorates?" This comment from Anne set both girls off into peals of laughter because it was so true. For all of Lady Catherine's diatribes on how amazing she was or would be had she learned how to do something. The incongruous mix of colors and themes in Lady Catherine's outfits and room decorations left Elizabeth wondering about the woman's state of mind. In order to endure Lady Catherine and her relentless lectures, Elizabeth and Anne relied on finding amusement in her

contradictory statements and quirks and exchanging knowing looks or discussing them later.

Leaning back in her chair, Elizabeth asked, “So what is our plan for tomorrow? Is there anything in particular we need to accomplish?”

“Until Richard and Darcy get here, we do not have much to do but look gloomy and unsuspecting when around my mother.”

“Speaking of gloomy,” Elizabeth asked. “You seem to be handling your father’s passing better than I had hoped.”

“Yes, well, towards the end there, papa’s suffering became unbearable,” Anne recounted in a somber tone. “There is actually a part of me relieved by his passing. Because though I will miss him terribly, I find comfort knowing his passing was kinder than his prolonged suffering.”

There was a logic to Anne’s words that brought Elizabeth comfort. She had almost felt guilty for her own similar feelings. Uncle Lewis was like a second father to her, and, despite that, she had stopped wanting him to hang on at the end. It had just been too hard watching his pain. Elizabeth couldn’t help but feel a wave of sorrow wash over her, realizing the extent of her own sadness and the void left by the absence of her dependable Uncle Lewis.

Still, life would go on and she would do all she could to protect Anne from what life threw at her, Lady Catherine included. Soon Richard would arrive, probably with Mr. Darcy, and they could come up with a better plan than would not let Lady Catherine get her way.

Still, she couldn’t shake the memory of Mr. Darcy’s troubling opinions from his visit a couple of years ago. She held onto the hope that his previous apology and

commitment to change had stayed intact, and that he hadn't relapsed into his old patterns since their last encounter. He possessed a sharp mind, and Uncle Lewis spoke well of him, so as long as he remained agreeable, collaborating with him to outmaneuver Lady Catherine would be a pleasure.

### Chapter Six

Darcy could not escape Lady Catherine and her pontification fast enough. Pleading a need to wash the dust of the road off of themselves, both he and Richard retreated to their provided rooms. Turning to Richard, he said, “I didn’t think she would ever stop talking.”

Sighing, Richard said, “I think she interprets Uncle Lewis’s death as a chance to attract more attention and manipulate circumstances to her liking.” Pausing as he came to his door, he added, “We should be grateful that she is so easily deceived into thinking that our undisturbed listening signifies agreement, rather than a mere demonstration of etiquette and a desire for peace.”

Darcy loosened his cravat while he thought about his cousin’s words before saying, “Give me half an hour to wash the road from myself and we can search out Anne. I would like to see how she is managing without her mother’s interference.”

With a jaunty salute, Richard disappeared into his room, the door clicking shut behind him. This left Darcy to wander into his room, distracted by his thoughts as he prepared to wash and change out of his traveling clothes. Looking around, he spotted his valet, Perry, busily putting away his things. Sporting a smile, Perry announced, “The last bucket of water has been fetched for your bath, and I’ve set out a fresh set of clothes for you.”

“Thank you, Perry.” Darcy turned towards the dressing room where his bath would be but hesitated and said, “I am concerned about what might happen at Rosings without my uncle at the helm and I worry about my cousin and the staff. Pay attention

while you are below stairs. My aunt may think little of those she sees as below her and insists that she has everything in order, but I trust the servants to have a better understanding of the situation. You will probably have a better understanding of what is happening than I will.”

Quick to agree, Perry said, “Of course, sir.” His subdued smile and nod were reassuring to Darcy. Perry had been his valet for the last several years and had been quite supportive while he struggled in the aftermath of his father’s death. Normally of a jolly disposition, he was good at helping Darcy keep things in perspective with his comments and small bits of advice. Darcy had confidence that Perry could wheedle information from the staff that would help him help his cousin.

With a nod and a smile, Darcy made his way to his waiting bath, removing his cravat as he went. Dropping it next to the chair where his fresh clothes waited, Darcy sat on the bench and removed his boots with a happy sigh. When he traveled and was at ease at home, he wore whatever he wished. While the boots he wore might not be considered the most fashionable, Darcy preferred to be able to remove his own shoes and clothes. It was one of the reasons he was so uncomfortable at balls. Society expected him to dress in the tightest clothes imaginable at fancy gatherings, right down to his snug-fitting boots.

It did not take long for Darcy to get clean and dressed once again, though he knew his aunt would most likely comment that he had not chosen to dress more formally. It had taken several days of hard travel for him and Richard to arrive at Rosings. Darcy was more concerned with comfort than with the formality that Aunt Catherine was sure to demand. Coming over with his cravat, Perry tied it into a competent knot and Darcy was ready to go.

Just as he was leaving his room, the door to Richard’s room opened, and they smiled at each other at their timing. Richard asked, “Should we just go to Anne’s room or skulk around hoping to spot her?”



“Actually, Anne is waiting for you in her sitting room with a light respite. We would like to-” Richard interrupted the young woman’s words with a hug that had her chuckling and Darcy curious.

Leaning back, Richard looked down at the woman and said, “It has been so long, Lizzie. We missed having you at Matlock this year.”

“It was tough not being able to support Jane during her first season, but I couldn’t abandon Uncle Lewis. Not with him doing so poorly.” Came her soft reply.

Nodding in understanding, Richard asked, “How are you holding up, Lizzie?”

Darcy had a hard time recognizing the young woman Richard was embracing as Miss Elizabeth. Darcy cast his mind back and vividly remembered the sharp pain from the girl’s kick to his shin only two years ago. How had she become the beautiful young lady before him?

When he had last been at Rosings, he had not only learned of his uncle’s upcoming demise, but he had also realized that he was becoming far too assuming and ridged. He had attempted to leave behind his old ways and strived to embody the qualities he had long admired in others. Seeing Miss Elizabeth before him now only emphasized just how wrong he had once been. Darcy was struck by the transformation: she was taller, and the youthful aura was gone, replaced by a captivating maturity that was undeniable. The change in her demeanor, a certain poise and self-assurance, was unmistakable. Looking more closely, Darcy saw a young lady with arresting green eyes and curly auburn hair piled on her head that would soon be the belle of any ball that she attended.

The wan smile on Miss Elizabeth’s face and the dimming of light in her green eyes told Darcy that she mourned the loss of his uncle. Despite the pain she so obviously felt, Miss Elizabeth stated, “Losing Uncle Lewis has been tough, but staying busy has

been helpful.”

“And how is Anne?” asked Richard.

Miss Elizabeth glanced between Richard and himself before saying, “Despite the loss of her only caring parent, she finds solace in knowing that both of you are here. There is much that we have to discuss before Lady Catherine expects us for dinner.”

By closely observing Miss Elizabeth's expressions, he caught the flick of her gaze down the hallway. It felt as if she was making sure that they were not being observed. He did not like that at all. Clearing his throat, he said, “While I am happy to partake of something before I have to face one of Aunt Catherine’s exorbitant dinners, there is something about your tone that has me concerned, Miss Elizabeth. Is there something afoot?”

Miss Elizabeth’s eyes subtly widened as she commented, “You are quite perceptive, Mr. Darcy.” With a nonchalant shrug, she casually explained, “It’s better if we discuss this in the safety of Anne’s sitting room. Do not worry, it is rather cozy and not too girlish for your manly tastes.”

Elizabeth found a certain amount of humor in the pacing that both Richard and Mr. Darcy were doing. While her understanding of Mr. Darcy was limited, she knew Richard was a man of action and would most certainly object to the idea she and Anne had come up with the night before. Waiting until Richard finally paused for a moment, Elizabeth said, “I know you would like to lop the head off the hydra, so to speak, and topple Lady Catherine from her position of power but you must understand that it would not be without consequences.”

Chuckling, Mr. Darcy asked, “Does my aunt have any extra heads that I am unaware of?”

Catching Anne's eye, Elizabeth shared a smile with her before Anne stated, "While my mother has just the one head, she always has another scheme, and what's possibly more troubling is that she is both resolute and brutal." Smoothing out an invisible wrinkle in her black dress, Anne continued, "Unless you are prepared to drag her off to Bedlam today, we have no other option. I know that she's far from the ideal mother, but with the pain of losing a parent still fresh, I simply can't face losing another."

Richard ran a hand over his face, the lines of worry etched deep, and then went to Anne, dropping to his knees, his warm hands enveloping hers. He said, "I cannot even begin to imagine the pain you must face having lost your one loving parent, but do you think that this is truly the best option? You want us to act like we do not know that you have inherited and that I am next in line. You want to allow your mother to believe that she is in control of everything while you and Lizzie run things from the shadows." Shaking his head, he mumbled, "I cannot like it, and do not get me started on allowing Aunt Catherine to treat Lizzie as a servant."

"I am asking you to allow me to manage Rosings as I see fit, to the best of my ability, while I am able to do so." With trembling fingers, Anne clutched Richard's hand, her touch light but desperate, and he immediately responded, rubbing her small hands between his own larger, warm ones. Anne, emboldened by her support, pushed forward and shared, "I would not survive the discord that would arise if my mother learned I was taking over. Even sending her to Scotland would take time and my mother would not give me a moment's peace. The last time I tried to stand up for something I wanted—a different style dress, to be precise—I paid the price by being bedridden for days. My heart just cannot take it. I know I do not have long, maybe only a handful of years, and I would like to live them in relative peace, even if that peace is under my mother's thumb."

Mr. Darcy sat across from Elizabeth and Anne, his fingers steepled as he contemplated for a moment. Then he inquired, "Although I understand your wish to

handle matters in your own manner, I am curious about how you plan to ensure the proper management of both the tenants and the staff.”

It was gratifying to hear that Mr. Darcy respected the plan that she and Anne had come up with. He was thinking it through and asking questions. A faint, almost painful smile curved Elizabeth’s mouth as she responded, “Despite Lady Catherine’s penchant for making proclamations and asserting her desires, she rarely backs them up with action, especially when it involves venturing beyond the rooms that she has claimed as her own. As long as we are able to keep those who handle the actual work on our side, things should function smoothly.”

Her comment had Mr. Darcy and Richard glancing at each other for a moment before Richard, with a rueful smile, said, “I do not know why I did not realize that. I often just let her talk so that I do not have to argue with her about her foolish ideas. Is there anything that she follows through on besides decorating her rooms?”

Shaking her head, Anne answered, “My mother believes that her position in life means that everyone must follow her pronouncements. She never questions whether or not they do what she demands. It would be unthinkable, and to check that they are following through would be too much like work. She is Lady Catherine de Bourgh, daughter of and sister to an earl. She does not work.” This had everyone chuckling.

Richard sat down in a chair next to Anne and stretched out his legs before him. He said, “If we are going to do this, I want to have safety measures in place to protect the both of you. I do not trust Aunt Catherine not to lash out if she learns she is not getting her way. More than that, I want a cutoff, a time beyond which we will stop this experiment. I will inherit when you turn thirty, but that is far too long to allow Aunt free rein. Would you consider having me step in on your twenty-fifth birthday?”

Anne tilted her head before nodding. “That would be fair.” Elizabeth knew what she did not say was that she did not think she would live much beyond twenty-five. It was

not a topic either of them wished to dwell on and she feared the gentlemen were not yet cognizant of yet.

Biting her lip, Elizabeth tried not to think of just how a furious Lady Catherine might lash out. In all the years Elizabeth had known her, she had never seen the woman back down gracefully. There had always been cruelty and underhanded behavior when she did not get her way. She suppressed a shudder, feeling her resolve grow stronger as she made a firm decision to ensure Anne's life remained as she wished it to for what time she had left.

Focusing on Richard, Elizabeth asked, "What safety measures do you have in mind?"

"I want to hear from you and Anne twice a month with updates on how everything is running and if Aunt Catherine is being a bother." Pausing, Richard seemed to realize he said before shrugging and adding, "Or more of a bother than is typical. From what I hear from my father, she has been a bother since birth."

"I had already made up my mind that staying in contact would be absolutely essential. I have spoken with Lydia Turner, the physician's wife, and she is willing to pass on any letters." She smiled at Anne and reassured her, "Lady Catherine mistreats her husband whenever he comes to assist Anne, and Mrs. Turner is not fond of it. Frankly, she is not fond of Lady Catherine at all, and I think she would do almost anything to cut her off at the knees."

Leaning slightly forward in his chair, Mr. Darcy spoke up, his voice filled with earnestness, "I am glad that you have those that are willing to help you both, do not get me wrong, but I feel that we should go further. There is always the possibility that Aunt Catherine will put you in a situation where she is monitoring what you write somehow. It may sound odd, but I think a pass phrase will be a benefit. It could serve as a warning that you are in need of aid or that Richard or I need to be on the lookout for danger. To be certain you are both prospering under Aunt Catherine's rule, I think

we should visit Rosings every year, to make sure in person that you are well.”

Elizabeth studied the young man across from her, finding herself very glad that he had come. It was a brilliant idea, and it made Elizabeth wonder where the thought had originated from. For some reason, hearing his suggestion made her want to ask him if he would join her in a game of chess while he was at Rosings.

Darcy followed Richard down the hallway, watching as his two cousins chatted in low tones, Anne gripping Richard’s arm for support as they went. They had waited as long as they could, but if they did not show up to the parlor to await dinner soon, he knew Lady Catherine would become upset. With every step, he couldn’t shake off the worry for his cousin and Miss Elizabeth, and how precarious their lives would be in the coming years.

Miss Elizabeth’s voice was soft but powerful when she interrupted his thoughts with her words. “I know this comes late, Mr. Darcy, but I wanted to express my condolences for the loss of your father. It has been many years since I lost my own father, but I remember the pain of it to this day. It is not something I would wish on anyone, though you may find relief knowing that the ache lessens with time.” Looking down at the young lady, Darcy caught the emotion in her eyes and felt the breath still in his throat.

In the six months or so since his father had died, he had accepted many condolences, but none of them seemed nearly as heartfelt as what Miss Elizabeth was offering. There had been trite comments about God’s will as well as something about their confidence in him and his ability to handle all that amounted to the Darcy name and holdings. None of them had been made with any feeling and none of it had touched him, not really.

The image of his father filled Darcy with a stark emptiness; unlike the warmth he sensed in Elizabeth’s relationship with her father, his own memories were cold and

distant, a void where affection should have been. It was impossible to miss the bitterness and disdain that seeped from every word his father spoke. Only a handful of people earned his approval, and Darcy had not been one of them. Any notion of affection or love had been out of the question. Frankly, his father's passing had been a relief of sorts, even though it meant that he had to take on many responsibilities that he was not fully prepared for.

Still, there had been an emotional reaction when his father died. He felt a deep, aching emptiness, almost as if he was mourning the loss of a chance to gain his father's approval, or even a flicker of affection. There was no longer any chance for his father to change his mind about him and learn to love him. Darcy rubbed at his chest in a futile attempt to soothe the sudden twinge that asserted itself.

Struggling for a moment to clear his throat, Darcy said, "Thank you, Miss Elizabeth. My father's passing has been a strange and difficult thing to deal with, and your words have offered a much-needed sense of comfort."

"It sounds as if your father's passing might not have been as straightforward as my own." Pausing, Miss Elizabeth bit her lip for a moment before adding, "Should you want to unburden yourself, I am a good listener."

Miss Elizabeth's sincere offer took Darcy aback. His gaze fell on her earnest expression, and a slow smile crept across his face, the unexpected warmth making him feel strangely light. "I fear we will not have time to unravel the Gordian knot that was my relationship with my father before we reach the parlor. But perhaps we could speak of it another time?"

In a way, he surprised himself by agreeing to disclose what he normally avoided even thinking about, but somehow it felt right. Which was odd. Gazing down at Miss Elizabeth, a flicker of uncertainty ran through him. He was captivated, yet completely unnerved by this young woman, whose presence seemed to unravel his reserve.

Once the four of them arrived at the parlor, all possibility for conversation stopped. His aunt Catherine's presence was enough to stifle any idle chatter, but the spectacle before them shocked Darcy into speechless silence. Somehow, since the death of her husband, Lady Catherine had installed a throne in the parlor.

Darcy and Richard exchanged a startled glance, their eyes wide with disbelief at the boldness of their aunt's behavior. Not only was there a raised platform that put her chair higher than all the rest, but the chair was gilded and excessively ornate. It was utterly absurd and so like his pompous aunt to do such a thing.

"Come in. Come in," she gestured, encouraging them into the room with a regal wave.

They moved haltingly towards the chairs that were arranged about the room and were about to sit down when Aunt Catherine harrumphed and said, "It seems I cannot give you leave to do anything on your own. Anne, you sit here next to me and face our guests. Miss Bennet, you may take that stool there next to Anne. That way, you can help her if she is in need. You know how delicate my Anne is. Boys, you will sit-"

Utterly fed up with her directions, Richard exclaimed, "Darcy and I are grown men, not boys, and we will sit as we please." He picked up one of the chairs that lined the edges of the room and brought it over next to Anne, adding, "See, this is perfect. Now we can chat amiably while we wait for dinner."

Following his cousin's lead, Darcy picked up a chair and moved it over with the others. Then, catching sight of the low stool Miss Elizabeth was to sit on, he nudged it aside with his foot, the rough wood scraping against the floorboards, and placed the chair in its stead, offering it to her with a polite bow, "Here you are, Miss Elizabeth. You take this chair, and I will fetch another. There is no sane reason for you to sit on a stool when there are so many fairly comfortable chairs available."



“Fitzwilliam Darcy! How dare you go against my arrangements? I am the mistress of this estate and that means that my word is law. If your poor mother were around to see what you are doing... To see how you are disrespecting me. She would be ashamed.” Moving to wipe a nonexistent tear from her eye, she sniffled slightly before continuing. “I will permit you to stay in your odd little grouping, but I demand you leave Miss Elizabeth the stool and sit in the chair yourself. Now.”

Turning to face the Gorgon that was his aunt, Darcy took a breath, ready to blast her with the fallacy in all that she said and did, but a grip on his sleeve stopped him. He knew, even without seeing Miss Elizabeth’s face, that she was worried he might upset the plan Anne had carefully crafted. Despite his misgivings about the plan, he had agreed to assist them in thwarting his aunt their way. Raised as he was, Darcy had long ago managed to gain control of his temper. His jaw clenched, but he forced himself to stay calm.

Instead of saying what he wanted to, he asserted, “Aunt Catherine, I know you like to have your way in everything, but in this, I cannot comply. I am a gentleman and as such I cannot in good conscience sit in a comfortable chair while the lady next to me is left to manage on a stool. If you want me to sit, Miss Elizabeth will sit in a chair as well.” Giving his waistcoat a sharp tug, he turned to Miss Elizabeth and, smiling, helped her into her chair. Ignoring his aunt’s inarticulate noises, Darcy collected another chair and sat down next to Miss Elizabeth. To say his aunt gaped like a fish would be rude, but true.

### Chapter Seven

Elizabeth was insanely grateful when the butler entered the room and announced dinner. In his characteristically cheeky way, Richard approached his aunt, extending his arm with a flourish that was as exaggerated as it was unconvincing. With a frustrated huff, she snatched his arm and exited the room, her posture stiff and full of outrage. This left Mr. Darcy able to offer an arm to Anne. They walked to the dining room in silence, which Elizabeth supposed was to Lady Catherine's liking. Following behind them all, Elizabeth shook her head. Lady Catherine probably thought they did not speak out of respect for her. Lost in her own world, Lady Catherine couldn't comprehend that their silence stemmed from the profound disgust and outrage they felt.

Their meal progressed in silence, and Elizabeth wondered if Lady Catherine had not yet recovered from the stand that Mr. Darcy had made. Normally, she was the sort to lecture throughout the meal when given the opportunity and an audience. It was a relief to be able to enjoy the relative peace, even if she found the meal unpalatable. She did not have an opportunity to talk with Mr. Darcy until they removed to the Music room.

"I believe music is in order," announced Lady Catherine. She looked down her nose at Elizabeth, her gaze icy and sharp, and added, "Miss Bennet, if you would."

Elizabeth maintained a polite facade until her back was to Lady Catherine. Then, with a subtle, almost imperceptible twitch of her lips, Elizabeth rolled her eyes. Who else was going to provide musical entertainment? Lady Catherine had never learned an instrument, having given up early in the endeavor according to Uncle Lewis. Anne,

on the other hand, had never been permitted to take lessons.

Going through the sheet music, Elizabeth searched for something Lady Catherine might approve of. Mr. Darcy approached, just as she had picked something out, and inquired, “Would you permit me to offer my services to turn the pages, Miss Elizabeth?”

Smiling up at him, Elizabeth nodded and said, “That would be most welcome, Mr. Darcy.” Settling on the bench, Elizabeth smoothed out her dress and Mr. Darcy stood at her side, ready to turn the pages as she played the sonata she had chosen.

For a time, she focused on falling into the pattern of the notes and the emotions that they evoked. It was not easy with Lady Catherine lecturing in the background about how, if she had learned, she would be more proficient than a mere companion. Elizabeth stumbled over several notes on hearing herself called such. It was one thing to know that Lady Catherine meant to relegate her to the life of a servant. It was entirely another thing to hear herself demeaned in front of two people that she respected.

“Pay her no mind, Miss Elizabeth,” murmured Mr. Darcy as he stood next to her. “She’s so caught up in her own misguided ignorance that she is utterly oblivious to the truth right before her eyes.”

Elizabeth glanced up at Mr. Darcy, a smile ghosting about her lips. Her fingers danced along the keys more confidently as she looked at Mr. Darcy. Feeling playful, she asked, “What truth is that?”

Mr. Darcy, his voice low and measured, turned the page for her before saying, “While you may not have the grand parentage that my aunt claims, you, Miss Elizabeth, exhibit more refinement and integrity in a day than she ever shown in her whole life.” Pausing briefly, he then quietly added, “I believe her aggression stems from feeling

threatened by you, as you embody what she herself pretends to be.”

A hot blush spread across Elizabeth’s cheeks, and she knew that she could do nothing about it. She could not remember ever being so complemented or ever felt so muddled. How was it that this was the same man who had insulted her so badly all those years ago? She knew he had apologized, but how had his view of her changed so much in only a few years?

Swallowing, Elizabeth had to force her fingers to continue to move. Thank goodness she had chosen a piece that she knew fairly well. Still, she had to ask, “What do you suppose Lady Catherine is pretending to be?”

“A lady of worth,” came his honest reply.

They might have moved on to another topic had Lady Catherine not interrupted them by saying, “This will not do. You are talking too much for a proper performance. If you cannot do it correctly, Bennet, then it is better that you should stop and remove yourself from the instrument.”

Scoffing, Richard was quick to speak up. “Aunt, do not be ridiculous. It is not as if she is playing a concerto for the king and queen. This is a small family gathering. It is meant to be enjoyed by everyone, including Elizabeth and Darcy.”

Lady Catherine was too restrained to roll her eyes, but she certainly looked down her nose at her nephew. “I am the Lady of this house. As mistress, I have the authority to say or do whatever I want. If I want to tell my daughter’s companion to stop playing, I can.”

“I know you must mean to say your daughter’s friend and companion. Elizabeth is not employed to be a companion. She was Uncle Lewis’s ward. My parents have embraced Jane, her older sister, as a beloved member of our family. By extension,

Elizabeth is family as well, a family member whom I hold dear and will not see misused.” From where she sat, Elizabeth could easily see the hard lines of Richard’s face. Even though he never enlisted in the military as he intended, Elizabeth could imagine how he would have appeared facing an enemy on the battlefield at that moment. Richard held his ground, his voice unwavering, his authority absolute. Whatever she was thinking, Lady Catherine’s reaction was only a slight widening of her eyes before they narrowed in ire.

There was a moment of heavy silence as the room waited for whoever was going to make the next move. Elizabeth found her gaze swiveling from one strong-willed opponent to the other. It was a relative surprise when it was Anne who broke the stalemate by saying, “As much as I enjoy your playing, Lizzie, I am tired and must retire for the night.”

Jumping up from the piano bench, Elizabeth moved to her side, murmuring, “It seems we both yearn for the comfort of rest. We have had a long day, and our hearts are heavy with grief. Let us go up together.”

The act of bidding everyone goodnight seemed to dispel the powder keg of animosity, at least slightly. After all, one couldn’t claim to be part of civilization without adhering to certain social graces, however put out one might be. Elizabeth accepted the hug Richard offered, whispering, “You know that as long as Anne wishes to stay here, I will stay by her side. While I am grateful for your powerful show of support, I need you to remember that I will have to live here with Lady Catherine after you return to Matlock. Do not do something foolish.”

Richard chuckled softly, a barely audible sound that belied the tense set of his shoulders. A crinkle appeared in his eyes as he looked down at her and said, “I will mind my tongue if that’s your wish, but I remain concerned. My aunt grows more self-important with every passing moment. Already she has made herself a throne to sit on. She will soon become too entrenched to topple easily.”

Sighing, Elizabeth nodded and hurried to catch up with Anne as she walked towards the stairs. Elizabeth understood the perilous nature of the game she was about to play, yet she would take the chance. If this was how Anne wanted to handle things, she had promised to try. She was not about to back out just because she feared the outcome.

Darcy waited impatiently in the empty hall, hoping to catch Miss Elizabeth as she emerged from the house and onto the garden path. Perry had been good enough to inquire about Miss Elizabeth's habits from the staff. They discovered she shared his habit of waking early, often enjoying a refreshing stroll as the sun rose. He wanted to get the chance to speak with her about the situation at Rosings without interference from his more hotheaded cousin or supercilious aunt.

There was also the matter of their promised conversation that never happened. A strange disappointment settled over Darcy after Miss Elizabeth's premature departure the night before. For some reason that he could not quite place, he had been looking forward to confiding in Miss Elizabeth about the loss of his father and Darcy was determined to follow through this morning.

Movement at the kitchen door had Darcy standing straighter as he watched Miss Elizabeth exit the house and shut the door quietly behind her. He cleared his throat, a subtle sound in the tranquil morning, to avoid startling her. Miss Elizabeth's face lit up with a smile when she spotted him waiting for her and Darcy found himself wanting to smile in return. Never before had he found himself so drawn in to another person's emotions and for all that he found it odd he did not hesitate to smile back at her.

"Mr. Darcy, do you have need of something, or have you simply come to greet me?" she asked.

With hushed steps, Darcy approached Elizabeth, his voice a low murmur as he said, "Actually, I had hoped that you would not mind if I joined you on your morning

walk. We did not have that conversation I promised last night, and I did not want to miss the opportunity.”

Miss Elizabeth took his offered arm without hesitation and said, “I would love to have company on my walk, Mr. Darcy. Anne’s health is too poor to accompany me, so it will be a rare joy to share the sunrise.”

They both took a moment to look to the east and appreciate the rosy glow that was emerging over the trees. By some silent agreement, they moved together down the garden path. They had walked some distance, the sounds of birds chirping a gentle melody in the background, before Darcy finally ventured to say, “Before I forget Georgianna, my younger sister wanted me to convey her most sincere condolences to both you and Anne.”

Looking up at him, her face earnest, Miss Elizabeth gushed, “Oh, that is so sweet of her. Tell her thank you for me.”

“You could write her and tell her yourself if you wish. I am sure she would enjoy the opportunity to exchange letters with a young lady closer to her in age.” Though the comment had been made with little thought once the words left his mouth, Darcy realized that it was a splendid idea to have Elizabeth exchange letters with Georgianna. He had only recently realized that Georgianna was lonely without friends her own age, and in Miss Elizabeth there was a chance at a meaningful friendship.

“I would very much enjoy writing to your sister. She must be entering her teen years by now. What is she, thirteen, fourteen?” asked Miss Elizabeth.

His reply was swift and simple, “Georgianna is thirteen; she is ten years younger than I am.”

Just as Darcy rounded a corner into the fragrant rose garden, the scent of a thousand blooms filling the air, Elizabeth asked, "I'm curious, with such a large age difference, how are you both navigating your sibling relationship now that your father is gone?"

Her question required Darcy to think for a moment before answering. "It has been an adjustment. Father's death has left me in charge of her care, along with Richard, and neither of us has any experience with young girls and what they need to thrive. More than that, I was away at school for much of her life, so we did not have much of a basis to build a relationship on, but I think we are growing close."

Chuckling softly, Miss Elizabeth said, "I once told Uncle Lewis that it was not fair that boys got to go away to school and learn all that they did."

Part of Darcy wanted to laugh at such an unusual idea, but he caught himself before he did. Uncle Lewis had told him that Miss Elizabeth had been an eager student, so it would make a certain amount of sense that she would have wanted to take advantage of any opportunity to learn. Curious, he asked, "How did he react to that?"

"I am afraid I quite shocked him, though after he recovered, he asked if I would also like to be away from Rosings for years at a time, spending all of my time with strangers. I did not like that idea very much at all, which seemed to satisfy Uncle Lewis, but I mourned the opportunity to learn. Uncle Lewis's offer of tutoring filled me with joy; I eagerly accepted, relishing the prospect of learning at home with Anne nearby." Miss Elizabeth paused, leaning over to smell one of the newly budding roses.

Darcy could not help but be charmed by the way she relished nature, her tender smile enjoying something so simple, so completely. She was so unlike the many women of the ton who would have never noticed the rose, let alone enjoy its fragrance. Such women judged value by price alone; Miss Elizabeth, conversely, would probably reject costly perfume, finding the delicate fragrance of a rose infinitely more



appealing.

Turning away from the rose, Miss Elizabeth looked up at him and asked, “Between Eton and Cambridge, I’ve heard it can take upwards of eight years, with only brief, infrequent trips home allowed. Did it bother you to be away from home for so long?”

Surprised by her question, it took Darcy a moment to compose his answer, but the silence between them was not uncomfortable. They walked down the rose-lined path while he thought and eventually, he said, “My only true regret was that my time away from Pemberley meant that my relationship with my younger sister was practically nonexistent until I was done with school.”

When Miss Elizabeth looked eager to hear more, Darcy continued, “I was always a studious boy, so I enjoyed learning, but school was a shock. It did not help that my mother passed away only a short time before I was sent to school, and I was by no means handling her death well. My reticence made it difficult to make friends. Sadly, it was a habit that persisted all the way into Cambridge. Frankly, though, home was not a place that I think I would have fared much better. My father was unbending and intolerant. He offered no comfort, consumed by the weight of the Darcy legacy and his expectations of me as a representative of the Darcy name, not a grieving child. To make matters worse, he became more demanding with every year that passed by, requiring a ridged adherence to what he thought was required of a Darcy. Though I question his methods, I’ve become a man who effectively oversees Pemberley and its estates, providing for my tenants and servants and maintaining a respected position. My father’s approach, therefore, had some merit, I suppose.”

With unexpected strength, Miss Elizabeth pulled him to a halt by gripping his coat and declared, “You have turned into a man of note in spite of your father not because of him. I will not speak badly of a man who has passed, but I would suggest that the best traits that I see in you are not something you learned from your father. Rather, they are the parts of you—your kindness, your strength, your defiance—that he

couldn't extinguish."

Elizabeth saw the confusion etched on Mr. Darcy's face, his brow furrowed in a way that spoke of bewilderment. Though she knew she was overstepping the boundaries of what a young lady might get away with, especially on a walk alone with a gentleman, she continued to lecture him, the words tumbling from her lips like a waterfall. "You stood up to Lady Catherine last night and insisted that I not sit on that stool. You defied her, and it was your inner kindness that prompted such an action. I may be wrong, but the type of man your father was urging you to emulate wouldn't stoop to such behavior, I think. The very idea seems contrary to the man you have described. His sort of Darcy would have ignored Lady Catherine's behavior and allowed her to get away with behaving poorly. But you did not, and I am very grateful for your actions."

"I have not always been so." Shaking his head ruefully, Mr. Darcy continued, "You may remember the comments I made that inspired you to kick me in the shin?"

Chuckling, Elizabeth found herself unexpectedly leaning into Mr. Darcy before jerking herself upright. "We all have bad days, Mr. Darcy. I can tell that you are striving to better yourself, as any person of true worth is wont to do. Life, like a river, is not stagnant; we must keep flowing, growing, or we'll miss the person we were meant to be, the landscapes we could have seen."

Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy continued their walk, their steps synchronized, the soft sound of the breeze accompanying their progress. Feeling slightly foolish for her grandiose statements, Elizabeth had just started to relax when Mr. Darcy said, "That is a remarkably mature idea for a lady of your tender years. Did you come up with it yourself or were you inspired by something?"

"I half remember my father saying something similar before he passed. I was seven and had been struggling with something, though I do not remember what now. It is

one of my only true memories of him. The rest of my memories of him are more ephemeral. I remember the feeling of his voice, a deep resonant hum against my skin as he held me while he read aloud, and the lingering scent of pipe tobacco and polished wood from his study. He died not a month later and my life change forever.” Elizabeth was glad that her feet had long ago memorized the path because her eyes had grown misty as she remembered her father.

Mr. Darcy surprised her when he offered her a handkerchief. “It sounds as if you had a wonderful father for all that he did not stay in your life for long.”

Elizabeth blotted her eyes and smiled. “Yes, he was a wonderful man.” Then hesitating, she tilted her head and asked, “Did you know that the Uncle Lewis and Reggie found Jane and I abandoned on their way home from your mother’s funeral? It seems that we both lost our one good parent around the same time. I hope the positive legacies of my father and your mother will provide a strong foundation for both of us to grow into the people we aspire to be.”

Though Mr. Darcy remained silent, a subtle nod and a small smile played on his lips, leading Elizabeth to believe he agreed with her sentiment. They continued their walk with her hand nestled in the crook of his arm, choosing the path that veered to the left that promised a more leisurely, scenic return to Rosings. It was a special treat for Elizabeth to be able to walk so far without a specific task that she was after. Though not as confined as she once had been, her many responsibilities limited her time to simply enjoy nature.

Despite her initial apprehension about Mr. Darcy’s visit, his presence, and Richard’s too, turned out to be a blessing. They had helped keep Lady Catherine in line the night before and were willing to go along with Anne’s plan, albeit reluctantly. As a final touch, Mr. Darcy had sought her out for a walk. As their conversation continued, it became clear that it was both insightful and deeply enjoyable, a blend of wit and wisdom that she quite enjoyed.

So much of her life recently had been somber with Uncle Lewis's illness and eventual passing and the moving to be exactly what she needed. Elizabeth appreciated the fact that Mr. Darcy was willing to let her mind wander and simply absorb the tranquility that nature offered. Wanting to express her gratitude, Elizabeth broke their silence. "It has meant a lot that you have come to Anne and me at this time. I know that you and Georgianna have only recently dealt with your own loss. Please know that your support has meant the world to me at a time when I had grown weary of doing it all on my own."

Halting their forward movement, Mr. Darcy took both of Elizabeth's hands in his own larger ones and said, "I well understand the requirements of taking an estate in hand while at the same time dealing with the weight of grief. Though somehow, I think you grieve Uncle Lewis more deeply than I grieved my father. I am glad that you have found some solace in my presence."

With a slight shake of her head, Elizabeth raised one eyebrow, it seemed to her that Mr. Darcy often was self-deprecating, and it would not do. He was too good a man to belittle himself so often. His inability to recognize his own good qualities might explain his cynical view of others. Elizabeth could tell he was fighting the habit that she saw during his last visit, but it was always nice to have a reminder of one's own worth. So she explained, "Grief is not something to compare or measure it is simply felt. Do not belittle your experience, Mr. Darcy."

Eyes widening, Mr. Darcy hesitated before smiling widely. "Before I forget, I wanted to say that the condolence you offered last night was, in fact, the sincerest of all that had been offered to me in regard to my father's death. Shall we continue?"

"Yes, as much as I am enjoying this walk, I do have responsibilities to get to." As they walked the rest of the way back to the mansion, they spoke of the responsibilities that Elizabeth oversaw at Rosings. It was a relief for Elizabeth to share her common burdens with someone who knew exactly what she was going through.

Soon enough though, Rosings was within sight and they had to part, at least for the moment and Mr. Darcy said, “Since you promised to write Georgianna, don’t hesitate to share any questions or concerns about the estate, staff problems, or difficult neighbors. I may not have all the answers, but I will do my best to assist you and Anne.”

### Chapter Eight

The heavy oak doors swung shut behind Darcy as he re-entered the mansion, his mind far away as he looked for coffee. He marveled at how much he had enjoyed spending time with Miss Elizabeth. Never before had he spent such extended proximity to a woman he was not related to without the urge to flee; yet, inexplicably, it happened. Even the silence between them felt oddly peaceful. What he would do with the familiarity that he had developed with Miss Elizabeth, he did not know. He felt a wave of relief at the thought that his stay at Rosings would be relatively short, knowing that a longer visit would leave him hopelessly confused.

While he supposed one could develop a friendship with a woman, he had never thought it would be something he would experience. Men and women lived in such isolated spheres, their lives rarely intersecting in ways that nurtured meaningful friendships. He supposed Miss Elizabeth was unique, a singular blend of wit and charm that defied simple explanation. For a man so used to routine, the strangeness of his current circumstances unsettled him.

Entering the sunlit morning room, Darcy saw Richard's smiling face at the table, a half-eaten plate of steaming eggs before him, the scent of coffee lingering in the air. Darcy immediately moved to the sideboard to obtain his cup of coffee, not stopping as Richard spoke up, "You are normally up long before me, Darcy. Are you just getting up?"

With a fortifying sip of his steaming coffee, Darcy turned to face his cousin. "No," he said, "I was up some time ago, but I took a walk."

Richard's fork paused in midair, his brows raised. "Did you happen to go on that walk with Elizabeth?"

Placing his cup at the spot across from Richard, Darcy moved back to the sideboard to collect his own assortment of breakfast items with a shrug. Just because he was reacting oddly to being in Miss Elizabeth's company did not mean he had to behave oddly. Not a man of excessive expression, he attempted to keep his tone bland. "Yes, I wanted to thank her for a kind comment that she made yesterday and pass on Georgie's condolences."

The delicious smells of the breakfast were distracting, but he still caught sight of a subtle tightening of Richard's eyes. Perhaps he was not as successful at regulating his mood as he thought. Sitting down and helping himself to a bit of food, Darcy waited for Richard to say something. Experience had taught him the value of patience; he knew it was wiser to let his opponent make the first move. Not that Richard was an opponent, but he did not want to say the wrong thing.

So for a time, both men were silent while they enjoyed the well-prepared meal. Soon enough, Richard's voice cut through the sound of cutlery, a hint of humor in his tone, as he asked, "You enjoyed her company that much, did you? I believe I told you years ago that you would get along well with Elizabeth."

After swallowing and wiping his mouth, Darcy said, "It was a pleasant start to my day, and I enjoyed the peace walking with Miss Elizabeth offered in the middle of what can only be labeled as a stressful visit. I believe that as odd as it seems that I might just form a friendship with Miss Elizabeth."

He had no intention of lying to Richard. His cousin was too perceptive to even try to lie to, and it was not as if Darcy wanted to hide the fact that he had enjoyed speaking with Miss Elizabeth. Still, it frustrated Darcy to no end when Richard's grin only grew wider.

Elizabeth had no idea what schemes Lady Catherine might have concocted to stop Anne from attending the will reading, but whatever they were, they were thwarted by Anne's own preparations.

The night before the will was to be read, Anne found herself overcome. She was so weak that Richard had to carry her up to her room while Mr. Darcy dispatched a messenger to bring back the physician. Of course, it was all staged and both gentlemen plus the physician were playing their roles to perfection. Overwhelmed by grief and poor health, Anne was declared too ill to leave her bed and ordered to stay there for no fewer than three days. Sadly, she would miss the reading of the will.

With a conspiratorial wink that had Elizabeth on the verge of laughter, Anne turned to her mother and said, "I know I should go to the reading of father's will but with my health poorly there is simply no way for me to manage it. But I trust you, Mother. You have always taken such good care of me. I know that you will convey anything of importance. After all, you would never dream of going against father's wishes and you have my well-being at heart, don't you?" Her tone was so earnest that one could easily think that she actually trusted the woman. The shared, silent laughter was evident when the physician, Richard, and Mr. Darcy subtly shifted their gazes, unable to contain their mirth, just as Elizabeth was struggling to do.

Lady Catherine, on the other hand, got a devious look in her eye and patted Anne's hand in a reassuring manner. "Oh my dear girl, I have never wanted anything but the best for you. Surely your father has made certain I'm fully equipped to support you and manage the estate's affairs, rendering the will reading little more than a formality. Rest assured, I will keep you completely apprised of everything crucial."

Elizabeth was careful to watch Lady Catherine, alert to the smallest hint of deception. So she saw the way that Lady Catherine phrased things would not make her a liar, not exactly. She caught Mr. Darcy's eye, and in that brief moment, a shared awareness lingered between them. He saw it too. It was odd to realize that everyone in the room



knew that Lady Catherine had not meant what she said in the way it sounded, but neither had Anne. Did Anne unknowingly share more similarities with her mother, or was she deliberately studying under a skilled deceiver to ensure the safety of herself and her community?

Though Elizabeth had almost wished for Richard and Mr. Darcy to stay much longer than they did, both gentlemen left shortly after the reading of the will, but not before putting many safety precautions in place. Elizabeth knew with them gone, she would become that much lonelier. Where she had adjusted to her solitary life with Anne as her main companion, it had been nice to have her horizon expand with Richard and Mr. Darcy there. Their extended stay revealed the simple joys of morning strolls through the fragrant garden, punctuated by lively conversations. She would also miss the click of chess pieces during their many games.

Even with Lady Catherine acting as mistress of Rosings, not much changed besides the decorations in the mansion, as it seemed her current goal was to acquire all the gilded furniture she could for her throne room. Anne, ever practical, tackled the estate's intricate financial affairs—matters Lady Catherine had never considered—while Elizabeth oversaw the execution of Anne's wishes with quiet efficiency. In her spare time, Elizabeth wrote letters.

Rosings Park, Kent

Dear Miss Darcy,

I am writing to thank you, with your brother's knowledge, of course, for your condolences on my loss of Uncle Lewis. Your concern was very much appreciated. Please accept my condolences on your father's death this many months past. Though I sent condolences on behalf of Anne and myself after his passing, I understand the volume of correspondence you and your brother must have received and won't be upset if you saw mine as just one of many.

I know that we have met in person briefly, but I would be very happy to engage in correspondence with you if you are interested and willing. Good friends are a precious gift and spending my time primarily at Rosings with Anne and Lady Catherine, some correspondence with another young lady would be a delightful way to connect and expand my circle of companions.

Yours respectfully,

Miss Elizabeth Bennet

Pemberley, Derbyshire

Dear Miss Elizabeth Bennet,

I must admit, I was thrilled to receive your letter. Like you, I'm rather solitary. It will be several years before my introduction to society is even considered. The absence of suitable companions my age amongst my neighbors at Pemberley compounds my situation. All of this is to say I would be very happy to exchange letters with you. My governess actually thinks it's a wonderful idea and is convinced it will greatly benefit my education.

Thank you for once again offering your condolence on my loss. I did take note of your previous letter, but I must admit that I was not up to responding as I might have, though I assume my brother did. Though now that I think of it, he might not have responded. I sometimes find the rules of propriety concerning correspondence between unrelated gentlemen and ladies perplexing.

Losing family is difficult, I have heard, but I have not had many such experiences thankfully. In addition to losing my father, I lost my mother, but her death came when I was an infant. I never really grieved for her, since she died before I was capable of forming an attachment to her or even memories. But I have mourned the lack of a

loving mother.

Fitzwilliam has expressed concern about you having to deal with Aunt Catherine. I will admit that I have spent little time with her, but she terrifies me. I do not know if I could manage staying there with her as you are. How are you faring under her thumb? Also, how is Anne? I know her health is not the best, and she has inherited many responsibilities along with Rosings.

I cannot wait to receive your letter in return, but only if you have time, as I know you have many responsibilities for one so young. I may not want to wait for your letter, but I can.

Your friend, (I hope)

Georgianna

PS. I would be happy if you would address me as Georgianna or even Georgie, as my brother does.

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Rosings Park, Kent

Dear Georgianna,

I hope you are doing well at Pemberley, my dear friend. Your brother Mr. Darcy was kind enough to give me your letter when he last visited with Richard. I was very glad to get another one of your letters and found your anecdote about the puppy getting into the church during the sermon entertaining. Though I wonder if it wasn't possibly smuggled in by one of the younger parishioners, your tale still made me smile. I will admit to you alone that Lady Catherine's looming presence and Anne's

declining health weigh heavily on me, leaving little room for genuine smiles. So the joy your letters bring is a real treat.

It is amazing to me that it has already been two years since we lost Uncle Lewis. Though even without him, I do believe that Anne and I have been managing Rosings remarkably well. I would go so far as to say he would nod his head in approval, a proud glint in his eye, at all we've achieved in his absence. Of course, we would not be doing nearly so well without your brother and Richard's assistance.

But on to other less depressing topics. How is your spring progressing? Have any of the Pemberley's home farm started having babies yet? I can never wait to see all the new little beings start appearing. Has your weather been cooperative?

My most recent letter from my sister, who is currently at Matlock, spoke of nothing but the persistent rain, and worse. Jane became caught in a downpour and developed a cold. Of course I worry for her, but I know that she is in good hands with Aunt Judith to take care of her.

I know Pemberley is not far from Matlock, only a day's journey, and I am curious to know if your weather has been just as damp and gloomy. We have spent much of this early spring wet as well. Though I managed to stay healthy despite getting several wet afternoons checking on the tenants.

Will you tell your brother for me that the clearing of the ditches in the area that he suggested prevented a flood when the rains persisted? I doubt that we will have a very productive year for crops, but at least all the tenants will stay warm and dry. Which Anne and I are very grateful for.

Although your brother's next visit to Rosings is some time away, I hope you'll consider joining him and Richard. I will not hold it against you if you do not wish to. I, more than anyone else, can understand the hesitation you would feel facing off

against Lady Catherine. There are days when I think she would be better placed on the French front. Surely, the French troops would flee before her sharp tongue and icy glare.

Have I told you before that she no longer addresses me as Miss Elizabeth as she used to when Uncle Lewis was here? Now I am only Bennet. I think she is trying to put me in my place somehow. Though when your brother was here, she made sure not to address me as such, which was accomplished by ignoring my presence all together.

I have prattled on for far too long and must get back to my duties. Please write to me as soon as you may and be sure to include all your latest adventures.

Your Friend,

Lizzie

Pemberley, Derbyshire

Dear Lizzie,

I must admit that I am still not over the loss of Mrs. Fletcher. Only now, as I write those words, do I realize how macabre that sounds. Rather than being deceased, my governess is providing comfort and support to her daughter and grandchildren following their recent loss, offering a helping hand during this difficult time. I know that it is wrong of me to wish she had stayed, but Mrs. Fletcher was with me for as long as I can remember.

At least Fitzwilliam and Richard, after much deliberation, have finally chosen a companion for me, a Mrs. Younge. I have promised Fitzwilliam that I will give her a chance, though there is something I that cannot like about her. For one thing, her smiles do not quite reach her eyes. When I mentioned it to Fitzwilliam, he said she

might just be uneasy at a new place. There is something more to why I do not like her, more than just her odd smiles, but I cannot name it. Her accommodating nature, while seemingly positive, just feels wrong somehow. I particularly do not like the way that she interacts with Fitzwilliam and Richard.

But surely this is all just me resenting Mrs. Fletcher's replacement, and I will adjust. I cannot help wishing you were here to help me through this transition. I know that it is not fair of me to wish as much when I have not mustered up the courage to visit you at Rosings. Last year I almost went with Fitzwilliam, but I was only mostly recovered from a cold, and I was worried I would pass it on to Anne.

Fitzwilliam asks me to convey his greetings. He is often as eager to get your letters as I am, which I find odd, being that he does not ask to read them. Still, he is always relieved to know that you and Anne are well and handling Aunt Catherine with as much grace as you are capable. He worries, I think, knowing that you are not in the safest of environments, but I always reassure him that Rosings is filled with staff that would do anything for you. I actually think you are safer there than you would be should you visit London.

Last season I went to London with Fitzwilliam and though I enjoyed visiting the museum and seeing several of the more popular sights, I was shocked at the crowds and dirt of it all. There are worse parts of the city, I am sure, but we both know Fitzwilliam would not have let me near them. The perpetual soot and smog of town life makes me pity those who lack a country estate. I imagine their lungs ache for fresh air, just as their spirits yearn for quiet. I did love getting ices though, so it was not all bad.

I will hope that we can visit London together one day and get ices together. Have you had them before? Part of me thinks that you would prefer to go to Hatchards like my brother, though. Write to me soon and be sure to give Anne my love.

Warm regards,

Georgie

Rosings Park, Kent

Dear Georgie,

It's completely understandable that you're still struggling to adapt to life without Mrs. Fletcher's comforting presence and guiding presence. She was one of the constants in your life and without her there, it is only natural to feel slightly adrift. While you adjust, do not forget that she is still with you in the lessons that you learned while she was there. The wonderful person you are becoming is a credit to her loving guidance, respect that and you honor her by staying true to those lessons.

As for your new companion, Mrs. Younge, trust your instincts. Listen to that inner voice; it's crucial to trust your instincts above all else. I do not know the woman, but I have been corresponding with you for years and we have spent time at Matlock together, if only for a short time. I will always trust you over a stranger and you should too. Trust your instincts .

I know too well that some people in this world harbor dark intentions, hiding them behind a veneer of smiles and pleasantries. A woman's instincts, even a young woman such as yourself, can sometimes be the only protection we have in this world. While I would never encourage you to be cruel or uncivil, I strongly encourage you to be on your guard.

Regarding your inquiry about ices, my sister Jane and I indulged in one or two delicious ices on a past trip to London. I still clearly remember the smooth, cold texture was delightful. I think your idea about sharing an outing to get ices together at some point in the future is brilliant. The prospect of seeing you again always fills me

with excitement. Our time together is something I truly cherish.

Tension is building at Rosings, and I anticipate being able to visit you sooner than expected. There is just something about Lady Catherine that has changed that makes me suspicious. I fear she is planning something.

It might be that things have not progressed as she had hoped. Her throne room is where she spends her days with her companion, yearning for the attention of visitors who no longer grace her with their presence. While the ladies of the community did visit for a time after Uncle Lewis died, they have long since stopped coming.

Lady Catherine was always condescending, but she refuses to return calls, as she feels she is above such things. When she haughtily informed the rector's wife that she would not contribute to her charity or attend any social gatherings, declaring her superiority over the townspeople, it was the final straw. Your aunt's abrasive behavior finally pushed the townspeople over the edge. Should she even attempt to greet anyone at church services, she would be given the cut direct. Sadly, she does not deem anyone worthy of a greeting, so I have not been able to witness her being cut, which is a real loss, I think.

I fear Anne's health has once again worsened. On her bad days, Anne's weakened body struggles to carry her across her room. The effort drains her strength, leaving her exhausted and aching. Many days now, she barely leaves her room. During the physician's last visit, he grimly declared there was little left to improve her condition, his displeasure palpable when Anne refused the bloodletting. I agreed with Anne, which had him doubting my intelligence, but I simply cannot see how bleeding someone who barely has the strength to walk will help anything. A local farmer recently died from blood loss following a terrible accident, and it has made me question the practice of bloodletting altogether.

Please tell your brother that things are going well at Rosings and thank him for



inquiring about me and Anne. Though please try to cushion Anne's decline for him. There is nothing he can really do to aid her, nothing any of us can do. I know she would not want him to worry.

Did I ever tell you that I kicked him in the shin the first time I saw him at Rosings? What can I say? I was young and impulsive, and he was insulting. He has come a long way, and I will admit that he improved much upon our second meeting. Each spring, the promise of seeing your brother fills me with anticipation.

It is wonderful to see how, by helping Anne and I that he also helps prepare Richard for the responsibility that is coming his way, ensuring that he will be an adequate steward of the land and people. What I truly look forward to, though, is the opportunity to speak with your brother. Do you find that odd? It might be, but it is true. His respect for my intellect is a rare and delightful quality, and our shared love of books often leads to lively debates about our favorite authors. Please tell your brother hello for me and that I will look forward to beating him at chess again during his upcoming visit.

Warm regards,

Lizzie

### Chapter Nine

Three years later

Elizabeth's arm slipped around Anne's frail shoulders, lending her support as they went up the stairs. Behind them, Lady Catherine continued to natter on, but Elizabeth ignored her. She was more concerned with the state of her friend's health than with whatever Lady Catherine was upset about this time.

The further they made it up the stairs, the more muffled Lady Catherine's voice became, and Anne seemed to relax. Elizabeth was thankful that Lady Catherine was not one to chase after anyone. She was a lady, after all, and there were some things that ladies just did not do. It was one of the few good things about Lady Catherine's ever-increasing delusions of grandeur.

Making it to the top of the stairs, Elizabeth judged it safe enough to say, "Did she really think we would just sit there and listen to her complaints when you so obviously need to be tucked into bed?"

"You know, Mother is not logical." Gasping, Anne wheezed before adding, "Nor does she care for my comfort or well-being."

There was nothing Elizabeth could say to refute that. It was true. Choosing not to leave the comment be, she escorted Anne to her room, helping her change and tucking her in. Elizabeth took up a glass and filled it with water from the nearby pitcher before saying, "This is the first time in years that Lady Catherine has wanted to come here. While I am happy that we are in London for you to consult with a

specialist about your health, I have the feeling that Lady Catherine is up to something. I dislike not knowing what she is about.”

Taking a sip of the water, Anne licked her always dry lips and said, “Do not forget that you must see father’s solicitor while you are here, and I know you are always delighted to see Jane.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, I am always eager to see Jane and I have not seen her in over a year. She recently wrote, describing a Mr. Bingley, a young man who’s come calling, and frankly, I’m eager to hear more about him. I will have to send a note around to the Matlock town house to see when she is available.” She did not say that she wondered if Lady Catherine would allow her the freedom to visit her sister without pitching a fit of epic proportions. The last several years had shown her just how cruel Lady Catherine could be. It had taken all that Elizabeth had to make sure that the staff and tenants had not run screaming from the Rosings.

The worst had been earlier that year, when Lady Catherine had said that she wanted Elizabeth to marry her rector. Elizabeth knew that almost any other woman in her position would say yes. He was a man of great standing in the community, his large home a testament to Lady Catherine’s favor, filled with servants bustling about, yet his true nature was vile, and he was more than twice her age. She adamantly refused Lady Catherine’s proposal.

For a moment there, Elizabeth had wondered if she had tipped her hand too far. She stood her ground, refusing to be bullied by Lady Catherine, reminding her that she was now under the Earl of Matlock’s care, and he would never approve of such a match. Thankfully, Lady Catherine had merely cursed her brother, assuming that he had been the one to tell her such things during one of her visits to her sister, never imagining that Elizabeth had been in contact with Uncle Lewis’s solicitor since his death.

In escaping the match, Elizabeth had seen a whole new sort of rancor from Lady Catherine, and Elizabeth feared that giving way to her presumptions for the last several years had only made things worse. And yet Elizabeth could not make life harder for Anne. Anne's life was already so bleak, with poor health and only Elizabeth for a friend, that Elizabeth dared not upset the status quo with Lady Catherine and make things more miserable for her.

Though somewhere deep inside, Elizabeth feared everything was about to come to a head. Lady Catherine had been too quiet of late. The older woman had a plan and Elizabeth dreaded learning what it might be.

Elizabeth moved to arrange things on the table next to Anne, wanting to make sure she had everything she might need. Smiling at her old friend, Elizabeth made sure to keep her face clear of anything that might worry Anne. Anne simply did not have the strength for anything, not after spending the day traveling. Leaning over with a gentle touch, she smoothed the pillows behind Anne, making sure they were positioned just right to help her breathe.

"Do not worry about anything for now." Distressed by Anne's state, Elizabeth fidgeted with the bedside items. It took a few moments to get herself back under control so that she could say, "Just rest. I will take some time to write a few notes to let people know we are in town."

"Lizzie, I know you are worried for me, but please do not be. I am not afraid of dying. In fact, at this point, I almost yearn for it." Anne watched Elizabeth from where she lay, her gaze strong even if she was not.

Sitting heavily on the chair beside the bed, Elizabeth cried, "You may not fear it, but I dread it, Anne. I know that's selfish of me to say, but I have grown closer to you than anyone else, and losing you would leave me utterly alone. If you are gone, who will I burden with the math that I do not want to do, and who will share a laugh with

me about my latest novel's ridiculous plot?"

A weak chuckle escaped Anne's lips before she said, "You are perfectly capable when it comes to math, you just choose not to do it because you enjoy other things more." Shaking her head on the pillow she continued, "I know you worry that you will be alone when I pass but you have other people who are there for you. You just have to let them in. You have Jane and Richard, Aunt and Uncle Matlock, and a certain gentleman who visits every year and reads your letters to his sister. Learn to depend on them. I have every confidence that you will lead a happy life once I am gone."

Standing from the chair, Elizabeth mock glared at Anne. "You have to stop teasing me about him. You know we are nothing more than good friends. Regardless, I will strive to draw closer to everyone and rely on them for support." Watching Anne yawn, she added, "You need to get some sleep."

Sighing drowsily, Anne nodded and closed her eyes. "Can you make sure Richard comes? I need to speak with him."

Elizabeth's touch was soft and soothing on Anne's brow as she murmured, "Of course. You know he comes to see you whenever he can. He would be at your beck and call if you let him." A small little chuckle escaped Anne's lips before she drifted off to sleep.

Elizabeth slipped out of the room, leaving behind only the sound of Anne's labored breathing. The thought of Anne's impending demise hung over Elizabeth like a shroud, a cold truth that she couldn't escape. The urge to hold Anne close and shield her from what was coming was strong, but Elizabeth realized that true kindness lay in letting her go, however painful it might be for Elizabeth.

Darcy sank into his wingback chair by the fire, the flames dancing and licking at the

logs, offering no comfort to the bone-deep weariness that had settled in his body. Fingers digging into his hair, he massaged, trying to dull the pounding in his skull. It did not help that his mind was still dwelling on the horrible night. The air hung thick with the cloying sweetness of perfume, battling a sour undercurrent of sweat, all punctuated by the endless stream of gossipy whispers and the high-pitched tittering. Darcy found himself dodging the persistent advances of three debutantes and a sly young widow. He was not even certain they all pursued him with marriage in mind. Being seen as an eligible bachelor struck him as similar to a top stallion at Tattersall's: a valued asset, up for auction whether he liked it or not. The night had resulted in a throbbing headache.

Sighing, Darcy dropped his hands and stared into the fire. There would be no escape. He was destined to be trapped in a routine of ritualistic duty that brought no light or warmth to his life. That was all there was to it.

Darcy did not mind duty in itself. He was perfectly happy to fulfill his duties back at Pemberley, but here in London, things were different. He was expected to attend social gatherings of people who had no interest in him as a person. The opera, a haven for most, was a battlefield for him, a place where he was bombarded by gentlemen, each seeking to exploit his wealth or palm off their unmarried daughters and sisters. Darcy missed being able to enjoy the opera.

The balls were the worst, with the crowded rooms and endless introductions that left him feeling suffocated, even with Richard and Bingley there to offer some relief. That evening had been the worst of the worst. Caroline Bingley had somehow obtained an invitation, and she tried to cling to his side for the entirety. The knowing looks and whispered remarks were like needles pricking at Darcy, making him uncomfortable and self-conscious.

It took a moment to realize that his valet, Perry, was holding a glass with his headache powders. Accepting the unasked-for gift, Darcy downed it, enduring the

bitter taste with a grimace and a murmured thanks to Perry. Always efficient, Perry knelt before Darcy and deftly removed his boots, a task that was impossible for Darcy to do on his own with the latest fashion. Which was just another reason for him to resent society and all its trappings.

Darcy managed a smile. "You always seem to know just what I need, Perry."

"That is my job, sir," answered Perry.

Darcy's smile grew as he thought of how genuine Perry was. He had known Perry long enough that he often went beyond the bounds of duty to see to the needs of those around him. Perry always took on a paternal role with the staff wherever he went, even going so far as to act as a father figure to Darcy, despite being his valet. Looking him straight in the eye, Darcy said, "I appreciate it, nonetheless. It is a comfort to know that there are people in my life who I can count on to look out for me."

Perry's eyes widened at Darcy's words, and he looked away for a moment before saying, "Thank you, sir. It has always been a pleasure to see to your needs." Then, with a curt nod, Perry left his master for the night.

Left alone in the firelight, Darcy knew he should finish disrobing and go to bed, but his mind was too tumultuous to contemplate doing so. He did not know how much more he could put up with. It was not even just that he only wanted to be free from the hangers on. Darcy was lonely and he could only see it getting worse.

That evening, Bingley, while there physically, had spent most of his time mooning after Richard's adoptive sister Jane. Richard found endless amusement in teasing their mutual friend about this fact, though Darcy perceived a hint of brotherly concern beneath his playful teasing. Richard was highly protective of the woman in his life. That had not changed since he had been taken to task by his cousin all those years

ago.

Darcy knew that soon enough Bingley would be married, possibly to Jane or some other woman of beauty and kindness. Richard would surely follow suit. He was the son of an earl with a cheerful disposition and the prospect of an estate on the horizon. Where did that leave Darcy?

It wasn't that he wanted to remain single, in fact, he yearned for companionship. A helpmate would be a tremendous boon to him, but the women he encountered, with their laughter, their chatter, and their empty-headed gossip, all failed to move him. Unless you counted his desire to move away from them.

The vastness of Pemberley, with its many tenants and numerous servants, demanded a wife's guidance and attention, leaving Darcy feeling the weight of his responsibilities without one. The problem was that he knew he could not just choose anyone. While most young ladies he met, despite being pleasant, lacked empathy for those of different social classes, Darcy longed for someone who would extend compassion and kindness to all. Darcy had seen the people of Pemberley suffer under the cold dismissiveness of his father and he would not see it happen again in his lifetime.

Was it even possible for him to find the sort of woman he needed among the daughters of the ton? And what of what he desired for himself? Was it wrong of him to want someone he could talk to? More than once he had heard the lecture that romance and love were too plebeian for a man of his rank to consider important. Did the fact that he was born of a higher class mean that he did not have the right to care deeply for someone and be cared for in return?

There was love in the world. He had observed glimpses of love in his aunt and uncle, who were known as a rarity among the ton. He had seen it in some of the tenant families, a bond of love so deep that even death would not diminish it. Was it wrong



to want something so pure? Life had blessed him with wealth, sprawling estates, robust health, and a loving family, providing him with every luxury and contentment that most men could only dream of. Could he want more?

Darcy was developing a deep-seated fear that he was destined to spend his life alone, searching for a love that he might never find. He knew he must marry to carry on his line, and there were many women who would marry him without a second thought. Could he abandon his hopes for a future he'd envisioned for years, just to find someone he could tolerate, even if it meant settling for less than genuine happiness? Or was there someone out there waiting for him to find her?

Elizabeth let out a sigh as she settled into the chair next to her bed. As tired as she was, she did not feel ready to sleep. There was a restless energy keeping Elizabeth from relaxing enough to even attempt to sleep. She couldn't articulate it, but a sense of impending doom hung in the air, a cold premonition of something terrible and it was Lady Catherine's fault.

There was no way of knowing what Lady Catherine was up to, but her secretive smiles and cheerful demeanor hinted at something. But what? Elizabeth had enough experience with the woman to know she was never happy about anything unless it greatly benefited her or harmed another person. No, there was no escaping the fact that she was up to something. Only Elizabeth could not yet fathom what it could be, which was eminently frustrating and possibly dangerous.

So instead of tossing and turning, Elizabeth got out her collection of letters that she kept wrapped up with an old, frayed ribbon and began to reread them. Hopefully, by reading them over, she could at least cheer herself up a bit. Most of the stack was made up of letters from Jane, but a significant number were from Georgianna.

The scent of the older letters was one of aged paper and ink, but the newer letters from Jane smelled distinctly of her perfume—a light, sweet blend of lavender and

honeysuckle. Bringing the most recent letter to her nose, Elizabeth inhaled deeply. It was almost as if her sister was there with her.

The letter itself was full of the joys that Jane found in life. She'd been on a quest in London, seeking the perfect hat for her new walking dress. There was also a section that went in depth about the last dance she had attended where, of course, she had danced with her mysterious Mr. Bingley. While Jane remained silent about her affections, the frequency with which she mentioned the gentleman in her letters to Elizabeth hinted at a deeper connection. At least being in London would offer Elizabeth the opportunity to see Jane and speak with her about her feelings for the man. There was even a possibility that she would be able to meet Mr. Bingley himself.

Running her finger over the swift lines of Jane's penmanship, Elizabeth read the lines where Jane expressed her most pressing concern.

... dear girl, I worry about you more and more every day. Richard tells me no lies, so I know that your situation with Lady Catherine only grows worse. I fear that one day you will come to some harm that you cannot fluff off or excuse.

I would beg you to come live with the Matlocks once more if I did not know how much you are attached to Anne. While your dedication to others is admirable, you must prioritize your own needs more. It is not wrong for you to do what you have to protect yourself. Your well-being is paramount to my happiness, so please, if you must think of me, know that I want...no, I need you safe and sound and most of all, happy.

While I will not press you to come, I will remind you that you have a home here waiting for you. You know Mother and Father Matlock would more than welcome you here with me. They have long regretted prioritizing societal expectations over their own parental instincts, a decision that haunts them as they remember only taking

me when we were children.

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With a sigh, Elizabeth let the letter fall onto her lap and gazed at the low ceiling, noticing a faint crack in the plaster. How would her life have been different if she had stayed with Jane and gone to Matlock? She certainly would have had a season by now, but Elizabeth did not have any great interest in having a season anytime soon. At the most, she was ambivalent to the whole process. She was certainly not envious, not after hearing Jane's detailed account of the awkward curtsy to the queen and the nervous anticipation that preceded it.

If she had lived with the Matlocks, she would be attending balls, not ensuring the tenant's thatched roofs didn't leak and poring over agricultural reports to improve crop yields. While she had attended a ball or two, if that was all she did, she would not be the happiest of creatures. There was just something about being useful that she enjoyed, even if her older sister worried she took it too far.

Even with Lady Catherine's relentless cruelty making life difficult, she wouldn't trade her current situation for a simpler one. Elizabeth would not for a second give up her life with Anne and Uncle Lewis. A bond of unwavering affection bound them together, a love she couldn't bear to lose, even should she be forced to lose them both in death.

Her experiences with the people who became her family had shaped her into the person she was, and honestly, she loved who she had become. The ability to ease people's burdens brought Elizabeth joy. She had learned to manage a household and handle a budget, learned much more than any typical young lady would. She was capable of so much more than buying lace and dispensing gossip that was typical of ladies her age in the ton.

Elizabeth had developed a capacity to immerse herself in classic texts in their original tongues and even debate them with other knowledgeable minds. She enjoyed the debates, especially if they were with Mr. Darcy, though to be fair, she did not get many opportunities to debate with other people. Richard did not have the patience for it, though he did read he did not find it worth his time or energy to debate what he read. Anne lacked the energy, and Lady Catherine was too self-absorbed to engage in true conversation, favoring long-winded pronouncements instead. So that left Mr. Darcy as the only person Elizabeth could debate with.

At times, Elizabeth wondered if Uncle Reggie would have been liberal enough to encourage her to expand her mind the way Uncle Lewis had. While Uncle Reggie was kind, and she was sure he loved her like family, he was certainly more traditional. Uncle Lewis had even gone so far as to teach her to play chess, which Elizabeth knew Uncle Reggie felt odd about. Chess was just another thing that she would not give up on just have Lady Catherine out of her life. The memory of beating Mr. Darcy at chess and seeing his genuine delight in her victory still brought a smile to her face.

Finally feeling drowsy, Elizabeth gathered the letters, her fingers lingering on the faded ribbon before lovingly tying them up and putting them away in a chest that smelled faintly of lavender and old paper. While she might join Jane at the Matlock's home once she lost Anne, Elizabeth was more than satisfied with her choices thus far. She would face whatever Lady Catherine was up to without regret. If Lady Catherine was the consequence she had to accept to have the people she loved in her life, so be it. She would not back down. If she had learned anything about herself, it was that she was a force to be reckoned with, not some delicate flower. For all her pomposity, Lady Catherine would be the one to regret whatever would happen next.

### Chapter Ten

Darcy had mostly recovered his spirits the following morning, after all sunny mornings were not the food of morose pondering. It helped that Richard had burst in to his dining room as he was sitting down to break his fast. Always chipper, his cousin helped himself to a cup of coffee before sitting across from him and saying, “I have had a note from Elizabeth. Or rather, Jane has, but she passed the message on to me.”

Swallowing, Darcy wiped at his mouth with a serviette before asking, “Is all well or should we be worried?”

Richard’s normally confident demeanor shifted as he looked at his cup, his frown deepening as he rolled the cup between his hands. Looking back up at Darcy, he said, “Our aunt has brought Anne and Elizabeth up to London, presumably for Anne to see a physician, but we both know she has never wanted to do such before. It has me worried.”

Darcy leaned back in his chair, the creak of the wood loud in the quiet room as he pondered what Lady Catherine might have in mind. His aunt had never had the desire to bring Anne to London before, no matter how much her daughter’s health had suffered. She had often sent for various quacks and had them prescribe all sorts of nostrums. But come to London? That had never happened. Richard was right, there was definitely something underhanded at play.

“That is certainly unsettling,” Darcy commented, his eyes narrowed in concern. “Georgianna has kept in close contact with Anne and Miss Elizabeth over the last few

years, and yet I do not think she knew anything about plans to come to London before now. What could our aunt have in mind?"

Richard finished taking a sip of his coffee and commented, "I have long been grateful that Elizabeth has kept in close contact with Georgianna. Not only has it helped us keep tabs on what aunt Catherine is up to, but it was Elizabeth who first became suspicious of Mrs. Younge. Can you imagine what could have happened if we hadn't put a stop to that trip to the seaside?"

Shaking his head, Darcy shuddered. "It does not bear thinking of. I still wake up at night in a panic, thinking of the danger my sister was in."

"I, for one, am delighted that Wickham and his paramour are located an ocean away and are another country's problem. Hopefully, he can finally find it in him to make an honest living or have an accident and rid the world of his particular brand of maliciousness." Richard stood and moved to the sideboard, and selected a pastry before returning to the table, saying, "I'm afraid it is Anne and Miss Elizabeth who are in danger now, and we must find a way to help them."

"Without any information, we will get nowhere in shielding them from Lady Catherine's wrath. Do you think we can visit with them without arousing suspicion?" Darcy spoke as he cut up what was left of his ham, his mind filtering through possibilities.

Richard brushed crumb off the corner of his mouth before saying, "Aunt Catherine cannot avoid the fact that she is in London. It would only be polite to call on the household. We are family, after all. How would it look if she turned us away?"

With a quick stab of his fork into the square of ham, he pointed it at Richard and replied, "Yes, but you know she would most likely attempt to prevent us from communicating freely with either of them."

“I could always set someone to watch the house. Surely Aunt Catherine will leave at some point, and we can swoop in and visit while she is out.”

Darcy’s jaw moved rhythmically as he chewed his meat, turning over the plan proposed solution in his mind. Of course, they would have to be somewhere close enough to get to de Bourgh House quickly. Then there was his worry that his aunt would be doing something underhanded while they were there. Swallowing, Darcy said, “If we were at the small park at the end of her block, it would be nothing to visit once our aunt leaves and we can have your person follow her and try to ferret out what she is up to.”

“Brilliant,” Richard clapped his hands together and stood. “There is a footman at Fitzwilliam House, an ex-army officer, who is just the sort to help us unravel Aunt Catherine’s plotting. I’ll sort everything out with him and meet you at the park in, let us say, an hour?”

Nodding, Darcy answered, “Yes. I will meet you there in an hour. Hopefully, we will be able to be in place early enough and we will not be waiting around all day. We do not know if Aunt Catherine even plans to leave the house today.”

“In the event that Aunt Catherine chooses to remain at home, we can spend some quality time chatting. I have yet to tell you of my most recent conversation with Jane and my fear that I shall have to put up with Bingley as my brother-in-law.”

Sitting up straighter, Darcy goggled and asked, “Truly? I knew Bingley danced with her last night and was watching her as she moved about the room, but I had not suspected anything would truly come of it. She has been out for some time and has long been heralded as a tremendous beauty.”

“You did not have to hear her talking last night on the way home from the ball about how he was just what a gentleman ought to be.” Finishing his sentence, Richard

rolled his eyes and added, “We can talk about it at the park.”

Richard left with a wave of his hand, and Darcy finished his meal in a bit of a rush. He still needed to dress for the day and send a note off to his solicitor before he left to meet his cousin. Darcy hoped his solicitor might also be able to look into Lady Catherine’s affairs, and that whatever she was plotting could be circumvented without too much drama.

Darcy had not informed Richard about the fact that Miss Elizabeth’s recent letters to Georgianna spoke of Anne’s worsening health. Georgianna had been kind enough to let him know the seriousness of their cousin’s situation, as much as she tried to soften the blow of the news. Despite the possibility that Richard was already aware of her declining health, Darcy was hesitant to be the one to break the news if he hadn’t been informed yet. A heavy weight gnawed at Darcy. The possibility that Lady Catherine’s scheming could kill her daughter was not entirely out of the question.

Knowing that Lady Catherine had left the house should have reassured Elizabeth, but it did not. The thick carpet swallowed Elizabeth’s soft steps as she tiptoed into Lady Catherine’s private sitting room, her heart pounding in her chest. She had never behaved so boldly, but Elizabeth knew the woman was up to something. She could feel it in her bones.

There was no telling how long Lady Catherine would be gone, so Elizabeth had to be swift if she was going to learn anything of her plans while she was away. It was a godsend that Lady Catherine had taken her lady’s maid with her, otherwise Elizabeth’s intelligence gathering would never have been successful.

Elizabeth memorized the placement of the papers on the desk before she began sorting through them. She would have to have put them back exactly the way they were to prevent any suspicion. There were several bills for what Elizabeth presumed would be gaudy pieces of furniture for Lady Catherine’s throne room. A page with



Lady Catherine's nearly illegible handwriting that Elizabeth deciphered as some sort of list of names that made no sense.

At last, Elizabeth came across what looked to be a legal document, or at least a rough draft of one. Elizabeth's heart skipped a beat when she saw her name in the first paragraph, a sudden jolt of unease coursing through her. There was too much to read right then, and she could not dare try to abscond with it. She was certain Lady Catherine would notice it missing.

The sharp sound of a forceful knock at the front door jolted Elizabeth, and the subsequent commotion downstairs had her dropping the document she was studying. Knowing her time was up, Elizabeth put everything back as it was and rushed out the door to the room. With a nervous hand, Elizabeth smoothed her skirt as she dashed down the hallway to where a maid was standing, her attention focused on the landing below.

Smiling at Elizabeth, she said, "Do not worry, it is not the old bat, just the young Miss's cousins come calling."

Elizabeth knew she should probably chide the maid for calling Lady Catherine an old bat, but instead, she offered her a smile and said, "Thank you for playing look out for me, Rachel."

"Oh, we both know that woman is up to something. It is better that we find out now than after she has sprung some trap." Patting Elizabeth on the shoulder, she added, "Just you let me know if you need my help."

It was a relief to know that she was not all alone in the struggle to withstand Lady Catherine. Rachel was a maid that had worked at Rosings for quite some time, having started there at only thirteen as a scullery maid. She was a woman who could not be easily intimidated and had been entrusted with their secret, knowing that Anne was

the true mistress of the estate.

Years ago, when Elizabeth revealed their situation and plans moving forward after Uncle Lewis's funeral, Rachel simply shook her head, muttering, "Who would want to fight for power with a mother like that? Especially a sickly girl like Miss Anne? Just you tell me what you need to help the poor little lamb, and we will find a way to get it done. She deserves to be able to do as she wants, especially now." Their eyes met, and in that instant, they acknowledged the grim truth: Scarlet fever had left its mark on Anne, and her future would be cut short.

Elizabeth smiled in remembrance as she began to go down the stairs. Rachel might have been only a few years older than Anne, but she mothered her constantly. It was something that Anne always seemed to relish. The fact was that most of the long-time staff were loyal to Anne over Lady Catherine and pampered her however they could.

As Elizabeth descended the final steps, her fingers nervously smoothed her hair, trying to make sure it was perfectly in place before facing the unexpected visitors. She was not surprised to find herself enveloped by Richard's warm hug. Shaking her head, Elizabeth wondered why she had bothered to smooth her hair and said, "This is unexpected. Nevertheless, your timing is perfect. Lady Catherine has gone off on some mysterious errand, so we are free to converse as we wish."

Leaning back from Elizabeth, Richard took in her appearance, his expression concerned, and asked, "Our timing is perfect by design, but before we get to that, how are you and Anne? It has been far too long since I have had the opportunity to see you in person."

Elizabeth took a step back from Richard, her touch lingering on his hand as she squeezed it reassuringly. "You know that there is very little that can get me down," she said, her eyes sparkling with determination. "I have been kept very busy lately managing everything for Rosings and de Bourgh House, but it is nothing I cannot

manage.”

Her eyes darted between Mr. Darcy, who stood nearby, and Richard, a weak smile playing on her lips. Georgianna, with her tendency to share everything, would have surely told Mr. Darcy about Anne’s declining health. Richard, however, was less privy to such matters. Even she was shocked about Anne’s rapid decline since they came to London.

“And what about Anne?” Richard’s question hung in the air and Elizabeth felt the weight of his worry.

“Anne is not well. The trip to London, it seems, was too much for her. Frankly, I do not know if she will ever be able to leave London.”

Mr. Darcy reached out and gripped Richard’s shoulder in reassurance. “Can we see her?”

Nodding, Elizabeth turned to go back up the stairs before saying, “I do not know if she will be awake, but I will take you up to her.” The sound of her breath echoed in the stairwell, a stark contrast to the heavy thuds of Richard and Mr. Darcy’s footsteps as they followed her.

No one spoke as they walked down the hall and silently entered Anne’s room. Anne lay in her bed asleep, her breathing soft and even, while the maid, her face illuminated by the soft glow of the bedside lamp, sat quietly in a chair, ready to tend to any need. Molly, the maid, looked up from her needlework as they entered, a gentle smile on her face. “She drifted off after her morning tea,” she whispered softly, “but I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if you wanted to wake her, Miss Elizabeth. She is always happy to spend time with you.”

Seeing Anne came as quite a shock. Her usual paleness had given way to a

sallowness, and her eyes were sunken and shadowed. Even under the blankets, he could see that she had become alarmingly thin. Though aware of his cousin's short life expectancy, he'd avoided imagining its reality and here it was, staring him in the face.

Anne's decline and eventual demise were unstoppable; he and everyone else were powerless in the face of her imminent death. With a worried frown, Darcy murmured to Miss Elizabeth, "How long has she been in such a state?" The hushed tone was barely audible above the labored breathing of the sick woman nearby.

Not taking her eyes off Anne, Miss Elizabeth answered, "Her decline had been fairly steady until Lady Catherine decided that we would be coming to London. The frantic rush of packing, the foul weather, and the long, bumpy journey completely drained Anne. She has not risen from bed since we arrived and is only barely able to hold conversations."

"Is she in any pain?" questioned Richard.

Miss Elizabeth shook her head, a faint frown furrowing her brow, and replied, "No. The maids are keeping her comfortable, ensuring she has a constant supply of soothing teas and medicinal powders to ease her discomfort. I contacted her physician; he'll be here tomorrow to evaluate her and see what more we can do to ease her way." Speaking of Anne's imminent death seemed to push Miss Elizabeth over the edge, and she broke off in a sob.

Reaching out, Richard pulled her into his side in a comforting embrace. Darcy watched his cousin soothe her, whispering to her so low that he could not hear what he said. He felt a pang of something unfamiliar watching them, a cold knot in his stomach that he eventually identified as jealousy.

It was a blow to realize that he wanted to be the one to comfort Miss Elizabeth. He

was so surprised that he intentionally shied away from trying to understand why he would feel that way and instead said, “Why don’t we leave Anne to her rest.” Darcy left the room and the other two followed him, their footsteps a soft agreement to his statement.

He had only taken a few steps into the hallway before he had realized that he did not know where they should go to speak together. Seeing his hesitation, Miss Elizabeth cleared her throat and said, “We can go down to the front parlor and discuss matters over a nice cup of tea. With Lady Catherine and her companion, Mrs. Cuthburt, away from the house, we are free to speak as we wish. The staff here are loyal and will do whatever they can to help us thwart her.”

Darcy settled into a comfortable chair near the crackling fireplace, the heat driving away the chill that his earlier flash of jealousy had brought on and the sound of the flames soothing his unease. He waited until everyone was seated and tea was requested before saying, “I do not know how much time we have until Aunt Catherine will return, so we must use what time we have wisely.”

Miss Elizabeth nodded and asked, “First, gentlemen, may I inquire whether you have come for any particular reason, or are you merely here to check on Anne?”

Richard stretched his legs out before him in a familiar manner before replying, “While we, of course, wanted to see you both, hearing that Lady Catherine had brought you all to town alarmed both of us. She would not put forth the effort to come to town without cause.” Looking back and forth between Miss Elizabeth and Darcy, he added, “Aunt Catherine has something planned, and we must discern what it is.”

“I do not disagree.” Miss Elizabeth stood and walked to the freshly delivered tea tray, the fragrant steam rising from the teapot a welcome sight as she commenced preparing the tea. First, she handed Richard a steaming cup, then carefully presented

Darcy with his, a warm smile gracing her lips as she said, “It seems our thoughts were not dissimilar. I had also wanted to take advantage of Lady Catherine’s absence. When you arrived, I was actually going through the papers on Lady Catherine’s desk.”

The steam from Darcy’s tea curled around his face as he took a small sip, the comforting warmth spreading through him. “Did you find anything that might help us to uncover what she is up to?” he inquired.

Sitting down with her own cup, Miss Elizabeth stared into its depths pensively. A moment passed before she spoke, a strange tension in her voice. “Most of what I found seemed to be random bills, but there was one thing—a stack of what appeared to be legal papers—that seemed rather disconcerting.”

Richard leaned forward in his chair and asked, “What was disconcerting about them?”

Taking a slow sip of her tea, Miss Elizabeth seemed to stall for time before admitting, “I only got a glance, mind you, but at first glance, I noticed my name appeared several times at the top of the page.”

Concerned, Darcy put his teacup down on a nearby table. Despite his apprehension about Lady Catherine, Darcy was unprepared for the queasiness he felt upon discovering her ire was directed at Miss Elizabeth. Swallowing against an unexpected lump in his throat, Darcy said, “Do you know what the papers were pertaining to?”

Shaking her head, Miss Elizabeth replied, “No, I had only started looking them over when I heard the commotion downstairs, and I hurried out of the room.”

“I already had my solicitor looking into my aunt’s suspicious behavior, but knowing that she has what I can only assume are forged documents pertaining to you, I will let

him know he needs to focus his attention on that. I am confident we will circumvent her plans, whatever they may be.” Darcy’s voice held a steely resolve as he reassured Miss Elizabeth. “You know we will do all we can to keep you from being harmed by whatever wicked plot she is attempting.”

“What are we waiting for?” Richard jumped to his feet. “Let us go up and look at those papers.”

Making their way to the base of the stairs in the entryway, they were startled when Lady Catherine and her companion, Mrs. Cuthburt, walked in through the opened front door. It only took a moment for all of their eyes to meet before Lady Catherine screeched, “What are you doing here?”

### Chapter Eleven

Elizabeth fought to suppress a grumble at the poor timing of Lady Catherine's arrival. A stifled curse from Richard did not help matters. Swallowing an inappropriate giggle, Elizabeth turned to face the woman she had grown to loathe. Thankfully, Richard and Darcy held Lady Catherine's attention, and she did not notice the wisp of a smile that ghosted across Elizabeth's lips.

Stepping forward, Richard took the lead in the confrontation. "What are we doing here? Is that how you greet your nephews who have taken the time to call on you?"

Expression hard, Lady Catherine huffed, "While coming for a visit is fine, I suppose, it would have been better had you sent round a note of your wish to visit. That way, I could have told you today would not be a good day for a visit." Brushing past the gentlemen, Lady Catherine's disdain was palpable as she planted herself on the first step, her posture stiff, making Elizabeth wonder if she was trying to gain authority by looking down on them. "While we may be family, sometimes I wonder if you forget yourselves in your search for entertainment to fill your idle hours. We have only just arrived in town and have not fully settled in. You will receive a message from me when I'm open for callers."

Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy and Richard's spines stiffen in unison. Lady Catherine was treating them as recalcitrant boys, and not the grown men they were. Stepping forward, Mr. Darcy's gaze collided with Lady Catherine's, his height dwarfing her even while she stood on the first step of the stairs. He was quick to say, "You assume, Aunt, that we came to call on you. Or did you forget there are other people in this home whom we might wish to see? It has been some time since Richard or I have



seen Miss Elizabeth, who was happy to greet us, unlike yourself. And do not overlook the fact we both knew Anne was already unwell. We were concerned by your audacious decision to subject her to the hazard of travel at this time of year, not to mention the noise and stress of London. As you wish to not be bothered by our presences, you are free to retreat wherever you wish. Richard and I will be visiting with Miss Elizabeth and seeing to our cousin.”

The charged interplay before her left Elizabeth feeling breathless. Her mouth went dry, and a strange feeling settled over her. Had she never noticed how the coat seemed to mold itself to Mr. Darcy’s broad shoulders, accentuating his powerful physique? Maybe it was the way he stood so easily before Lady Catherine, unwavering and confident in his declaration, unlike Elizabeth, who always felt compelled to show deference.

She was unsurprised by Lady Catherine’s screech. “You speak to your aunt like that? I am the daughter of an earl and the sister to one! Who are you to—”

Richard’s booming voice cut Lady Catherine off. “Now then, what say you to this?” Stepping forward, he challenged, “I am the son of an earl, which shall always take precedence over a female relative. Do not presume that brandishing your courtesy title will get you anywhere. Are you going to be gracious and allow us to visit with Anne and Elizabeth, or do I need to return with father?”

If looks could kill, Lady Catherine’s contemptuous gaze, cold and sharp enough to freeze blood, would have ended both her nephews. The heavy silence was broken only by the audible hiss of her breath. Elizabeth knew that whatever happened, there would be consequences for standing up to her. Elizabeth had come to know just how much Lady Catherine like punishing people for what she saw as slights.

Huffing, Lady Catherine looked away from Mr. Darcy and Richard, her words sharp. “See Anne if you must, but if your visit harms her delicate health, it will be on your

heads.” With a pointed glare directed at Elizabeth, Lady Catherine’s voice dripped with disdain as she said, “As for Bennet, I can always have her finish the tasks she is responsible for at a later time.”

Sensing that both gentlemen were about to say something about their aunt’s thinly veiled threat, Elizabeth gripped both of their arms and said, “I will be sure to check in with you, Lady Catherine, once your nephews leave.” The charade of deference to Lady Catherine grated on Elizabeth, though it served Anne’s aims. Still, a breaking point neared—either Anne’s health would necessitate a change, or her suppressed fury would explode.

With a regal nod, Lady Catherine turned her back on them and swept up the ornate staircase. Elizabeth glanced around and realized that Mrs. Cuthburt had already disappeared, most likely to have tea prepared for her mistress. It took some prodding, but she got both Mr. Darcy and Richard to make their way back up to Anne’s room.

Leaning back up against the door, Elizabeth let her shoulders droop, tired now that the confrontation was over for the moment. Then, blowing out a breath, she smiled at Anne’s maid and asked, “Could you see about getting tea brought up here? I know we had just sat down to tea downstairs, but we had to relocate.” With a respectful nod, the maid stood as Elizabeth added, “And please apologize to the cook. The extra work was unavoidable, I’m afraid.”

After the maid left, Elizabeth collapsed into a chair near Anne’s bed, Richard and Mr. Darcy swiftly following. Mr. Darcy was quick to speak up. “I am so sorry my aunt behaves so cruelly towards you, Miss Elizabeth. I cannot imagine having to put up with her for any length of time, let alone every day.”

Leaning forward, Richard added, “Yes, Lizzie, you know you are more than welcome at Matlock House. In fact, Mother and Jane would be thrilled to have you. Why do you stay and put up with her?”

“She stays for me.” A hoarse whisper escaped Anne’s lips, the sound fragile and dry, instantly causing Elizabeth to spring up and fetch the waiting water. Anne took a small sip and sighed with relief, a faint smile touching her lips as she looked at Elizabeth and said, “Lizzie knows I would be worse off if she were not here to oversee things. She stays because I have need of her and the people of Rosings need her. But that time has passed. I am aware that my time in this world is coming to an end. It is finally time for my mother to face the consequence of her actions.”

They did not stay long with Anne. She became fatigued rapidly, and their brief conversation seemed to exhaust her completely. Darcy and Richard, mindful of Anne’s delicate health and Aunt Catherine’s already frayed temper, bid their goodbyes, and promised Anne they would see her again soon.

As Miss Elizabeth had walked them to the door, Darcy hesitated, his eyes searching hers as he asked, “Will you be all right once we leave?” Her vulnerability to his aunt’s harsh words and actions bothered him profoundly, even though he admired her selflessness in staying despite the difficulties she faced. Knowing that he would be leaving her alone to face his aunt alone made the knot in his stomach tighten.

Shaking her head, Miss Elizabeth offered a rueful grin. “I am not easily intimidated by Lady Catherine’s bluster. Although she habitually issues numerous demands, sometimes with an air of impatience, she seldom confirms her demands have been obeyed. Besides, I know her for what she is—a supercilious woman ignorant of her worth or mine. Her insults cannot hurt me.”

Darcy drew nearer, his hand gripping Miss Elizabeth’s as he stressed, “Her insults, though uncalled for, are not what truly concerns me. I am afraid of what my aunt might do when she learns she will not be getting her way. A cornered beast is desperate and unpredictable, and it will lash out with surprising ferocity. I fear that she will lash out at you in a way you cannot so easily sidestep.”

Tilting her head, Miss Elizabeth smiled and asked, “Did you just call you aunt a beast?”

“You have to admit,” he said, a smirk playing on his lips, “that there are many worse things I could call her.”

Miss Elizabeth squeezed his hand, her touch firm yet comforting, as she reassured him. “I will be cautious in my dealings with Lady Catherine. Do not worry.”

Darcy did not know how long he stared into Miss Elizabeth’s earnest face before Richard clapped him on the back in a signal that they must go. Saying goodbye to Miss Elizabeth, he and Richard wasted no time lingering in the entryway. They were eager to get to away so they could strategize without being overheard.

The ride back to Darcy House was not sufficient for all the thinking Darcy had to do. He had many things to consider, but the image of his frail, dying cousin haunted him, her shallow breaths a constant reminder of her imminent demise. The weight of Anne’s confession, that she knew she was dying and soon, was difficult to bear.

Though the pain of his coming loss was a sharp, physical thing, he knew there was nothing to be done, so he pushed it aside, focusing instead on Miss Elizabeth’s perilous situation. He did not like the fact that she was suffering even now under his aunt’s ill-gotten authority. Miss Elizabeth was too good for such ill use.

In the last several years, he had come to know much about Miss Elizabeth. He’d met countless young women in high society over the years, but none possessed the quiet strength and unwavering spirit she exuded. That was not to say that she could not hold her own in a conversation or debate. Miss Elizabeth possessed a level of intelligence and comprehension that surpassed even some of his former classmates. Miss Elizabeth always kept him on his toes when they were together. She challenged some of his long-held ideas about the society.

However, her ability to debate and play chess was only a glimpse into the multifaceted and vibrant personality she truly was. Her heart, overflowing with empathy and kindness, astonished him far more than her sharp intellect; its warmth captivated him. It was her heart that left her under his aunt's thumb.

While he had been convinced in the past to let Anne and Miss Elizabeth handle the situation as they saw fit, that time had passed. A knot of unease tightened in Darcy's chest as he pondered his aunt's schemes, yet his determination to protect the worthy woman that was Miss Elizabeth hardened. He could do no less. And if he refused to question why Miss Elizabeth's predicament so profoundly moved him, he would think about it later, after he had dealt with his aunt.

Realizing that he had arrived at Darcy House and his footman was standing there to collect his reins, Darcy dismounted and thanked the man absentmindedly. Within moments, Darcy was inside, requesting that tea and a light meal to be sent to his study. He and Richard had a lot to discuss, and they might as well discuss strategy while they ate.

As Darcy entered his study, the smell of leather-bound books and wood polish eased his tension, a familiar comfort after an aggravating morning. There was just something about the combination that reminded him of happy times reading leather tomes and exploring the wider world from his spot by the fire. Taking a seat not behind his desk, but in one of the two wingback chairs, Darcy stretched his legs out and sighed.

"I must admit," Richard drawled, running a hand through his hair as he sat down in the chair across from Darcy, "that I am oddly glad that Aunt Catherine is finally doing something we can act against."

Focusing on his cousin, Darcy asked, "How so?"

Eyes narrowing, Richard replied, “For the longest time, I have wanted to act against our aunt. The cruelty she inflicts upon Elizabeth and those she views as lesser beings is matched only by the breathtaking extent of her self-aggrandizing delusions. While my inaction was a direct result of Anne’s request for me to stay my hand, it has worn on me to do nothing. But now, with this direct affront to Elizabeth, I am finally free to act, and it is as if a weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”

“You know, Anne’s health was so poor that even a minor confrontation with her mother could have killed her,” argued Darcy. Slumping in his chair, he looked into the fire and added, “Anne wanted to live out her remaining time in whatever peace she could manage, avoiding any unnecessary stress.”

With a growl, Richard said, “I know, but that does not mean I was happy to stand by knowing Aunt Catherine was doing everything she could to belittle a young woman I cherish as a younger sister.” Waiting for Darcy to look away from the crackling fire and back at him, Richard continued, “So I ask, how are we to bring an end to Aunt Catherine’s reign?”

With a gentle touch, Elizabeth ran a lavender scented cloth to Anne’s face and wrists, whispering reassurances as she tried to comfort her longtime companion. Anne spent more and more time asleep and even the special physician who had come at Mr. Darcy’s request could offer no hope. It was only a matter of time before she would slip from the world.

She was grateful to have something to occupy her, otherwise the relentless worry about Mr. Darcy and Richard’s endeavors would have been unbearable. At least Elizabeth had received a note from Jane via one of the downstairs maids just that morning. Jane had confirmed that Richard and Mr. Darcy’s investigation had uncovered Lady Catherine’s underhanded attempt to bribe someone in Uncle Lewis’s law firm, a discovery that filled Jane with outrage. The attempted bribe made sense to Elizabeth only if Lady Catherine was maneuvering to manipulate his will, possibly to

disinherit someone she disliked or increase her own inheritance.

But was Lady Catherine that foolish? Elizabeth knew that there were multiple copies of the will. Besides the law firm's copy, the earl possessed a copy of the will, as did Mr. Darcy. Did Lady Catherine really think she could get away with her underhanded tactics?

Stretching her back, Elizabeth chuckled softly to herself. Of course, Lady Catherine thought she could escape unscathed. She had evaded the consequences of everything else since her husband's death. Per Anne's request, they had all pretended like her mother was still in charge of everything. Why not reach for more?

Elizabeth herself had allowed Lady Catherine to treat her as a hired companion and nurse for her daughter. Unfazed by Lady Catherine's withering stares and contemptuous, icy comments, Elizabeth remained resolute. She loved Anne like a sister and would do whatever was necessary for her comfort. She thought she had somehow won something, never understanding Elizabeth could not care if a foolish woman wasted her breath in demeaning her. Elizabeth, overseeing both the management of the household and the sprawling estate, felt a quiet confidence in her own worth that was untempered by Lady Catherine's manipulations.

Settling more comfortably into the chair beside the bed, a sudden, sharp clash of voices from downstairs sliced through the quiet. The sounds, harsh and angry, propelled Elizabeth from Anne's side to investigate the commotion below. As she hurried down the hallway and to the top of the stairs, Elizabeth could pick out the distinct sound of Mr. Darcy's voice mingling with that of Lady Catherine. Though she was used to Lady Catherine's furious tirades, the sheer force of Mr. Darcy's icy wrath, laced with cutting disdain, rendered her speechless.

Hurrying down the stairs, Elizabeth made it to the bottom just as Lady Catherine barked, "Get out of my house, you ungrateful boy, and take this riffraff with you!"

“No, Aunt Catherine. In the past, I have suppressed my own desires to maintain peace and comply with Anne’s pleas, but my patience has run out, and I am finally taking a stand. You have gone too far in your selfish machinations.” Looking down at her, he asked with a tilt of his head, “Did you really think you could get away with it?”

Elizabeth’s gaze swiveled to Lady Catherine and was surprised to note that she seemed to shrink back for a moment before reasserting herself. Shoulders back and head held high, she exclaimed, “I do not know what you think you are talking about.” Shaking her head, Lady Catherine looked at the footman saying, “It is time for you to go, the footman will see you out.”

Concern etched on Martin’s face, the footman looked at Elizabeth, his eyes concerned, and Elizabeth shook her head almost imperceptibly. She did not know what Mr. Darcy had discovered, but Elizabeth would not weaken her stance against the Lady Catherine. When Lady Catherine realized Martin had not moved to hustle Mr. Darcy and the man with him out the door, she huffed, “Useless fool!”

Unbeknownst to Lady Catherine, the staff’s loyalty lay with Elizabeth, who quietly managed the household with kindness and held the real authority. All the true respect was reserved for Elizabeth. Martin knew that even if Lady Catherine dismissed him, Elizabeth would make sure he was cared for. Lady Catherine might have threatened to fire Martin, but was distracted when Mr. Darcy introduced the man standing to his right. “Lady Catherine, I do not believe that you have met the Honorable Dudley Crampton. He’s the barrister responsible for the careful execution of your late husband’s will.”

Though her eyes widened, Lady Catherine held her tongue, and into the odd sort of silence, the man said, “I believe Lady Catherine was at the reading of her husband’s will.” His attention shifted from Mr. Darcy to Lady Catherine before continuing. “Even though we didn’t exchange a single word that day, your unhappiness about the distribution of your husband’s assets was palpable. Your response didn’t surprise me;



it was exactly what I expected. Before his death, your husband warned me that you would do everything in your power to circumvent his wishes.”

Lady Catherine sniffed disdainfully, her voice dripping with contempt as she declared, “My poor husband was unwell and apparently paranoid.”

“Regardless of your dismissive opinion, I followed my client’s wishes and did all I could to see that what he wished would come to pass.” A slow smile stretched Mr. Crampton’s face as he said, “The moment your stooge, Mr. Dunn, bribed one of my staff for a peek at the will, I knew more security measures were needed.”

Lady Catherine glared, her nostrils flaring slightly. “I do not know this Mr. Dunn you speak of.”

In that moment, Elizabeth vividly recalled the hushed tones and angry mutterings of Lady Catherine’s conversation with a man named Dunn, a meeting that occurred soon after her Uncle Lewis’s death. The memory was heavy with unspoken implications, and a few things started to make more sense. They had spoken of a codicil then too. A codicil that apparently had something to do with her.

Elizabeth was so lost in thought that she almost missed it when the barrister said, “That is odd, because Mr. Dunn seems to know you. When we caught him attempting to switch the codicil attached to your husband’s will with a forged document, he claimed he was only doing it at your behest.”

Though her eyes darted, Lady Catherine’s voice held steady as she declared, “Obviously, he was lying.”

“If that is the case, it is very unusual that he would attempt to replace the codicil with one that greatly benefited you?” came his calm reply.

“How would I know the mind of a criminal?” Lady Catherine scoffed, before stepping forward and saying, “It is obvious that my husband should never have trusted you to uphold his wishes. I will be bringing your incompetencies to the attention of the court, that is for certain.”

“Is that so?” responded Mr. Crampton. A slight, almost imperceptible clearing of his throat made Elizabeth wonder if he was stifling laughter at Lady Catherine’s absurd pronouncements. Elizabeth found herself charmed; the man’s laughter at Lady Catherine’s antics hinted at a compatible wit and a shared appreciation for the absurd. It made sense that Uncle Lewis would have chosen him as his barrister.

Narrowing her eyes, Lady Catherine had the audacity to poke the taller man in the chest as she snapped, “I am Mistress here and I will not be insulted in my own home. It is time for you to leave.”

Looking down at the bony finger poking him in the chest, Mr. Crampton said, “While it is true that you live here, you are not the mistress of this house. Your daughter is, and you know it.”

### Chapter Twelve

Darcy watched the interplay between Mr. Crampton and his aunt and shook his head. While his aunt might have thought herself clever, it was fairly simple to sort out what she was up to. Having observed his aunt's clandestine meeting with Mr. Dunn, where a substantial amount of money changed hands, the footman Richard had set to follow her next learned a key detail: Mr. Dunn worked in a low-level position at their Uncle Lewis's law firm.

It had been simple to arrange a meeting with Mr. Crampton, with his own barrister in attendance. After all, Darcy was in possession of a copy of his uncle's will, though he had not reviewed it since his uncle's death. Mr. Crampton had been grateful to know that his employee was working for Lady Catherine. With that information in hand, it had been easy to catch Dunn red-handed, in the act of switching out the codicil.

Returning his attention back to the confrontation, Darcy caught the end of Mr. Crampton's comment. "... you are not the mistress of this house. Your daughter is, and you know it."

His aunt's reaction to that was spectacular. She flushed a fiery red, sputtering, "Anne is too feeble, too ill to even have a season, let alone manage anything! She has never managed de Bourgh House or Rosings; the role of mistress was left to me."

"No, she only let you think that," countered Mr. Crampton, a sly smile playing on his lips. "Your daughter told me that it was easier to let you think you were in charge than to force you to comply. She made sure that the tenants were cared for and had access to the latest agricultural techniques. She also kept me abreast of her

investments and Rosings' progress through frequent, detailed correspondence."

A bark of laughter escaped Lady Catherine as she crowed, "Now I know you are lying, because I monitored all the mail coming in and out of the estate! Never once did a piece of mail from your firm ever make it to my daughter."

Darcy resisted the urge to laugh at his aunt. He saw the smug look on her face, but he knew that her latest statement, intended to bolster her case, was actually weakening it. Darcy debated letting her know of her error when Miss Elizabeth spoke up saying, "Anne and I knew you would prevent both of us from receiving any important correspondence, so I made arrangements to ensure that we could both receive and send mail."

A smile crept across Darcy's lips as he watched Miss Elizabeth stand up to the tyrant that was his aunt. So many people cowered before the woman that was Lady Catherine, but not Miss Elizabeth. He noticed the subtle confidence in her upward chin tilt and the inner light shining from her emerald eyes. The fact that she had such incredibly lovely eyes didn't improve the situation. He was practically spellbound.

Lady Catherine, seething with fury, stalked toward Miss Elizabeth and sneered, "You scheming strumpet! How dare you undermine me, you ingrate, when you depend entirely on my largess for your very existence? The audacity!"

When Darcy noticed her arm start moving, as if to strike Miss Elizabeth, he reached out, grasping her wrist in a tight grip, saying, "You would not be attempting to strike Miss Elizabeth, would you, Aunt?" Every fiber of his being screamed at him to squeeze her wrist to the point of pain, but he held back. He had seen the widening of Miss Elizabeth's eyes as she recognized Aunt Catherine's intention. It incensed him to know his aunt would put such a look on Miss Elizabeth's face.

"Unhand me!" Lady Catherine struggled to rip herself free, hissing, "I will discipline

my staff in any way I see fit.”

“I see why you felt my visit to de Brough House was so urgent, Richard.” Darcy’s gaze snapped to the doorway where Richard and his uncle stood. It seemed he had missed their entrance while managing his aunt.

With a knowing quirk of his eyebrow and a brief nod towards Darcy, his uncle stepped forward, a silent greeting passing between them. He stepped away from his aunt, giving his uncle the room to face his sister. The air crackled with the anticipation of their conversation. It was a good thing really that his uncle would confront her because Darcy could not say what he might have done if his aunt tried his patience any further.

With a pointed look at Lady Catherine, Darcy moved to Miss Elizabeth’s side. He found he needed to be near her. The idea that she could have been harmed if he had not acted quickly enough was oddly distressing and he needed to assure himself of her well-being. He caught her eye; her smile, though steady, held a hint of weariness, but he was relieved to see it and know his aunt hadn’t completely intimidated her.

Darcy offered her his arm, and she took it without hesitation, standing closer to him than was her typical habit. When Miss Elizabeth squeezed his arm in what he presumed was gratitude or possibly a need for reassurance, he was quick to lay his free hand over her own on his arm. He was so absorbed in the pleasant tingle that had run up his appendage and to his heart that he nearly missed it when his aunt and uncle stopped glaring at each other and began trading verbal blows.

“I know what I saw when I walked in. You would have hit Lizzy had Darcy not stopped you. What could you have been thinking?” Despite a calm tone, Uncle Reggie’s voice held authority, a skill honed, Darcy guessed, through years of parliamentary debate.

Fists clenched at her side, Lady Catherine glared up at her brother, her voice sharp as she ranted, “Your insistence on granting that wretch more worth than she has is a disgrace. She is nothing but a cast-off child who should have been sent to the workhouse and as long as she is in my house, I will treat her how I choose. She does not know her place and I am only attempting to remind her. Frankly, it is your fault, as I blame you and Lewis for giving her delusions above her station.”

Tilting his head, Reginald Fitzwilliam, earl of Matlock, said, “I find it curious that you say that Lizzy has delusions above her station. When frankly, it is you who has forgotten your place in the world, and what little authority you actually have is at risk of completely slipping through your fingers. You risk much in your most recent power grab.” That caused Lady Catherine to take a step back from her brother, her mouth slightly agape.

Meanwhile, Uncle Reginald looked at Mr. Crampton, saying, “While I always enjoy seeing you, Dudley, it seems that you are not here for a friendly visit. What has my sister done this time?” He turned back to his sister, his eyes narrowed, and added, with a low, dangerous tone, “You can wipe that belligerent glare right off your face, Catty, you will not win this day.” The silence that followed was heavy with tension.

Elizabeth watched it all, grateful she was not currently the focus of Lady Catherine’s ire. She wanted to be courageous and say she could have confronted Lady Catherine without Darcy and the others, but admitted that she’d have been much less successful alone. She also found it was much nicer to be brave when the warmth of Mr. Darcy’s hand on her own reminded her he was there to support her. The near-miss with Lady Catherine was almost worth it for the strange pleasure she derived from her current safe and comfortable situation next to Mr. Darcy. It was rare that Elizabeth felt the warmth of protection and she could almost trick herself into believing she was cherished.

“You are familiar with this trespasser, Reginald?” Lady Catherine’s bark drew

Elizabeth's attention back to the confrontation.

"His father and I have worked together in parliament for what seems like decades, Catty. He is yet another person who will not kowtow to you. Now be quiet so that I can learn how much trouble you are in."

Though there was an odd twitch in his lips, Mr. Crampton managed not to laugh. He cleared his throat and answered the earl's previous question. "My Lord, it appears your sister had a lackey try to replace a codicil in your brother-in-law's will for one that favored her."

Clicking his tongue, the earl shook his head and, looking at his sister, said, "Really, Catty?" He then addressed Mr. Crampton, inquiring, "What did she award herself?"

Looking at Lady Catherine, Mr. Crampton declared, "It would seem your brother-in-law was generous enough to rescind her original jointure, instead bestowing upon her an estate, a substantial sum, and the right to remain Mistress of Rosings for the duration of her life."

"How singular," commented the earl, a hint of amusement in his voice. "How would that work with the fact that Rosings goes to my son, Richard, when Anne passes? Does she presume to be mistress over the woman he eventually marries?"

A loud, boisterous bark of laughter punctuated Richard's dismissive, "Not bloody likely!"

Mr. Darcy spoke up from beside Elizabeth, adding his own inquiry, "My question is how can she stay mistress when in fact Anne has been mistress of the estate since Uncle Lewis passed?"

"You are all ridiculous!" cried Lady Catherine. "How do you know that the codicil in

question is not the correct one? My husband was a good man. What is to say that he did not want what is best for me, what I deserve?"

"What you deserve? What you deserve is far less than an estate and control over Rosings. Do not ask for what you deserve, sister, because I may just give it to you!" Approaching Lady Catherine, the earl's voice lowered, revealing an anger Elizabeth had never before witnessed in the kind man. "Do not think that I was unaware of how you have always treated Lizzie. To my shame, I permitted you to act unchecked until matters had reached this point, but no longer. I tell you now if you step one inch further out of line, you will not like my response."

Though her eyes widened slightly, Lady Catherine did not shrink back from her brother. Nose in the air, she shrugged, saying, "I still say there is no way to know which copy of the codicil is the correct one. Who is to say that the hussy did not persuade this Dunn to add the codicil in her favor?"

The barb from Lady Catherine caused Mr. Darcy to tense, though had she not been close enough to feel his muscles shift, she might not have known. Looking up, she noticed a muscle in his jaw twitch. A cold rage burned in his eyes, making her breath catch painfully in her throat. While it seemed that Lady Catherine's comment enraged Mr. Darcy, it was Mr. Crampton who responded first, countering, "Did you really believe I wouldn't have taken precautions to protect the codicil as securely as the will itself? Just as with the will, there are multiple copies of the codicil with multiple barristers. Should you doubt the codicil's authenticity, it is simple enough to demonstrate which document is genuine."

With a venomous glare, Lady Catherine fixed Mr. Crampton in her sights, the intensity palpable but then, slowly, deliberately, her gaze swept across the others. Had her disapproval meant anything to any of them, it would have been quite a blow. It seemed, though, that Mr. Crampton was immune to the glares of disgruntled old women. Elizabeth could almost see the moment Lady Catherine dropped her farce of



innocence. She shifted ever so slightly, shrugging as if shedding an uncomfortable cloak before beginning her tirade.

“My husband’s will is an insult to an esteemed personage such as myself. I demeaned myself by marrying him and if father had given me any choice in the matter, I would have married far above him.” Lady Catherine paced as she ranted, and Elizabeth wondered if she was glad to finally be able to vent her spleen. Spinning back around to face the group standing in the entryway Lady Catherine exclaimed, “I assumed that upon his death, I would finally receive my rightful inheritance: his family estate, a lifetime of comfort and even more important, the power I should have always had. I would be the mistress of Rosings with no interference from my weak and meddling husband.”

Though no one spoke up to counter her claims, Elizabeth could feel the weight of their ambivalence in the heavy silence, a palpable wall against her delusions of grandeur. Elizabeth even noticed that Uncle Reginald pinched the bridge of his nose the way he sometimes did when attempting to ward off a headache. It made Elizabeth wonder just how often people got headaches that were induced by being forced to spend time in Lady Catherine’s presence.

“But no,” Lady Catherine continued. “When he died, he left practically nothing to me and instead arranged for Anne, his dying daughter. A daughter who was so weak I could not even arrange a wedding for. Daughters are merely instruments for fulfilling their parents’ ambitions and for strengthening their families’ power, that I learned from my own dear father. And yet Anne could not even get that right. She will be the end of my husband’s line, and he still left most of it to her. Disgusting! What is even more despicable is that he arranged for Richard to get everything once Anne finally dies. When I learned that he even set up a codicil in regard to a girl who should have been nothing more than a servant, my sense of justice called me to act. Why are you hindering my move to correct so many wrongdoings?” Having worn herself out in her manic declarations, Lady Catherine stood there gasping and attempting to catch her

breath. What was remarkable to Elizabeth was that she could tell that the woman thought she would have won them over with her impassioned speech.

Darcy glanced at the others, wondering who would respond to the insanity first. His uncle only waited a moment before asking, “Are you finished spewing your ridiculous drivel?” If Lady Catherine’s earlier glares had been icy, sharp shards of disdain, Uncle Reggie’s glare was molten, burning with furious anger.

When Lady Catherine’s mouth opened to gape at her younger brother, the earl took it as assent and said, “I am ashamed of you and, frankly, the way you speak would have most people ready to send you to Bedlam. I am fairly certain that after witnessing your horrendous behavior, Dudley here would be more than willing to help me make it happen.”

With a slight tilt of his head, Mr. Crampton murmured, “It would be a pleasure to help you in any way you request, Lord Matlock.” His comment caused Richard to smile and his aunt to sputter.

Uncle Reggie acknowledged Mr. Crampton’s comment with a smile before continuing, “Despite my inclination to see to it that you get what you truly deserve, I will allow you to remain here until your new home is ready for you to move there.” Glancing up the stairs, he added, “I have been told that my dear niece Anne will not be with us much longer and I expect for you to behave and allow her the courtesy of a loving, peaceful environment in the meantime. Your behavior during this time will dictate where that new home will be. And no, there is absolutely no chance that it will be Rosings.”

This shock moved Lady Catherine to find the power of speech once again, though she did not, it seemed, find discretion, saying, “I am the daughter of an earl, his oldest child. In a just world, I would be the head of this family. You should be doing all you can to assist me to correct this injustice! I deserve better than what he wanted for me,

or what you are granting me. This is not to be borne, I insist on being satisfied! You cannot-”

“I can do whatever I deem correct! I am an earl!” he roared, finally stopping her rant before continuing on in a more normal tone. “While you may delude yourself, you have not fooled any of us. You are just a baronet’s widow, a commoner. You have no power to control anything. Any little comfort that you have is what others have deemed fit to grant you.”

Hands on hips, Lady Catherine retorted, “How dare you speak to me so! Our mother would be ashamed to know you.”

“No, our mother would be ashamed to know you , Catherine.” Uncle Reggie shook his head, face hard, adding, “Somehow, you overlooked the quiet dignity, the gentle compassion, and the unwavering integrity that defined our mother. She was exceptional, a stunning contrast to your grasping selfishness; her very memory is a rebuke to your crass behavior.”

For a moment Darcy wondered if his aunt was about to suffer an apoplexy, her face having gone a dark shade of puce and then white. Reginald Fitzwilliam, seemingly unfazed by his sister’s struggle, beckoned a nervous-looking footman standing near the edge of the room, commanding, “Take my sister to her rooms. She is overwrought and will not be partaking in our further discussions. Please stay outside her room to insure she rests as she should.”

The footman, his face pale, gave a shaky bow to the earl before approaching Lady Catherine. After a moment’s hesitation, he gestured for her to precede him up the stairs. With a huff, she marched up the stairs, her back ramrod straight. The group in the entryway stood in silence, the air thick with anticipation, until the resounding slam of the door above shattered the stillness.

The earl clasped his hands, a relieved smile gracing his lips as he stated, “With that unpleasant business concluded, let us proceed with the task at hand.”

Nodding, Miss Elizabeth said, “By all means, let us adjourn to the parlor. I think we could all do with a cup of tea and possibly a treat after everything.”

Darcy instinctively stayed close to Miss Elizabeth’s side, not wanting to leave her, just in case she had been affected by his aunt’s triad than she would allow herself to show. His little sister would have been in tears after such an outrageous display. It was possible that Miss Elizabeth’s composure was a carefully constructed facade; Darcy, a master of self-control himself, could understand an unwillingness to show any vulnerability. He stayed close, watching her as the group shifted locations.

He settled onto the plush settee beside her just as a maid arrived, bearing a gleaming silver tea service laden with delicate china cups and a fragrant pot of Earl Grey for Miss Elizabeth to dispense. Darcy took a moment to look around the room, observing everyone. It was peculiar to witness the soothing warmth and the calming scent of the tea chase away the earlier agitation, leaving a sense of tranquility in the room.

Mr. Crampton was the first to speak from his chair by the fire. “Whatever else I want to say today, I want to make a point of recognizing your fortitude, Miss Elizabeth. To have spent the majority of your life in that woman’s sphere can have only been a tremendous burden. I may have only just met you in person, but I can easily tell that you’ve risen above Lady Catherine’s scorn, showcasing a strength and elegance that any person of sense must respect. Sir Lewis was right about you; your decision to remain at Rosings, foregoing better prospects due to your commitment to Miss de Bourgh and her household, speaks volumes.”

Miss Elizabeth’s eyes widened, her voice softening as she asked, “Did Uncle Lewis mention me?”

“While we rarely met in person, we corresponded fairly often, and your name came up more than once,” answered Mr. Crampton with a smile.

Putting down his teacup on a side table, Richard spoke up. “Though I hate to disrupt the lovely sentimentality, I do wonder at the point of this gathering. It cannot have been solely to route my aunt, though I chiefly enjoyed the experience of seeing her so defeated.”

“Our purpose here,” Darcy said, “is to devise a plan and prepare for Anne’s inevitable death, correct?”

### Chapter Thirteen

The impending discussion's painful nature was readily apparent to Elizabeth. While she saw the logic of ensuring that her sister of the heart's death would be handled as it should be and the power passed to Richard as it must be, that did not make the situation any less painful to bear. Most of the time, she was able to stay busy enough to avoid the icy grip of grief that would take hold when she was forced to acknowledge how little time she had left with Anne.

Elizabeth took a sip of her tea, which she had made sure to add just the right amount of cream and sugar to. She relished the delicious brew, its warmth a soothing balm that seeped into her very being. It helped some and prepared her for the conversation at hand.

Uncle Reggie, his face etched with gentle concern, looked directly at Elizabeth and asked, "How is Anne? I know she is not well, but I would have your unvarnished view of her situation."

Swallowing in an attempt to get past the lump in her throat, Elizabeth said, "She does not have long, days rather than weeks, I think, but she is not suffering overmuch. Anne is asleep most of the time but does wake on occasion to take tea or broth. I am sure she will be glad to see you." Elizabeth did not realize that she cried as she spoke until Mr. Darcy reached out and pressed a handkerchief into her hand. Glancing up at him, she gave him a watery smile of gratitude before delicately dabbing at her eyes with the soft linen of his gifted handkerchief.

Into the somber silence Mr. Crampton pronounced, "While I am here, I would like to

Speak to her if she is able so that I can be assured that everything is in order for her own will to be handled as it should be.”

With a nod, Uncle Reggie said, “Yes, we must have everything in order to be as Anne wishes, but what of Richard? He’s slated to inherit the estate, and to ensure a smooth transition, it would be wise to have all documents and paperwork in perfect order for an immediate transfer of ownership upon her passing.”

“Father, Anne is dying. What does it matter that I take over immediately? Surely, there is nothing so urgent that I must make a show of force while I am in mourning,” countered Richard.

Forestalling an argument between the father and son, Elizabeth spoke up. “Lady Catherine will do all in her power to keep the stranglehold on what she thinks should be hers. I would not put it past her to attempt some underhanded means to keep you at bay. You would be wise to be sure that she is not given the means to strike out at you.”

Looking at Elizabeth, Richard slumped slightly before acquiescing, saying, “There is logic in your argument.” Then, turning to Mr. Crampton with a smirk, he asked, “So how can we be rid of the old bat?”

Smothering a smile, Mr. Crampton said, “Sir Lewis knew his wife and her tendencies well and his will leaves us with several options. He actually gives you the choice of where she will live. There are actually several options. First, she may have the dower house at Rosings if you so choose, but should not wish her so close, you may send her to live at the satellite estate in Scotland. There too there is the choice if you permit her to live at the estate or in that dower house, which is half the size of the dower house at Rosings. If neither option is something that suites you, he also stated she may be released to her brother for him to care for as he sees fit.”

“She is certainly not staying at Rosings, even if it is at the dower house. Her constant interference and complaints would drive me to madness.” Came Richard’s immediate reply.

Elizabeth could not help but chuckle at Richard’s vehement reply. A marvelous thought struck Elizabeth mid-laugh, the sound of her laughter fading as a smile of cunning spread across her face. She said, “You know, Richard, Lady Catherine being in London may turn out to be quite advantageous for you.”

Raising an eyebrow, Richard tilted his head and asked, “How so?”

Elizabeth smiled at Richard, despite still clutching the tear-stained handkerchief in her hand, saying, “You can have all of her possessions removed from Rosings and sent wherever you wish. The destination is unimportant—Scotland or a place of Uncle Reggie’s choosing. The point is that if she shows up at Rosings, it really is not hers any longer. There will be no trace of her if you start now. Personally, I would start with that god awful throne room.” Feeling Mr. Darcy’s intense gaze on her, Elizabeth turned, her heart quickening, to meet his eyes full of mischievous mirth. Lifting her chin despite her blush, she answered his look, saying, “What? You did not have to spend time in that room on a daily basis for years.”

“Lizzie has a valid point.” Uncle Reggie’s voice pulled Elizabeth from her odd fascination with the smile in Mr. Darcy’s eyes. Taking another sip of her to cover her confusion, she listened as he continued, saying, “The alterations my sister implemented at Rosings were solely dependent upon Anne’s allowance in an effort to keep the peace. I am certain Anne would approve their removal.”

Nodding, Elizabeth looked at Richard and explained, “In fact, I can speak with Anne about the plan and send a missive to the staff there about beginning the process. I am certain the Rosings staff, more loyal to Anne than Lady Catherine, will gladly comply.”



Richard was quick to say, “Thank you, Lizzy. Anne's position as mistress of Rosings, though likely temporary given her failing health, demands respect. I would be horrified to be seen as usurping it, especially considering her mother's machinations. On the other hand, the practical need to remove Aunt Catherine's things is undeniable. With your idea, I can ensure that what needs to be done is handled efficiently and with the proper respect.”

Darcy stood at the bottom of the stairs, wondering what he should do. His uncle had gone up to spend time with Anne. Richard and Mr. Crampton were discussing the finer details of their Uncle Lewis's will in the parlor. Miss Elizabeth had already spoken with Anne about making changes at Rosings and had left to write a missive to the staff there. With no specific task to be about, he felt out of place.

He supposed he should return home and see to the tall stack of correspondence waiting for him on his desk that he had been ignoring, but the thought was unappealing. Not only did he want to speak to Miss Elizabeth before he left, but he was unsettled, though he could not put his finger on why. It was not the fact that Mr. Crampton had not yet spoken to Miss Elizabeth about the codicil that Aunt Catherine had so recently tried to alter. He knew from speaking to his own barrister that the information within the codicil could not be revealed to Miss Elizabeth until she reached her majority, which he knew would not be for another fortnight.

Running a hand along his forehead, Darcy tried to decipher his odd feelings. It was partly his distrust of Aunt Catherine. He couldn't believe his aunt had only been confined to her room like a recalcitrant child for her most recent actions. They all knew that she was delusional and had been caught red-handed attempting to alter her husband's will. Though the codicil's contents remained a mystery, Darcy sensed his uncle had bequeathed something to Miss Elizabeth, and he strongly suspected his aunt was actively trying to block her from receiving it. And yet all that had happened in response to such underhandedness was to send her to her room? It was wrong.

Any other person would be facing a trial, but not his aunt, no his uncle would not allow that, as it might affect his power in parliament. It smacked of injustice and more; it made him wonder what she would do next. Without facing any real punishment, Darcy worried Lady Catherine would lash out in some other way. He did not like it, but he did not have the authority to handle the situation as he would wish.

Darcy was pulled out of his musings by the sound of footsteps on the stairs above him. Glancing up, he caught sight of Miss Elizabeth as she descended the stairs, and it was as if he had lost all the air in his lungs. He couldn't pinpoint the exact source of the feeling. Perhaps it was the way she smiled so joyously when their eyes met, or how she seemed to glow in the light from the windows. He could not quite fathom how she still had the strength to smile so after the confrontation earlier. The socialite ladies that he often complained about would have been taken to bed with a fit of the vapors and yet here she was smiling at him in a way that made him ache. Miss Elizabeth had indeed become a remarkable lady, a true woman of worth. What was he to do about this strange pull she had on him? The question echoed in his mind. A persistent whisper that attempted to distract him from the issues at hand.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Miss Elizabeth approached the liveried footman, a letter clutched in her hand, and said, "See that this finds its way to Rosings by express." Accepting the letter with a bow, the young man hurried away as if sensing the urgency of the letter's contents. Turning to Darcy, she asked, "Have you been left to your own devices, Mr. Darcy?"

Smiling down at Miss Elizabeth who's head only reached his shoulder, Darcy offered her his arm before saying, "I was taking the opportunity to reflect on all that has transpired this morning while Uncle Reggie was visiting with Anne and Richard was going over matters with Mr. Crampton. It seems that you have completed your mission to be rid of Aunt Catherine's ostentatious hoard."

A peal of laughter, bright and unrestrained, erupted from Miss Elizabeth as she

leaned on him briefly, her body shaking with the strength of her mirth. She tilted her head back, allowing him to see the merriment in her emerald gaze as she caught her breath, saying, “I have the most peculiar image of Lady Catherine as a dragon clutching at her hoard of gold and shaking her tail at everyone. Sadly, she lost her fire long ago, so instead of spewing a raging inferno, she can only blow smoke.”

A chuckle rumbled in Darcy’s chest as he joined her mirth, the sound a low, warm counterpoint to her laughter. “That is quite the image,” he said, a smile playing on his lips. Then, sobering somewhat, he added, “While smoke is better than fire to deal with, it is still detrimental. Will a valiant knight appear to defeat her, free the villagers from her tyranny, and rescue the princess held captive?”

Shaking her head with a sigh, Miss Elizabeth mused, her voice laced with a hint of melancholy, “Sadly, the princess’s only true freedom will come when she escapes this earthly realm.”

For a time neither of them spoke, but then something within Darcy forced him to say, “But isn’t there a second princess in the tower? Surely, she will be free to live her life unhindered once the dragon is vanquished?”

Looking up at Darcy with wide eyes, Miss Elizabeth answered, “There is no other princess, only a poor serving girl, but she will be eminently grateful to be free.”

Elizabeth waited, gaging Mr. Darcy’s reaction to what she had said. Scars from her mother’s abandonment and Lady Catherine’s tyrannical reign ran deep, and the idea of calling herself a princess felt inappropriate. Regardless, the idea of freedom was intoxicating, and she would be grateful when it came. Though she had never quite pictured what she would do once she obtained it.

Mr. Darcy tilted his head, eyes intense, and Elizabeth strangely felt as if he was peering into her soul. He only just opened his mouth to say something when

Richard's voice, warm and teasing interrupted from behind her, saying, "Are you coming in the parlor, you two, or are you just going to stand there laughing and staring at each other?"

Certain her face was flaming, Elizabeth wished she could disappear until she noticed Mr. Darcy glaring at Richard over her head. At least she was not the only one embarrassed.

Certain her cheeks were aflame, Elizabeth wanted to melt into the floorboards, but then she noticed that Mr. Darcy seemed just as addled. For a moment, Mr. Darcy glared over her head at Richard, but then, shaking his head slightly, he looked back at her. A smile softened his features, and his eyes twinkled, a silent understanding passing between them that left her breathless and strangely happy.

Clearing his throat, Mr. Darcy said, "We were just joining you."

Elizabeth moved together with Mr. Darcy to the settee across from Richard and once settled she said, "I just dispatched the message we spoke of to Rosings via express. By this time tomorrow, the staff there will be dismantling Lady Catherine's throne room and packing up her things, with what I assume will be no little amount of celebration."

Leaning back in his chair and stretching out his legs before him, Richard chuckled. "I hardly expect the staff at Rosings to disapprove of me; compared to Aunt Catherine, I will have to be a vast improvement."

"Too true. Despite Anne and my best efforts to intercede, Lady Catherine's haughty disdain was palpable, affecting everyone from the housekeeper to the children playing on the estate grounds after church. Even with their sorrow at the loss of Anne, you will be a breath of fresh air." A strange constriction tightened Elizabeth's chest. Despite the truth of the words, it hurt to speak of a time when Anne would no

longer be part of her life. A world without Anne felt wrong somehow.

For a moment, the only sound was the quiet breathing of those gathered, the silence heavy with grief and the knowledge of the imminent loss. Mr. Crampton leaned forward, his voice low and serious. "I have a meeting to attend this afternoon, and therefore will be leaving soon; however, before I go, I wished to speak with you about the codicil, Miss Elizabeth."

"Oh?" Elizabeth said, her eyebrows raised in curious inquiry. "What did you want to discuss, Mr. Crampton?"

"I'm limited in what I can share about the codicil's contents, but please know it directly concerns you. That said, I can officially meet with you about it after you reach your majority, which I would like to arrange as soon as may be."

"I reach my majority in less than a fortnight."

"Yes, I knew it would be soon. Your approaching birthday is probably why Lady Catherine attempted to act now so that she could stop the proceedings." Pausing, Mr. Crampton reached into his pocket before withdrawing a card and handing it to her, adding, "Do you have a solicitor who can attend a meeting with you and serve your interests?"

The card felt cool and smooth beneath Elizabeth's fingers as she traced the embossed lettering and read the address. "No," she said, "I have never had need of a solicitor."

Reaching out, Mr. Darcy lay his hand on hers saying, "I am sure that my solicitor would be more than happy to be of assistance. Mr. Adkins knows Mr. Crampton and their firms have a history of working together, which should make things run smoothly."

Elizabeth felt a sense of relief knowing that Mr. Darcy trusted the solicitor who would be available to help her, as she had no knowledge about choosing one herself. Smiling at him, she said, “I would be happy to have Mr. Adkins’ assistance, as long as you are sure that he would not mind you volunteering his services.”

Squeezing her hand Mr. Darcy replied, “Oh I am sure he would not mind.” Elizabeth’s gaze fell to Mr. Darcy’s hand, its size dwarfing her own, the comforting warmth a tangible presence against her skin that she was unaccustomed to.

She might have continued to study his hand on hers, lost in the warmth of his touch, if it were not for Mr. Crampton's throat clearing, a jarring sound that broke the spell as he stood and announced his departure. “As I said, I must be on my way. Should Miss de Bourgh inquire, please convey my willingness to adhere to her instructions precisely as she has requested.”

Everyone stood to see Mr. Crampton off and had just closed the door behind him when Elizabeth spotted Uncle Reggie appear at the top of the stairs. She could not help but feel as if his twenty minutes with Anne had left him looking ravaged. His usually vibrant complexion was ashen, and though his movements were slow and deliberate, his hands trembling slightly. Though he’d always appeared younger, his face now bore the weight of years, his eyes holding a weariness that belied his youthful spirit.

It hurt Elizabeth to see him so, so she moved to the base of the stairs and asked, “Uncle Reggie, are you well?”

Meeting her gaze with difficulty, Uncle Reggie said, “I am well enough, my dear, only it is never easy for one to see someone pass before their time and with the rate that Anne is fading, I may have just said goodbye to her forever.” Glancing between the sad visages of Mr. Darcy and Richard, Uncle Reggie added, “I believe, gentlemen, it is time to leave and allow Lizzy to see to household matters and spend

time with Anne.” So saying, he gestured to a footman who proceeded to bring him his hat and gloves and send word to have his carriage brought around.

Mr. Darcy, ignoring the proffered hat, stepped forward, his voice sharp and urgent as he demanded, “But uncle, what about Aunt Catherine? Surely, we cannot just leave her to plot her next move. There is no telling what she will try!”

### Chapter Fourteen

Frustration ate at Darcy as he stood facing his uncle. There was so much at stake and his uncle either could not see it or he did not want to acknowledge it. Flicking his gaze to Miss Elizabeth, who stood watching him confront his uncle with wide eyes. How could his uncle not see that she was at risk if they left things as they were?

Waving him off with a dismissive flick of his wrist, Uncle Reggie scoffed, “My sister’s been thwarted, and even if she tries something else, it will take time to scheme up anything of significance. Time that she does not have. As much as it pains me to say it, Anne will soon pass and then Richard will be in control. Besides, no matter how flawed her parenting techniques are, surely she has the right to be with her dying daughter.”

Clenching his fists at his sides, he nodded to his uncle and stepped back. It appeared futile to try to change his uncle’s mind, as stubbornness was clearly a family characteristic. Darcy allowed his uncle to leave, exchanging a glance with Richard, who had hugged Miss Elizabeth goodbye. A subtle frown flickered across Richard’s face, a silent protest against his father’s words. It was clear to Darcy that they would both do everything in their power to frustrate their aunt’s schemes. It would have been easier to have the earl’s support, but they would do it without him if they had to.

Darcy approached Miss Elizabeth, wishing that he could hug her as Richard had, instead he simply said, “Miss Elizabeth, I want you to send someone to me if you need help at any time, night or day. I do not trust Aunt Catherine not to lash out, and you will be her most likely victim.”



Smiling, Miss Elizabeth reassured him, "I will do as you ask and alert you at the first hint of concern, but I do not want you to worry. Do not forget that I have dealt with your aunt for most of my life, Mr. Darcy. I have learned quite well how to avoid her machinations." They stood for a moment, their eyes locked, before Darcy, with a slight bow and a blush creeping up his neck, turned and left.

Halfway back to Darcy House, the chill wind tugging at his collar, he realized his worry wasn't for his dying cousin, but for the steadfast young woman who'd been her constant companion. Though he wanted to feel guilty because he paid so little attention to Anne and her condition, he knew on some level that her inevitable death would be a release for her from a broken and difficult existence. On the other hand, the threat of his aunt's wrath loomed over Elizabeth, filling him with a sense of dread. Darcy felt a pull towards Miss Elizabeth, an inexplicable force that seemed to tether him to her and captivated him entirely. It was a feeling unlike any other he had experienced in his life. It was inexplicable.

A quiet voice in the back of his mind declared that he had fallen in love with Miss Elizabeth, but Darcy did not know if he believed it. He had never given the theory of love much credence. Men of his class married for the advantage of the match. Darcy expected to find satisfaction in caring for Pemberley and a good job well done. Unlike Bingley, who constantly and openly declared his love, he had never considered himself to be in love; so the idea was foreign to him.

Bingley's declarations of love for this lady or that were but ephemeral fancies. His sighs and wistful gazes failed to conceal the shallowness of his feelings. Despite his grand pronouncements and flowery language about his feelings, he just stared longingly, like a lovesick calf, across the brightly lit ballrooms. Darcy would die of embarrassment before he would behave in such a fashion, and yet... There was just something about Miss Elizabeth that made him suspect that his feelings for her were more than he had ever imagined.

Arriving at Darcy House, Darcy swung down from his horse and handed off his reins. Still lost in thought, Darcy made his way up the steps and into his home. He saw the worried glances of his staff and he knew they questioned his odd behavior, but he lacked the energy to reassure them. As Darcy stepped into his study, the rich smell of old books and leather filled the air, calming him enough to request coffee and a light meal.

As much as he suspected that his aunt would lash out like a child deprived of a coveted sweet, the absence of facts meant that he could only guess at the exact nature of her outburst and until he knew more, he could do nothing to combat her. And as for his feelings, dwelling on his confusion over what he felt for Miss Elizabeth and what he was going to do with them was getting him nowhere. He would simply have to come to a realization at another time. For now, he would focus on catching up on responding to his recent letter from his steward and his various other correspondence.

With a deep breath, Darcy squared his shoulders, focusing intently on the tangible things he could accomplish, pushing aside the anxieties that clouded his mind. Darcy understood that he needed to efficiently manage his workload and ensure everything that he had fallen behind on was done. That way, once he obtained information about his aunt and her machinations, he would be able to act swiftly and without hesitation.

Darcy thanked the maid for the coffee and food, the china clinking softly as she set it down. He added cream, the rich dairy swirling into the dark brew, and took a distracted sip while perusing the letter detailing the current fleece market rates. Pemberley had a wonderful year for the sheep herds, and he believed it was time to renegotiate the rate for their fleece with their current buyer. If the seller would not agree to a fairer price, Darcy knew he could easily find another company willing to pay for what he felt was right. He knew drafting the proposal would be a time-consuming process, and frankly, Darcy hoped the task would distract him from his worries about the young woman he'd left at de Brough House. The scratching of his pen on the parchment was a welcome distraction from the turmoil in his heart.

It had been a tumultuous morning, but Elizabeth clung to the fragile hope that things were moving in the right direction, and that Lady Catherine would remain stymied until Richard could take control of matters. Peeking in at Anne as she slept, Elizabeth reassured herself that she was no worse for having visited with everyone. The weight of Anne's dwindling time pressed heavily on her, fueling a selfish desire to keep her sister of the heart in her life, fearing any event might steal away even a sliver of their remaining time together.

Closing the door with as little noise as possible, Elizabeth rested her forehead against the hardwood for a moment, gathering strength before she tackled everything else she needed to do for the day. Drawing a deep breath of air into her lungs, Elizabeth straightened her shoulders and turned away from the door. She didn't want to admit it, but the truth was that she had already finished almost all her tasks for the day. Under her management, de Bourgh House ran with remarkable efficiency, but surely she could find something to keep her mind and hands occupied.

Elizabeth ran her hands down her dress, smoothing away invisible wrinkles, deciding she would go below stairs and cheek in with the staff below stairs. It would not do to have them worry about the most recent disorder Lady Catherine had created. Yes, she would reassure the staff and then she would write a note to Jane. While Jane had not been there that morning, Elizabeth knew she would know what had transpired by now and would be worrying. Knowing Lady Catherine's cruelty would upset Jane, Elizabeth meticulously planned their meetings to avoid any encounters with the formidable Lady Catherine. Perhaps she would propose that they meet up for tea and some shopping later in the week.

Stepping into the kitchen, Elizabeth smiled when the cook, Mrs. Jessop, greeted her. "Miss Elizabeth, dear girl, you are just in time to try my latest batch of biscuits." Gesturing her over to the small table in the corner, the gregarious woman placed several biscuits on a plate and then looked at Elizabeth expectantly, adding, "You know I am always trying to come up with something to tempt the young miss.

Besides, it is not yet time for me to start on the roast for tonight's meal and I can use an excuse to get off my feet."

Under the woman's gentle kindness, Elizabeth felt her muscles slowly unknot, a sense of relief washing over her. Sitting at the table, she watched Mrs. Jessop pour the tea. The comforting clink of the cups was a soothing bit of normalcy that Elizabeth craved. She waited until Mrs. Jessop had settled herself at the table across from her before saying, "I wanted to check on how things are blow stairs after Lady Catherine's most recent tantrum."

With a slow, thoughtful sip of her steaming tea, Mrs. Jessop observed Elizabeth, her expression unreadable, before saying, "You needn't worry about the staff," she said her voice calm, "though it is a kindness that you always do. We all know that woman is a few apples short of a bushel and we take no notice of her. Things are different for us than they are for you. We are just servants. The most that woman can really do is dismiss us and even that would be difficult for her to accomplish because she has no genuine power in the home. Besides, we have all been told that should we wish it we could seek employment with the earl or Mr. Darcy."

Elizabeth listened, chewing thoughtfully on a biscuit, and after swallowing, said, "I am relieved to hear that the staff are not worried about Lady Catherine and her antics."

Putting down her cup, Mrs. Jessop looked Elizabeth in the eye, her gaze unwavering as she said, "I never said the staff were not worried."

Bewildered, Elizabeth's mind stumbled, trying to reconcile Mrs. Jessop's comment that the staff was worried with her early assurance that they were unbothered by Lady Catherine. With a shake of her head, Elizabeth murmured, "But?"

Quick to explain, Mrs. Jessop said, "They are not concerned with their plight, but

yours, Miss Elizabeth; we risk nothing, but you stand to lose everything. Though she may treat you otherwise, you are a member of the landed gentry. That position may have many advantages, but it carries many risks as well. You are a genuinely good person who sacrifices much, and we see it, perhaps more than people like the earl and the young gentlemen who were here.”

Mrs. Jessop’s words affected Elizabeth oddly. On the one hand, it was nice to know that she had gained so much respect from the staff, but on the other hand, she did not feel comfortable knowing that they thought she was at risk. Fiddling with the handle of her teacup, Elizabeth asserted, “You know I can manage Lady Catherine, Mrs. Jessop. She may be cruel and spiteful, but I have grown inured to her words. While I am grateful that you and the rest of the staff care that much about me, I do not want you to worry. Moreover, we both know Richard will inherit the grand estate soon, and plans are underway to better contain Lady Catherine.”

Frowning, Mrs. Jessop leaned forward, exclaiming, “I have seen the way Lady Catherine looks at you. It is obvious to me that she hates you. Her venomous gaze speaks of evil intent. That woman intends you ill and I worry you are not safe here with her so close to you. Lady Catherine knows that her time to act is coming to a close. She will unleash her anger, not with spoken threats, but with violence, and you must be ready for it if you hope to make it out of the situation unscathed.”

The kitchen hummed with the quiet sounds of the bubbling stove and the gentle clinking of dishes that the scullery maid washed, but when Mrs. Jessop stopped speaking, a heavy, almost painful silence fell over Elizabeth. Even as a child, Elizabeth had known that Lady Catherine hated her, but she had never once supposed that the woman would attempt to physically harm her. The fact that Mrs. Jessop did was alarming.

Elizabeth picked up her teacup and took a sip and attempted to force her racing heart to settle. Forewarned, she felt a surge of determination to protect herself. Lady

Catherine's schemes would not go unchallenged; should the woman attempt to harm her, she would discover Elizabeth's resolute spirit and well-laid plans. Setting her shoulders, she said, "Thank you for the warning, Mrs. Jessop. I will be sure to be on my guard."

Smiling, Mrs. Jessop picked up a biscuit. "Good." Then, a sly grin playing on her lips, she continued, her eyes twinkling, "So, young Thomas tells me that Mr. Darcy protected you from Lady Catherine's venom, actually shielding you from her displeasure? He is quite the strapping young man. Handsome, too. How did it feel to be protected by such a man?"

Sputtering on her tea, Elizabeth struggled to compose herself and find the words to answer Mrs. Jessop. Elizabeth had been struggling to push aside that particular experience, avoiding thinking about what could not be, but Mrs. Jessop's words recalled the feeling of Mr. Darcy protecting her with vivid clarity. The comforting weight of Mr. Darcy's protection settled heavily on her, even if all he had done was offer her his arm in support. It felt like so much more. The butterflies that had erupted in her stomach when he settled his hand over hers had completely wiped out the fear from the moment when she had been certain that Lady Catherine would strike her. A bittersweet ache bloomed in her chest; she longed for something more from him, a connection she couldn't quite define, and it left her uncertain about the possibility of a happy future without him in her life. Knowing she had to say at least something, Elizabeth murmured, "It was a wonderful thing to be protected by such a man."

The first thought that wormed his way into Darcy's mind was that his neck hurt. The second was that he was not in his bed but rather in an odd position, leaning against a hard surface. Darcy lay there momentarily, trying to understand what had landed him in such a position, when he heard a throat clear somewhere near his elbow. Sitting up right caused a tremendous agony to shoot down his neck and along his spine causing him to gasp.

“Sir?”

Groaning, Darcy swiveled his gaze to spot his valet standing there with a tray. Running a tired hand down his stubbled face, Darcy asked in a low voice, “Perry?”

Holding a glass out, Perry explained, “You fell asleep at your desk, sir. I have brought you your headache powders.” Darcy automatically accepted the offered glass, the cool liquid a welcome relief as it slid down his throat.

Stretching, Darcy glanced about his desk, remembering that he had been trying to keep busy to distract himself from worrying about Miss Elizabeth. It appeared he had made considerable progress though, as there was a stack of correspondence ready to go out at the corner of the desk. Collecting the stack of letters, Darcy handed them to Perry and asked, “Can you see that these get sent out?”

“Of course, sir.” Perry’s response was typical, but besides accepting the stack from Darcy, he did not move away. He stood there in the way that Darcy had grown accustomed to. It was clear that Perry had something that he wanted to say and was waiting for the opportunity.

Darcy, too flustered that morning to be subtle, blurted out his question to Perry. “Is there something that you want to discuss with me?”

“Between coming home in a bluster and sleeping in your study, you have most of the staff quite concerned. This behavior is not like you at all, sir. Is there something that you are concerned about, sir? Perhaps something to do with Lady Catherine?”

With his chin resting in his hands, Darcy gazed up at Perry’s face, a faint smile gracing his lips. Though not as close as friends, Darcy knew Perry, his valet of many years, had his best intentions at heart. Just as he was about to unburden himself, Richard strode into the room, his voice a casual, almost careless announcement,

“Darcy is worried about Miss Elizabeth Bennet and Aunt Catherine’s furious wrath.”

Nodding as if such a concern was only to be expected Perry said, “Lady Catherine is the sort of person who would cause concern in any person of sense.” Turning to Richard, Perry gave an abbreviated bow adding, “I will leave you to converse with Mr. Darcy. Ring if you have a need of anything.”

With a sigh, Darcy shifted in his chair as Perry left, and Richard smoothly pulled a chair from the wall, placing it with a quiet thud across from him. It was clear that Richard wanted Darcy to vent his frustrations and worries. So Darcy said, “Our aunt is cruel, conniving and complicit in an attempt to harm Miss Elizabeth in some way and yet your father, the earl, has only seen fit to send her to her room.”

“And you are worried that Lizzie will come to harm with Aunt Catherine so close at hand.” Richard spoke as if only acknowledging the obvious.

Releasing a frustrated sigh, Darcy grumbled, “Miss Elizabeth is determined to stay there and care for Anne, who will not survive much longer. What she is doing is noble and I can only be grateful for the love she shows our cousin, but I cannot help but worry.” Rubbing at his face Darcy pondered for a moment before adding, “I am not at liberty to protect her as I want to, and it is driving me to distraction.”

With a single eyebrow raised, Richard asked, “And what prevents you from protecting Lizzie as you wish?”

Resisting the urge to glare at his cousin, Darcy grumbled, “I am not related to Miss Elizabeth. She is not my sister nor my cousin. No matter how you view her, we have no familial connection. It would look rather untoward if I acted as I wished.”

Fighting a smile that Richard asked, “And how do you wish to act, Darcy?”



Looking away from Richard's questioning gaze, Darcy said, "I wish to go to de Bourgh House and scoop Miss Elizabeth up. I yearn to keep her safe from all dangers, especially Aunt Catherine, who I fear would cause her pain. I want to bring her back here and see her in my house, see her across the breakfast table and reading in my library. I want to make certain that look of fear never again crosses her face; I want to erase the memory of it from her eyes."

"It sounds as if you wish Lizzie to be the mistress of Darcy House. Do you hesitate because you worry that she is not worth of such a privilege?" Even as he said the provocative statement, Richard's face was kept carefully blank. A tactic Darcy was not unfamiliar with, but it did not anger him any less.

"With her intelligence and compassion, Miss Elizabeth is perfectly suited to be the mistress of Darcy House or Pemberley or any other grand estate! She could manage any household with impeccable style and grace," countered Darcy.

"Then why to you hesitate to act on what you want?" questioned Richard.

"I... do not know." Darcy murmured with hesitation. Why was he so hesitant to do anything with his newfound feelings? Even realizing that he felt something for Miss Elizabeth had been slightly frightening. He had never expected to stumble into love. He had reached his advanced age without caring for most women of the ton, having resigned himself to some form of marriage of convenience, when suddenly he looked at Elizabeth and a yearning ignited in his chest. It was a yearning that he did not expect, and he was uncomfortable with things he could neither foresee nor quantify. So he hesitated.

Apparently, Richard did not seem to be satisfied with his answer, so he waited. Groaning, Darcy sat up straighter and setting his shoulders, he admitted, "I never expected to feel this way. These feelings are an unknown, and I am lost, unsure of how to find my way forward."

Smiling, Richard leaned slightly forward. “You handle it as you handle any new experience or skill, one step at a time. The unfamiliar sting of new love shouldn’t send you running. Exploring the depths of love is a worthwhile journey, and the rewards are immeasurable.”

Richard’s words hit Darcy like a punch to his solar plexus, taking the air out of his lungs. The image of Miss Elizabeth, her enchanting eyes dancing with humor as she smiled at him over a cup of tea, struck him with surprising intensity. He imagined a future where, if only he could conquer his hesitation and win Miss Elizabeth’s heart, her smiling eyes would grace his every day, a remarkable reward indeed. He just had to gather the strength to act and court the lady he had come to love. There was every chance that the rewards would be glorious.

Darcy stood, a slight smile playing on his lips as he stretched, then nodded to his cousin. “I will say this,” he began, the words tinged with amusement, “if this is how Bingley feels every time he talks of being in love, it is no wonder I fear for his sanity at times.”

“At least he seems to have finally settled onto the real thing with Jane and has calmed down a bit,” chuckled Richard. Then, looking Darcy over, he added, “How about you go get cleaned up and we can discuss how we are going to protect Lizzie from the Gorgon over breakfast?”

Ruefully rubbing the scruff on his face, Darcy nodded and made for the door. As he reached the foot of the stairs, he called back to Richard, “Do not eat all my bacon before I come back down!”

### Chapter Fifteen

The calming scent of rosemary and mint filled Elizabeth's lungs as she stood, hands planted firmly on her hips, feeling the tension slowly leave her body. The heavy, coal-tinged air of London was worlds away from the delicate fragrance of the country. But in the tiny kitchen garden of de Bourgh House, the soothing scent of rosemary and other herbs provided a moment of pastoral peace. Elizabeth needed some fresh air but didn't want to leave Anne alone for the extended time a trip to one of London's parks would require.

Her conversation with Mrs. Jessop, the day before, had been both helpful and bittersweet. Recalling Lady Catherine's increasingly erratic behavior—the wild accusations from the day before and the frantic pacing that the staff had reported hearing from her room throughout the night—Elizabeth admitted the woman was unraveling. It was an uneasy feeling to know that she was no longer physically safe in the place she called home.

Pacing about the small garden, Elizabeth tried to work out some of her anxiety. Her childhood, marred by her mother's abandonment, had taught her to rely on herself, but the love and support of Anne and Uncle Reggie had melted away some of the resulting uncertainty and left her with a softer sense of the world. It was not as if she had forgotten the harsh realities of the world, only felt somewhat protected from them, but that protection had been stripped away, and everything was crashing back in on her.

If that had been the only issue, she might have been able to better manage her emotions. Elizabeth also worried about her developing feelings for Mr. Darcy. Mrs.

Jessop's pointed suggestion about her and Mr. Darcy being a good match left a bittersweet taste in her mouth, a subtle yet persistent pain.

Mr. Darcy's proud exterior hid a warm heart, and Elizabeth gradually learned to appreciate his true self. After a time, it made sense to her that a young man might hide who he was to protect himself from the grasping ways of those who would use him for their own gain. A deep affection blossomed in her heart for him, yet despite her burgeoning feelings, she wasn't convinced that she could provide him with what he deserved.

While on some level they were equals, she was a gentleman's daughter, just as Mr. Darcy was a gentleman. Elizabeth did not feel that she could be the type of woman he needed at his side. She knew he spent part of every year in London attending social function, while Elizabeth had never had a season or been presented to the queen. Surely his wife would be expected to host elegant dinner parties and engage in witty repartee with high society. Such skills seemed beyond Elizabeth's reach. Not only had she never hosted so much as a tea party, but she was also more likely to insult someone than needlessly flatter them.

Still, the warmth of Mr. Darcy's protection lingered, a stark contrast to the painful reality of a future that would never exist. Sighing, Elizabeth leaned over to pinch off a sprig of rosemary. She had grown accustomed to shielding her heart from Lady Catherine's insults and cruelties, surly she would be able to adjust to her unrequited feelings for Mr. Darcy. Closing her eyes, Elizabeth brought the rosemary to her nose and took a deep breath, loving the woodsy sent.

Her peaceful moment ended abruptly as a hand clamped down on her arm, spinning her around with surprising force, the sudden movement jarring her. The rosemary, its scent heavy and sweet, tumbled from her fingers, which had gone completely numb. Elizabeth glanced over to see Mrs. Cuthburt's knuckles whiten, her grip on Elizabeth's arm a vise. The sharp pressure was a clear indication of her fierce loyalty

to Lady Catherine and her eagerness to please her imperious mistress. Before her stood Lady Catherine, her expression triumphant, and Elizabeth knew that Mrs. Jessop had been so very correct.

Lady Catherine's face twisted with malice, her voice dangerously low, as she prepared to unleash her wrath with more than just words. "Your delusions of grandeur are at an end!" Stepping forward, Lady Catherine glowered, adding, "While my brother might be oblivious to reality, I am not, I have seen all that you have done and what you intend to do, and I will not let you win."

Tilting her head, Elizabeth gazed at Lady Catherine and even knowing it would not help matters, found herself saying, "What is it that you think I am trying to win, Lady Catherine?"

"Win? Win!" shouted Lady Catherine, spittle flying into Elizabeth's face as she drew ever closer. "Why the game of life, you conniving strumpet! I have not plotted and planned my whole life, even going so far as to marry that fool Lewis and birthing that weakling, all for nothing. The reward for my suffering, for the indignities I have endured, is victory. I will not be usurped by you now that I am able to reap the benefits and do as I wish."

Gasping for breath, Lady Catherine glared at Elizabeth, her chest heaving, the air thick with malice. Meanwhile, Elizabeth was focused instead on her options. As tight as the grip on her arm was, Elizabeth knew that Mrs. Cuthburt was not a fit woman, and it was possible that Elizabeth would be able to jerk free. If she could just make her way back into the house, Elizabeth was confident that the rest of the staff would stand firm against Lady Catherine and protect her.

"The carriage has arrived, my lady." Mrs. Cuthburt's announcement interrupted Elizabeth's planning and with a sinking feeling she saw two men jump down from a hackney cab and let themselves in through the side gate.

Stepping back from Elizabeth with a smile, Lady Catherine said, “Wonderful. We can proceed as planned.” With a careful step, she walked toward the two laborers, their faces etched with the hard work of their lives, and handed each a small, weighty object that Elizabeth assumed was payment for their services. Continuing toward the carriage, Lady Catherine called back to Elizabeth. “It is time to go for a ride.”

“It is humorous that you called Aunt Catherine a Gorgon, when just yesterday Miss Elizabeth called her a dragon. I do not know which label is more apropos.” Slicing a thick piece of smoky ham, Darcy popped a piece into his mouth, the salty flavor dancing on his tongue as he chewed it thoughtfully. Richard had eaten all but one piece of bacon by the time he came back down, but Darcy liked ham almost as much, so he was not too disgruntled.

A low chuckle rumbled in Richard’s chest as he declared, “Either way, Aunt Catherine is a monster, and she must be slain.” The words were sharp, edged with a grim determination. He punctuated his comment with rather inelegant stabs of his fork at his eggs.

“Is your father still convinced that she is contained?” asked Darcy.

With a scoff, Richard shook his head, but waited to finish chewing and swallowing before saying, “My father believes yesterday’s threats will control his sister, or at least keep her cowed until Anne has passed, and I can take control of everything.”

Realizing that he was grinding his teeth, Darcy consciously unclenched his jaw and, after taking a breath and said, “If he believes that, he is fooling himself.”

Years of friendship with his cousin helped Darcy to recognize the anger and frustration on Richard’s face when he put down his utensils and pushed his plate away. Throwing down his serviette, he said, “You and I both know that, but he is too used to the way he interacts with the lords in parliament. He forgets that some people,

when pushed too far, will unleash a furious, uncontrolled rage, disregarding any potential repercussions and Aunt Catherine is that sort of person.”

“That is exactly why I worry for Elizabeth.” Leaning back in his chair, Darcy rubbed at his furrowed brow. “I am afraid that Aunt Catherine will do something drastic before we can do anything to stop her.”

Getting up, Richard went to the side table and poured himself another cup of coffee. Adding a splash of cream, he stirred the coffee, the clinking spoon echoing in the quiet room as he leaned against the sideboard. He said, “You are not alone in that fear, which is why I have sent one of our footmen over to de Bourgh House. He has received strict orders to prevent our aunt from harming Lizzie or any of the staff. Thankfully, he is the sort of man who can think for himself and will not be cowed by our aunt or her antics.”

A deep sigh escaped Darcy’s lips as he nodded, his voice a low rumble, a hint of regret in his tone, and said, “That is something...more than I did, to be sure.”

Walking over, Richard clasped Darcy on the shoulder, saying, “Do not fret. The weight of your newfound love was so profound that it paralyzed you, leaving you unable to do much more than try to analyze it to death and run from the feeling like a frightened rabbit. You can plan to protect her the next time she needs help.”

Shoving Richard’s hand away with a laugh, Darcy rolled his eyes at his jovial cousin. He could tell, despite the odd way he was going about it, that Richard was trying to cheer him up. It was a clumsy but kind gesture. Standing up, Darcy left the room, knowing that Richard would follow him as he walked back to his study.

The fire in his study was nearly out, so Darcy entered and used the poker to nudge the reluctant logs, hearing them shift with a dull thud. Soon enough, the fire crackled and popped, growing into a comforting blaze that cast dancing shadows on the walls.

Holding his hands out to the warmth, Darcy said, “As grateful as I am that you put your plan in motion, I wish we could do more, that I could do more.”

Richard dropped into one of the overstuffed chairs near the fire, saying, “What you want to do is rush over there and scoop up Lizzy and bring her back here or better yet Pemberley so you can keep her safe from Aunt Catherine and everything in the world that could harm her. I will tell you now that taking away her choice to do as she pleases will get you nowhere with her. That kind of behavior won’t get you anywhere with most women; it’s off-putting and disrespectful.”

Darcy, completely taken aback by Richard’s pointed remark, sat down in the chair across from him and asked, “And how is that something you know?”

“I am not as reticent as you are, Darcy. When I dance at balls, I actually talk with the ladies and from that I have learned an all-important fact.” Leaning slightly forward in his chair, Richard continued, “Women are people just like you and me.”

A moment passed in silence before Darcy managed to respond. His voice full of incredulity, Darcy said, “I think Bingley’s insanity must be infecting you, Richard. You are no longer making any sense.”

Face serious, Richard asked, “Suppose someone comes in, declaring your current location unsafe despite the many important tasks that you have to do, and then forcibly removes you to an undisclosed location without offering you any say in the matter. How would you feel?”

Darcy wanted to respond flippantly, but he knew Richard wanted a serious answer, so he thought a moment before saying, “I would be angry. I am an adult and perfectly capable of making my own decisions about where I go and what I do. It would be disrespectful of someone to step in and take my choice away when I am intelligent enough to evaluate my situation and take steps to protect myself on my own.”



“What makes a woman, Lizzie, for example, any different? Why would she not be just as angry to have someone to swoop in and take charge?”

“But...” Darcy began but stopped when he began to question the validity of his argument. He wanted to say that a woman would be grateful for his help when, really, he had no evidence to prove such an idea was so. Was it simply an arrogant assumption that his help would be welcomed by a woman?

Richard saw Darcy’s pause and said, a hint of challenge in his tone, “Darcy, you are capable of deciding how to act, and so is any lady.” When Darcy did not interrupt or bluster, Richard continued, “A woman is perfectly capable of making her own decisions, and her anger is a force to be reckoned with if those decisions are disregarded. Frankly, I find it appalling that our society often views women as children, reducing them to beings incapable of independent thought and decision-making. Granted, there are many women who are not able to direct their destinies as they should, but I blame that on never being taught to think as they should, not some inherent trait. How do you think Lizzy would react if you took away her choice to act as she wished?”

Darcy contemplated Richard’s statement. He could see the logic in what he said. More than that, he saw that one of the things that made Miss Elizabeth different from all the debutantes he had met over the years was that she spoke her mind, whereas most women simply parroted what seemed to be publicly accepted drivel. He had long lauded the influence she had over Georgianna, bringing her out of her shell and giving her the courage to take on various responsibilities about Pemberley.

Then, his fear getting the best of him, shaking his head, Darcy blurted, “But Elizabeth is vulnerable to Aunt Catherine’s machinations, and she could be seriously harmed. Not only is her reputation in danger, if Aunt Catherine does something rash, her very life could be at stake.”

“True, but that will not make her any happier if you take away her right to proceed as she wishes.” Richard looked at Darcy, his eyebrows raised, his expression almost smug.

Put off by Richard’s attitude despite how useful his advice was, Darcy ground out through clenched teeth, “What do you suggest I do, oh wise one?”

Stretching his feet out, a smug expression still on his face, Richard drawled, “Talk to her; tell her your worries and work together to create a plan to keep her safe.”

There were several habits that Elizabeth developed as a result of being abandoned in a strange town by her mother as a child. She knew what it was to be completely at the mercy of strangers and did all she could to be prepared should something similar ever happen. Having found safety and comfort in the elegant home of Lewis de Bourgh, Elizabeth eventually ceased her former habits. The quiet compassion and care exhibited by Uncle Lewis and Anne did much to soothe her anxieties. Even after he had died, Elizabeth had not felt the need to protect herself from the world. After all, she was a grown woman and even with Lady Catherine as her adversary, secure in her home and status, she knew that level of vulnerability was unlikely to return.

That was, however, until the plain speaking she received from Mrs. Jessop. Having her eyes opened to the extent at which Lady Catherine was liable to lash out at her had Elizabeth return to her old habits, and it was those habits that Elizabeth suspected would help her escape Lady Catherine’s wrath, hopefully unharmed. The last thing she had done before going to bed the night before was to sew coins into the hem of her winter cape and the dress that she would wear the next day. She had also been sure to place the small but very sharp knife, a gift from Richard, in her boot. So even as she looked out the window of the strange carriage, Elizabeth did not entirely panic. She knew she had the means to protect herself and pay for transport somewhere safe. She just had to be alert to the opportunities that would present themselves to escape Lady Catherine’s clutches.

Attempting to appear nonchalant, Elizabeth searched her view of the street, hoping to catch a glance of something she recognized. Nothing looked familiar; crumbling buildings littered with trash screamed of a place far removed from the London she knew. The air itself felt heavy with the unfamiliar scent of decay and despair. Returning her gaze back to the two women seated across from her, Elizabeth forced herself not to finger the coins sewn into the hem of her cape and alert them to their existence.

Mrs. Cuthburt sat next to Lady Catherine, ever the silent shadow. Despite her involvement in the scheme, the woman wouldn't meet Elizabeth's gaze, her guilt palpable in the heavy silence. Elizabeth wanted to feel sorry for such a beaten creature but could not muster it. Instead, she decided to think about what might be coming and what she could do to counter it; she was determined to not be the victim that Lady Catherine wanted her to be.

Elizabeth was abruptly pulled out of the contingency plans that she was forming when Lady Catherine's sharp voice cut through the air, demanding, "Do you have nothing to say for yourself? No apology for your abominable behavior? No plea for mercy and promise to better know your place?"

Pausing to choose her words, Elizabeth defiantly locked eyes with the woman she had treated with deference up until that point. "What is there to say? I know you well enough to know that your fit of anger will not be satisfied by anything I might say, no matter how true." Tilting her head, Elizabeth studied the woman who had welcomed her into her home all those years ago, albeit rather grudgingly and under her husband's direction. While some women aged like fine wine, becoming more statuesque and beautiful, Lady Catherine had not. No, she had aged more like sour grapes turning into vinegar. The countless years spent indoors and evading physical activity had caused her complexion to become pallid and her body to become flabby, neither of which her outdated clothing could effectively conceal.

“This is not to be born!” Lady Catherine spat, leaning forward. “You had nothing but the clothes on your back when my family found you. Year after year, I have ensured your well-being. You were provided with clothing, food, and education, and this is how you repay me? How can you not be sorry for attempting to usurp me?”

Elizabeth had developed a practiced air of quiet deference around Lady Catherine, stifling her natural inclination for truth and clever banter to avoid conflict with the cruel woman. But now, with no goodwill left to preserve, she confidently stated, “Your husband was the one who decided to take me in, though I will grant that you did not see me removed when he died. I was cared for by the staff at Rosings and even your family, the earl and countess. From you, I have received nothing except icy disdain.” Sitting up straighter, Elizabeth wrapped herself in dignity as she declared, “I am sorry that someone as wonderful as Anne has had the misfortune of having you as a mother—almost anyone else could have done better, except perhaps my own mother. If things continue as they seem, I will regret losing the opportunity to assist the residents of Rosings.”

Taking a breath, Elizabeth looked Lady Catherine dead in the eye and added, “Many regrets may fill my life—past choices, chances missed, and maybe even my relationship with my mother—but I regret nothing about how I interacted with you. You asked me if I regretted my actions, but it could not be farther than the truth. I am proud that I have been able to subvert your wishes and protect the people I have come to care for. You proclaim how things should be done without the first hint of understanding. If you had been left to run rampant after Uncle Lewis died, Rosings would have been bankrupt within a year and Anne would have died of neglect. You are a supercilious fool, and I am confident you will be your own ruination.” Somehow, Elizabeth was not surprised by the sting of the slap across her face.

The older woman’s hostile hauteur gave way to a fierce outburst. Thumping on the roof with her cane, Lady Catherine shouted, “Stop the carriage immediately! I will not be in this slattern’s presence one minute more.” Gripping at Elizabeth’s arm with

a weakened hand strengthened by fury, she ground out, "Listen to me. I am the daughter of an earl and the wife of a baronet. You are nothing! Born of a lowly gentleman with nothing but a small estate to his name and a mother not worthy of mention. With this background, you think to be insolent to me? Should I ever see you again, I will know how to act."

They were still staring at each other, neither backing down, when the footman cleared his throat by the open carriage door. Turning to look at the man, Lady Catherine shoved Elizabeth at him and proclaimed, "Leave her in the gutter where she belongs. I wish to return to de Bourgh House with all haste. There is much for me to do."

Elizabeth was grateful the man who stood at the door was kind enough to catch her before she tumbled onto the broken cobblestones. Smiling up at him in thanks, Elizabeth saw the worry in his eyes but shook her head. Surely, he had a family to support and could not know the depth of Lady Catherine's growing insanity. Briefly glancing into the darkness of the carriage where Lady Catherine stewed, he clasped her hand and whispered urgently, "This is not a safe place for the likes of you, but there will be an alehouse near where you can get another carriage. May God guide your path."

Tears filled Elizabeth's eyes as she recognized the cold heaviness of the coins in her hand. Swallowing hard, she murmured, "Thank you." With a quick nod, the man climbed back onto the carriage, the sound of hooves echoing hollowly as it pulled further down the street, leaving her alone in the heart of a London slum.

### Chapter Sixteen

“With Anne so near death, surely Aunt Catherine cannot prevent us from visiting her and offering comfort,” commented Darcy, his brow furrowed.

“I agree. In fact, we may just have to visit often, even every day, to monitor her situation.” Richard stood, a thoughtful expression on his face, and said, “Do not get me wrong, I want to be there for Anne, but it will also give us a chance to keep an eye on Aunt Catherine and make sure she doesn’t do anything foolish.”

“I will tell the staff to prepare our horses.” Moving over to the bell-pull, Darcy was about to pull it to summon someone when a maid came rushing in. Out of breath, she cried, “Sir, the cook says that you must come down to the kitchen. Someone from de Bourgh House has shown up and they are in quite a state.”

Darcy knew that he and Richard had been discussing how to protect Elizabeth all morning. Still, he had been completely oblivious to the possibility that something terrible might have already befallen her. His heart stuttered painfully in his chest and Darcy knew without a doubt that he was deeply in love with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

It was not mere affection or infatuation or any of the other words that he had tried to use to explain his emotions away; it was a bone deep, heart searing love. How else could the mere thought that she was in danger make him feel like he was dying? Was Elizabeth hurt? Was she scared, in desperate need of immediate aid? A searing agony twisted through him, worry escalating into a furious rage that propelled him down the hall, his footsteps echoing as he ran.

If he had taken a moment to think of anything but learning as he could about what Elizabeth needed, he would have realized that his were not the only steps that thudded as he rushed to the kitchen. Richard was right behind him as he slid through the door into the kitchen, his eyes scouring the area for any clues that could aid him in his quest to be of aid to Elizabeth. Darcy's attention was immediately drawn to his cook, kneeling before a crying boy seated in a chair. The cook's worried face was inches from the boy's, holding a mug to his lips, the scene thick with tension and unspoken worry.

Seeing Darcy's hurried entrance, Mrs. Patrick, the cook, said, "This is Zachary. He works with the horses at de Bourgh House, and he has come with a message for you."

Darcy wanted to rush over to the pair and demand to be told what had gone wrong at de Bourgh House, but he knew instinctively that would not be productive. So he took a deep breath and forced himself to act calm, even if he did not feel it. Then, walking slowly over, he calmly said, "Hello, Zachary. I hear you have a message for me."

Rubbing at his face, Zachary took a shuddering breath and, looking up at Darcy, said, "Theys gone. Miss Elizabeth and Lady Catherine are both gone."

It made no sense to Darcy. The staff at de Bourgh House knew that Lady Catherine was not to be trusted. None of the stable hands would have prepared the carriage for her or taken her anywhere. So how did she and Elizabeth vanish? Shaking his head in confusion, Darcy asked, "Where did they go?"

Seeming to have himself under better control, Zachary sat up straighter before responding, "We don't know, nor can we tell when they left exactly. The Footman that came from the earl's said he was going to see about a hackney and told me I should come tell you that they are both gone."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Darcy attempted to contain his fury. He was not

angry at the boy and did not want to frighten him or his staff. He was, in fact, angry at himself for underestimating his aunt, and her ability to seek outside assistance in the form of alternative transportation. Darcy had presumed that she was at least contained to de Bourgh House. It was an error in judgment that could prove disastrous. It seemed he would not be discussing plans with Elizabeth for her protection. He would be searching her out in an effort to save her.

The weight of Richard's hand on Darcy's shoulder felt heavy as he spoke. "We need to go to de Bourgh House and discover what we can learn there."

Darcy nodded. "Mrs. Patrick, please make sure that Zachary is well taken care of. Richard and I will be going to de Bourgh House. Should any messages be sent here, please see to it that they are forwarded to me there." He then moved through the kitchen to the mews where his horse was kept. It was not the time to wait while his horse was saddled. He would do it himself and hopefully work off some of his anxiety.

Richard was right with him as he emerged from the mews and on to the street, his horse's hooves clapping loudly on the cobblestones. Neither of them spoke as they traveled, pushing their horses as fast as they dared in the crowded streets. Sadly, it gave Darcy too much time to envision too many ways in which Elizabeth could have been harmed by that point. The worst thing was the way his visions always included how Elizabeth would look at him, tears in her eyes and ask him why he had not been there to come to her aid when she needed it.

It was a good thing that his horse knew enough to follow Richard's, as he was incapable of giving him much direction. Soon enough, they arrived at de Bourgh House, and they were dismounting and rushing up the front steps. Thankfully, Mrs. Jessop, the cook cum housekeeper, met them at the front door and said, "Young Zachary reached you then."



Richard, quick to assert himself, said, “Yes, Zachary made it to Darcy House, though he was in quite the state by the time he got there.”

Hand on her chest, Mrs. Jessop smiled tearfully and said, “That boy sets great store by Miss Elizabeth. We all do.”

Clenching his fists at his sides, Darcy asked, “All Richard and I know at this point is that Elizabeth is missing, along with my aunt. Have you learned anything new?”

Patting his arm in sympathy, Mrs. Jessop shook her head. “Nothing new as of yet. Though that footman went off in search of someone he knew at one of the hackney companies.” Pausing, she added, “Oh, and Mrs. Cuthburt is gone too. Though that is not a surprise, as that woman is never far from Lady Catherine’s side. Believes the sun won’t rise or set without Lady Catherine’s approval, that one.”

Smoothing her skirts, Elizabeth set her shoulders and raised her chin. The intense gazes from the people on the street were hard to disregard, yet she remained mostly unaffected by them. Walking a few feet, Elizabeth chose a person to approach with care and, smiling, said, “Hello, my name is Lizzie. What is yours?”

Life had been as cruel to the girl before her as it had to her tattered and faded dress. Elizabeth estimated her to be around twelve or thirteen despite the expression that spoke of having seen too much. Eyes wide, she licked cracked lips before she answered, “Molly, miss.”

“Molly, it seems that I am in need of some directions. Would you be able to tell me where I should go to find some transportation to the home of a friend of mine?”

“You can catch a cab ‘bout ten blocks that way, miss.” A slim hand pointed down the street. Looking back-and-forth, Molly frowned, adding, “But it is not safe, miss, not by yourself.”

Her smile slipping into a frown, Elizabeth nodded, murmuring, “I suspected as much.”

Eyes narrowing, Molly glanced in the direction the carriage had left in. With a tsk she said, “That toff left you here on purpose, didn’t they?”

“Yes, she did,” commented Elizabeth with a sigh.

“You do somthin’ to make her angry?”

Chuckling in an odd, humorless sort of way, Elizabeth answered, “I stopped her from hurting someone that didn’t deserve it.”

“Sounds about right.” Molly put two fingers in her mouth and whistled sharply. The sound barely registered with Elizabeth as her thoughts focused on just how dirty the girl’s hands were and the fact that she had put all that grime into her mouth. Elizabeth knew it was not the girl’s fault that she had no means to wash up, but she still fought a shudder.

Promptly as if summoned, a boy maybe a year or two older than the girl showed up and asked, “Ya need somthin’, Molls?”

“We need to get Miss Lizzie here to the Drunken Mule. She needs a ride.”

Elizabeth hesitated at the thought of seeking transportation at a place called the Drunken Mule, wondering if it was the wisest choice, but she had no other alternatives.

Looking her up and down, the boy shook his head, complaining, “What she doin’ here in the first place? Ain’t no place for a lady like her.”

“She ain’t had no choice in the matter, Matthew, and we’re gonna help her,” Molly asserted. Elizabeth watched the interaction, wondering at the relationship between the two. She suspected that they might be siblings. Their dark brown hair and eyes mirrored each other, and even though their faces were smudged with dirt and slightly gaunt, their similar features were unmistakable.

Kicking at the ground with a bare foot, Matthew grumbled, “Why we got to help her?”

Fists on her hips, Molly confronted the taller boy. “Cause it’s the right thing to do, Matthew Bailey, an’ you know it is what Momma woulda done!” It was a struggle not to smile at the antics of the two. It seemed siblings acted similarly wherever they were, whether it be the slums of London or the ballrooms of Mayfair.

With a roll of his eyes and a huff, Matthew turned to Elizabeth and said, “Let’s be about it, then.” Turning, he shuffled off in the direction Molly had said she would need to go.

Shaking her head, Molly said, “I am sorry about my brother, Miss Lizzie. Matt seems to have lost all the manners Momma taught him.”

As she trailed behind Matthew, she remarked, “I do not have a brother, but I have heard that they tend to be quite contrary.” Turning to look at Molly, she added, “I hope I am not keeping you from anything. Meeting an abandoned woman today was surely not part of your plans.”

Shrugging, Molly said, “Just lookin’ for rags to turn over to the ragman. We can find ‘im as we go.”

Elizabeth watched as Molly’s eyes scanned the street and the piles of refuse that lined the way. She knew people collected rags to be turned into paper and the like, but had

not thought of meeting someone of the sort. “Do not let me keep you from your work. If we need to stop, I do not mind.”

Hearing her comment, Matthew turned to look at Elizabeth. “You are not like any toff I’ve seen before.”

Chuckling, Elizabeth responded, “Indeed, it helps that I am not a toff, at least not in any true sense.”

“Who are you then?” he asked.

“You know I cannot quite tell anymore,” Elizabeth murmured. “My father was a member of the lower gentry, but when he died, our estate went to one of his far-removed cousins. Before long, I was left to fend for myself, with only my older sister by my side. A well-to-do family took me in when I was too small to look after myself. However, it seems that I have become dispensable to them.”

“What about your momma? She die too?” asked Molly, her voice soft.

Feeling it was only fair to tell the painful truth, Elizabeth said, “No, she thought she would be able to do better for herself without two children about.”

“You are like us, then. When Momma died, Papa up and left Molly and I on our own.” Kicking at a stone, Matthew added, “We’re better off without him.”

Elizabeth could appreciate the sentiment. Occasionally, parents fell short of being the haven they were meant to provide. “I have long felt that way about my mother.”

There was only so much pacing a man could do, but Darcy had no clue what else he should do in his situation. It was not as if there was something at hand he could punch, no wood to chop or mountain to climb. So he paced.

“You really must stop that, Darcy. You will wear a hole in the carpet,” commented Richard from where he sat.

Glaring back at his cousin, Darcy snapped, “As it is a gaudy carpet selected by our aunt with horrible taste, I really do not care if I ruin it.”

Looking down at the garish carpet, Richard shrugged as if in agreement and said, “At least try not to harm the hardwood floor underneath the carpet. I will have to live here at some point, and I would like to be able to enjoy my parlor without having to hide the evidence of your tendency to pace.”

The footman that Richard had borrowed from Matlock had returned not long after they had arrived and had not brought good news with him. There had been no way for him to track down what carriage had been the one to leave with Elizabeth and Aunt Catherine. He had, however, been able to learn from the staff of the neighboring estate that a hackney had been seen pulling up next to the small kitchen garden sometime mid-morning. This confirmed Darcy’s theory that Aunt Catherine had secretly relied on outside help, beyond the de Bourgh household staff. At least he did not need to ferret out a traitor. Though that would have meant that Darcy would have something to do besides pace.

He halted beside the fireplace and grabbed the mantle, the cold stone a stark contrast to the warmth of his hands as he gripped it tightly, his head bowed low in defeat. Darcy was the master of one of the largest estates in England, nobility excluded. He even owned several smaller satellite estates that, though smaller, were all profitable and well run. He ensured his people were well-fed, clothed, and sheltered; despite his tireless efforts and years of success, a deep sense of futility washed over him. Who was he if he could not protect the people he cared for? How could a man fail to assist his beloved when she required his help?

Knuckles going white, Darcy fought a battle within himself. He wanted to go and tear

London apart looking for Elizabeth, but the logical part of him knew that London was too large to search aimlessly through it. Regardless, he was still fighting the urge to run out the door. Conversely, he was terrified of leaving and missing the possibility that his aunt would return. Should he be gone when she came back, he would lose his chance to intimidate her into revealing what he wanted to know, what he needed to know. He was torn asunder, and he did not know how much longer he could take the strain.

It was a good thing then that he heard the door opening and a commotion coming from the entryway. “I demand you move out of my way, you hulking buffoon! In fact, you are dismissed from your position. Leave the premises at once.”

The commotion had Richard and Darcy racing out of the parlor in time for them to catch sight of their aunt wielding her umbrella in an attempt to strike the footman. Only the footman had no respect for the woman and was not actually an employee of the house, so he caught the umbrella in midair and jerked it out of her grasp. “I am not under your employment, Lady Catherine, and I want to make it clear that I will not stand for mistreatment, period, let alone from those who are unworthy of being addressed as Lady .” Darcy watched as his Aunt Catherine huffed and puffed, her face reddening with indignation, a comical sight that was utterly lost on the impassive footman.

“Thank you for preventing my aunt’s retreat, James,” drawled Richard as he and Darcy came to stand on either side of their aunt. Taking her elbow, he added, “We are in need to have a conversation with her. Could you see to it that my aunt’s companion, Mrs. Cuthburt, is seen to her room and stays there?” Mrs. Cuthburt gaped, mouth wide for a moment, but shoulders drooping, she went willingly enough. James, with a nod and a brief bow, guided Mrs. Cuthburt out of the hall and away from her mistress.

Turning to glare at Richard, Lady Catherine attempted to jerk her arm out of his grip,

hissing, “Unhand me, nephew! I have been shopping and now find that I must rest.”

Moving to take her other elbow, Darcy forced himself not to clutch it so hard as to harm her, saying, “Oh but aunt, as Richard said, we absolutely must have a speak with you about a matter of vital importance.” Between Darcy and Richard, they managed to drag their aunt to the parlor and plop her down in the most uncomfortable straight-back chair in the room.

With a glare, Darcy crossed his arms stubbornly across his chest. He refused to engage in whatever game his aunt was playing. As Darcy stepped closer to her, his imposing size loomed over her, creating a sense of intimidation that he was happy to engender as he questioned her. “What have you done with Elizabeth?”

Lady Catherine crossed her arms and looked away from his glare, unwilling to respond. Darcy waited, the silence growing, punctuated only by the ticking of a distant clock, as the unspoken tension between him and his aunt crackled in the air. Eventually she glanced back at him, her countenance flippant as she said, “It is not my business to keep track of the staff. Something like that is beneath me.”

Darcy could hear Richard shift behind him, but he refused to take his eyes off his adversary. His jaw was set, his eyes unwavering; Elizabeth’s very life could depend on his ability to force his aunt to understand just how much Elizabeth meant to him. Richard spoke from behind Darcy. “Do not lie to us aunt, you do not know what I will do to protect the young lady I view as a sister. I suspect Darcy will be just as vicious in defense of a person that he loves.”

Attempting to stand, Lady Catherine shrieked when she was prevented from doing so by Darcy, shouting, “How is it that both of you can be so deceived by that little strumpet? She is nothing. She was nothing when my husband found her, and she is less than nothing now.”

Darcy leaned forward, boxing Lady Catherine in her chair, and growled, “You are not in a position to disparage Elizabeth, Aunt. She is a better person than you in every way, and I demand to know what you did to her. Keep in mind that your refusal to comply will bring terrible repercussions.”



### Chapter Seventeen

Elizabeth looked about the street they traveled with discrete glances. There were people watching their small group, but thus far, no one had tried to interfere with them. It seemed that the two children were accepted by the community at large, even if she was not. She hoped that, as the darkness deepened with the approaching night, they would continue to be unmolested. She found herself hoping they reached the Drunken Mule sooner rather than later.

Used to walking long distances through the country, ten city blocks were not such a distance, though it still took longer than she liked. By the time they arrived at the Drunken Mule, the hair on the back of Elizabeth's neck felt like it would never lay flat again. Elizabeth's heart raced, her instincts kicking in when she sensed the leering stares. She deftly retrieved the knife hidden in her boot and slipped it into her sleeve, all the while appearing to casually correct a loose knot.

Feeling more secure, she forced her face into a demure smile, neither inviting anything nor backing down in fear. Noticing one glance aimed towards Molly, Elizabeth wrapped an arm around the girl, pulling her closer to her side. "Where should I go in order to ask about a transportation?"

Molly glanced around nervously, her eyes darting to the derelict building. It was filled with men and hard-looking women who turned to stare. "In there," she said, pointing, "they should be able to help you."

Nodding, Elizabeth glanced around and spotted Matthew not far off, looking uneasy. "I am going to go inside and talk with someone."

Elizabeth had only taken a few additional steps before she sensed the children's presence behind her, their footsteps echoing in the eerie silence as they followed her into what she realized was a pub of some kind. It was without a doubt not like anything she had ever frequented. Elizabeth managed a smile when she noticed that Molly and Matthew were determined to keep her safe, even within the confines of the building. The sound of boisterous chatter gradually faded to a murmur as people's eyes fell upon her, intensifying Elizabeth's awareness of her lack of belonging.

Shoulders back and head held high, Elizabeth made her way to the bar, where a woman with hard eyes stood with a tray of ale and stale bread. Speaking up, she said, "I was told that I would be able to find transportation here."

"There's cabs that come through regular like," the woman muttered as she came around the bar and begun to hand out drinks and collect payment. Once her tray was cleared, she shifted her focus to Elizabeth, her eyes briefly darting across the children before locking onto her. Tsking, she said, "This is not a place for you, Missy. An' while I might be curious bout why you are here, what I want more is to have you gone."

"I can appreciate the sentiment. Frankly, the story of how I came to be here is far too long for a casual conversation and I likewise want to be on my way. Where should I wait for the next cab to arrive?" asked Elizabeth.

Grabbing at a rag hanging from her soiled apron, the woman wiped at a table halfheartedly before responding, "Although there is a bench out front, it is full of the regular rabble this time of day."

With a nod, Elizabeth took her leave to wait in the yard, allowing the woman to continue her work. She only hoped that a cab would come along before it got full dark. Avoiding the bench where there were several half-drunk men involved in a heated discussion, Elizabeth stood out of the way with the children. Facing them

both, she said, “I would like to get the cabbie to take you home for your kindness, but I do not want to overstep.”

“That’s all right, Miss.” Matthew shifted his weight back and forth before taking his sister’s arm and adding, “We will be fine.”

Pressing her lips together for a moment, Elizabeth fought the urge to insist they come with her, but it was not as if they were stray kittens. She hardly knew how things would turn out for herself. She had no business stealing them from the life they knew. Offering a weak smile, she said, “I won’t keep you from making your way home. Thank you for seeing me here.” Wishing she could do more, Elizabeth reached under her cape and removed her shawl and draped it around Molly’s shoulders, adding, “I want you to take this. It will keep you warm or if you are in need of funds, it is worth enough that it might bring you a good sum.”

Mouth dropping open, Molly ran her hand along the fringe, saying, “It is far too lovely for the likes of me, Miss Lizzie.”

“You have helped me in my hour of need. You do not know how grateful I am to have had you here with me. Please allow me to show you the weight of my gratitude in the best way that I can in my current situation.” Then, turning to Matthew, she handed him half of the money that the cabbie had given her. “Take care of yourselves, and if you are ever in need or interested in a different type of work, please do not hesitate to go to the big church on the corner of Elm. I am friends with the vicar’s wife—we work on the same charity—and she will know how to get in touch with me. I am sure that we would be able to work something out to help you both. For example, if you are thinking about leaving London, we can recommend some Estates that are looking for dependable individuals like yourselves. Alternatively, I may know a few farm families in the countryside who would gladly welcome two more children, and not just for the work that you could provide.”

For a brief moment, Matthew and Molly exchanged bright glances before their faces became carefully impassive. After murmuring a quick thank you and giving a gentle tug on his sister's arm, the two children scurried away into the deepening shadows, leaving Elizabeth to navigate what was left of her time in the London slum by herself.

Darcy watched as his aunt's face pinched up in fury as she glared at him, and he idly wondered how his mother could have had such a woman as her sister. Even years after her death, the staff at Pemberley remembered Anne Darcy with fondness, recounting tales of her compassionate nature and gentle demeanor, a beloved mistress whose memory lingered in the halls of Pemberley. The woman before him, with her cruel disposition, had few similarities to his mother, even if they were sisters.

Lady Catherine's lips pressed together, turning white before she opened her mouth to say, "Have you no familial feeling?"

This gave Darcy no cause to hesitate, and he easily answered, "For you? No."

Gaping in outrage, Lady Catherine quickly lashed out, growling, "You would choose that girl over propriety, over even what is just? What of the duty, honor, and gratitude you owe to those who paved your path, allowing you this grand life of abundance and opportunity?"

With a sharp intake of breath, Darcy leaned back from his aunt and unleashed a cold, harsh bark of laughter at her admonition; the sound was jarring and free from any sort of joy or his typical humor. Crossing his arms, Darcy watched Lady Catherine stew for a bit before he chided, "Let us take this one at a time, shall we?" Ticking each thing off on his fingers as he went, Darcy said, "Duty. I have a duty to the people of my estates to care for and provide for them and the land. I even have a duty as a human being to strive to be a kind, caring, and compassionate person, especially toward the less fortunate. Those duties may be unfamiliar to you as you have never even attempted to honor them. And that brings us to honor. I honor my mother and

father by trying to live up to the example they set, filled with compassion, resilience, and a strong moral compass. I also aim to honor God and uphold His commandments and principles. And let us not forget gratitude. I am grateful to many people in my life for the joy they have brought to me, and I am grateful to those that have gone before me clearing the way for the life I live today. I do not, however, owe you any duty, honor or gratitude as you have done nothing to deserve them, and I will always choose Elizabeth over you.”

Clutching her chest, Lady Catherine shook her head, lamenting, “This is not to be born! She has poisoned you against me and all that is right. It is a good thing that she is no longer here to usurp my rule.” Sitting up straighter, Lady Catherine attempted to look more imposing when she said, “While my daughter may be the mistress of this house, she is in no position to manage anything, so I am managing it in her stead. I demand that both of you leave this place immediately. I will not be bothered by two so unnatural children in my presence.”

With a curt, sharp tone, Richard retorted, “There is nothing you can do to compel us to leave. The staff is not loyal to you. They are loyal to Anne and Elizabeth and will help us at every turn. You cannot overpower even one of us, let alone both of us, so you will have to abide by our presence. Though you may retire to your room if you let us know what you did with Elizabeth.”

Done with her behavior Darcy snarled, “If you do not tell us where Elizabeth is, I will not only make certain that you are sent to Bedlam, but I will also make sure that you are in the public area where people will be able to pay to watch you suffer for a pittance.”

“You do not have the power to do such a thing. I am the daughter of an earl, and my brother is the current Earl of Matlock,” she countered, though Darcy could see the fear in her eyes.

Coming to stand next to Darcy, their shoulders brushing, Richard hissed, “My father practically views Elizabeth as another daughter. Do not think for a moment that he will hesitate to seek retribution on her behalf. And do not forget that I am the son of the current earl and will do everything in my power to see to it that you land in Bedlam.”

“She is gone! Beyond your reach and back to the gutter where she belongs,” exploded Lady Catherine.

The chilling statement from his aunt sent a wave of icy terror through Darcy, his heart seizing with the sharp sting of horror. Forcing himself to speak, his voice came out low and gravelly. “Are you telling us that you had Elizabeth left somewhere in the slums of London?”

“Where!?” cried Richard.

Throwing her hands in the air, she complained, “How am I to know? I told the man to take us to a bad part of town. All I know of it is that the stench of decay was heavy in the air. When she refused to behave as she should and would not apologize for her presumption, I had her unceremoniously removed from the carriage and deposited in the gutter.”

Spinning around, Darcy strode towards the front door, eager to search for the woman who held his heart captive. Calling over his shoulder, he said, “You better hope I find Elizabeth before anything happens to her, Aunt. Otherwise, you’ll face consequences far worse than you can imagine.” Then, pausing for a moment, he looked at Richard and added, “Do what you want with her. I want nothing to do with that viper; the mere sight of her makes me angry enough to forget myself and my duty to be a gentleman, so it would be best for me to not be in her presence at this time.”

Waiting for a ride away from the yard of the Drunken Mule, Elizabeth attempted to

decide where she would have the carriage take her. She did not really have that many options. Lady Catherine had always been very cruel in her retaliation, but until recently, Elizabeth never would have suspected her to behave so rashly. Biting her lip, Elizabeth wondered if she had been too confident in herself and in the staff's loyalty to her and Anne to think that she would ever find herself in such a bind. She supposed that she should have considered the fact that there were always people desperate enough to do foul deeds for the money she would offer.

A prickling sensation crawled up her neck; the hairs stood on end, a stark reminder that danger still lurked, a feeling that wouldn't leave until she escaped the slums and reached safety. With her exact whereabouts unknown, she had no idea how long getting somewhere safe would take, nor even when a hackney would arrive to take her away. Trying not to appear too eager, Elizabeth looked down the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of a carriage coming her way.

Maintaining a rigid posture, Elizabeth battled the unsettling weight of many eyes upon her, their silent scrutiny a tangible pressure. Her thoughts drifted to Fitzwilliam Darcy and how had he been there with her, he would take the men to task that dared to leer at her. Even without him by her side to offer protection, the mere thought of him seemed to bolster Elizabeth. Knowing he respected her and was gentleman enough to see to her safety was a nice thing to think of when she felt insecure.

Oh, she had a driving instinct to make sure that she could fend for herself should the need arise, but it was wonderful to know that she was not the only person who was concerned for her safety. It made her want to rush to his house and find comfort in his embrace. Not that he had ever embraced her before, but she had a vivid imagination, and she knew instinctively that she would find solace in his arms.

The logical part of her knew that going to Darcy House was out of the question. Elizabeth recognized the impropriety of visiting a single gentleman's residence unaccompanied. Georgianna had told her of his experiences with young ladies and

their family's attempts to trap him into unwanted marriages. She had explained that, though he could maintain the veneer of civility in public, behind closed doors it would turn into brooding resentment. Their relentless pursuit of him and their callous disregard for what he might want stoked the fires of his anger, until Georgianna feared it would consume him. He had lost quite a bit of faith in society going through that, and she was not about to risk having him feel that way about her. She would not risk trapping him into an unwanted marriage.

The earl's residence was the only option she could see that would work, so she would go to Matlock House if a carriage would ever arrive. Though she doubted they'd be home that evening. Jane often wrote to her about the busy schedule they kept while in town. They were constantly out at society gatherings. Though Elizabeth occasionally enjoyed the elegant spectacle of a play or opera, she preferred the quiet company of a good book to the clamor and bright lights of balls and public gatherings. Regardless, she felt certain that the busy but efficient staff would care for her needs, whether the earl and his family were in residence.

After what felt like too much time waiting, Elizabeth was finally able to hear the cllop of hooves approaching, alerting her to the approach of a carriage. She waited with bated breath for it to make its way to her, only to have an arm slung over her shoulder. Silently cursing, Elizabeth knew that she had been spending too much time watching for the carriage and not keeping an eye on the rabble that was behind her. Feeling all kinds of a fool for not hearing the man's approach, Elizabeth gripped at the hilt of the knife that she had stuck up her sleeve earlier.

"Why you wantin' to leave, darlin'?" Elizabeth recoiled at the words whispered in her ear, feeling repulsed by the foul odor of his breath and the meaning behind his presumptuousness. She shrugged off the man's arm around her shoulder and took a cautious step back, but he followed her step for step. Smiling and showing off a maw of rotting teeth, he gestured to another man who was getting up from the bench, cajoling, "We can make it worth your while if you stay for a little while."



Looking over his shoulder she could see that one of the other men had followed him and was standing only a few feet away, a lurid grin on his face. Elizabeth raised her voice and, hoping she sounded firm, said, “Thank you, but no.”

“Don’t be like that,” he sneered, his arm reaching out to encircle her shoulder once more.

Instinctively Elizabeth knew that though she might be able to keep one man at bay, she would be hard pressed to escape from two, even with her knife. It was vital that she impress upon them why trying anything with her was a very bad idea. She began planning her next move when the long-awaited carriage came into view, its horse’s hooves clapping at a lazy pace. It was now or never. Elizabeth’s instincts kicked in, and she sprang into action, determined to protect herself at all costs. Faster than the obviously inebriated man could respond, Elizabeth stepped forward with her unsheathed knife at his groin. Richard had always said it was the best option in that sort of situation. With a clenched jaw and hard eyes, Elizabeth mustered, “I was polite, but that did not seem to work, so now I will be less polite. I am not interested in you or your friend. I will be leaving and if you attempt anything, the first thing I will do is hurt you in a way that will prevent this problem from ever happening again.”

Despite her bold words and firm resolve, Elizabeth was taken aback when he simply nodded, tipped his cap, and calmly walked away, a wide grin showing off his yellowed teeth. When his friend began to protest, her almost attacker said, “Leave ‘er be. I like her spunk.” Without any further protest, both men faded back into the gathered riffraff.

Luckily, before she did something undignified, like collapsing in relief, the carriage stopped next to her. Looking up at him, she asked, “Can you take me as far as Mayfair?”

Scratching his head, he countered, “I can, but it won’t be cheap.”

Smiling, Elizabeth surreptitiously sheathed her knife and answered, “I can pay you part of the fare now and pay the rest, plus a generous tip once I get where I am going.” Holding out what was left of the money the cabbie had given her earlier in the night, she let the light glint off the coins.

Reaching down, he collected the coins in a flash and then, with a quick gesture of his thumb, he directed her towards the carriage and said, “Get in.”

Elizabeth was not even upset he had not descended to assist her into the carriage. She was simply grateful to be able to get away and make her way toward what she considered safety. It was only once they were away that she realized just how badly her hands were shaking. Gripping her hands in her skirt, Elizabeth fought not to cry. There would be time for that later. For now, she was not entirely safe, and she needed to get the money out of the hem of her cape.

### Chapter Eighteen

It seemed to Darcy that his search was proving futile. Before he had left de Bourgh House, Darcy had heard from James, the footman, that Mrs. Cuthburt had admitted to the fact that she knew little more than her mistress about where they had been. The only bright point was that she had noticed the company that the hackney belonged to and a rough description of the driver.

That had taken Darcy on a search of hackneys and the men who drove them. He finally encountered someone who'd overheard a cabbie's tale—a top-lofty woman resembling his aunt, abandoning a passenger in the grimy, rat-infested alleys of a London slum. Darcy had raced towards the area, his heart pounding in his chest, picturing Elizabeth's piteous situation and the many dangers she faced alone in such a place.

But now that he had arrived, he was getting nowhere. He met rough-looking people, their faces etched with suspicion, who refused to speak to him, and he hesitated to bribe them, fearing they would simply rob him. The absence of any response added to his growing fear and the deepening shadows highlighted his mistake in not bringing more people along in his search. More eyes would, of course, help, but there was also strength and safety in numbers.

A small voice came from the shadows. "Are you looking for Lizzie?"

Halting his horse, Darcy dismounted and attempting to catch sight of the speaker, he said, "Yes, I am searching for Lizzie. Have you seen her?"

From beneath the crumbling eaves of an abandoned building, a small child appeared, their thin frame wrapped in a luxurious shawl, a stark contrast to the grimy surroundings. The shawl made Darcy's breath catch in his throat. It was Elizabeth's shawl, and he hoped with all he had that he had finally stumbled upon something that would help him find her.

The little girl, pushing a stray strand of knotted hair behind her ear before licking her dry, chapped lips, whispered, "Yes, I saw her when the carriage dropped her off. She gave me her shawl when I helped her get to the Drunken Mule."

It disturbed Darcy to realize that a little girl as young as the one before him not only knew of a place called the Drunken Mule but knew it well enough to take Elizabeth there. Still, he asked. "Do you know why Elizabeth wanted to go to the Drunken Mule?"

"She needed a ride away from here," came a second voice from off to Darcy's left.

Darcy turned, her gaze meeting the eyes of a teenage boy with eyes like the girl's, framed by a shock of dark hair. The boy's clothes were as dirty and worn as the girl's, and Darcy silently promised he would ensure the money he had earmarked for London charities would aid as many children in need as possible. If the charities that he had already contributed to did not do an adequate job, he would find others. No child deserved to grow up in such a manner.

Darcy nodded. "Yes, I think she would need to leave the area." Turning to the girl, Darcy smiled, adding, "Thank you for helping her. That means quite a lot to me."

"She had no business being here, but we watched to make sure that she got on a carriage and left." As the boy spoke, he moved closer to the girl who Darcy assumed was his younger sister. "She was smart, for a toff. Was even able to scare off a drunkard."

Looking down the street, Darcy saw a world that was so unlike his own. That his aunt had abandoned anyone here, let alone the woman that he loved, filled him with fury. At least Elizabeth had made it to transportation away and was hopefully on her way to safety. Overwhelmed with relief, Darcy turned back to the pair who had aided Elizabeth, preventing what could have been a terrible tragedy; his gratitude was immense.

Kneeling down, he said, "I am Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire. Who might you be?"

Bobbing, the little girl said, "I'm Molly and my brother's Matthew."

"It's wonderful to meet such remarkable individuals as yourselves. I am touched by what you have done. I would like to offer the both of you a reward for your good deeds."

Wrapping his arm around the girl's frail shoulders, the lad explained, "The lady already gave Molly the shawl and me a few coins."

Running his hand through his hair, Darcy could not help but grin. Of course, even in such a dire situation, Elizabeth would see these two in need and give them what she had to aid them. "Even though Elizabeth gave you something, I would still like to reward you. You see, I love Elizabeth more than anything and I do not know what I would do if something happened to her. So I want to help you as you have helped Elizabeth and, by extension, me."

The little girl spoke up, eyes wide as she said, "Lizzie said that we could go to the church and her friend would help us. That maybe we could even go to a place away from here."

Darcy did not want to be heavy-handed with the two, so he asked, "Would the two of

you like to live somewhere else?”

“I do not know anyone who really wants to live like this, Mister.” The boy’s reply was bitter, and Darcy could understand why he might be so. “If you are rich enough to say you could give us a better life, how was it that your Elizabeth was left here all alone?”

Rubbing at the bridge of his nose, Darcy sighed, the sound heavy with frustration, muttering, “My aunt is a selfish and spiteful woman, and she was determined to have her way, mistakenly believing she could escape the consequences.”

Nodding, the boy said, “Sometimes the people in your family are not what they should be. You going to let her get away with it?”

Though he did not want to frighten the children away, Darcy could not help the hard look that took hold of his face when he said, “No, my aunt will not be getting away with what she has done.”

A sly grin spread across Matthew’s face. His too-old gaze met Darcy’s as he chuckled, “Good. Too many people get away with things they shouldn’t.”

Elizabeth, feeling the weight of grime and exhaustion, asked to be taken to the back entrance of Matlock House, the servants’ entrance. Knocking on the door, she only had to wait a moment before it was flung open and the cook was crying, “Oh, Miss Elizabeth, whatever happened to you? You poor dear, come in out of the cold.”

Smiling at the kind woman who ran her domain with the efficiency of a general and the warmth of a loving mother, Elizabeth said, “Mrs. Danvers, I told the hackney driver who brought me here that I would give him a generous tip once I arrived here. Is Fawkes available so that I can see that it is taken care of? The man was tremendously helpful in getting me out of a tight situation.”

Mrs. Danvers looked over Elizabeth's shoulder, and smiling at the driver, she called, "I will send the boy out with your money shortly." Then ushering Elizabeth into the kitchen, she sat her down at the table and began giving orders. "Sally, get Miss Elizabeth a cup of tea and see that it is well sugared. May, you get water boiling for a bath. I dare say Miss Elizabeth will need one after the day she has had." Going over to the highest shelf in the pantry, Mrs. Danvers opened a tin and withdrew a handful of coins.

Handing the coins to the stable boy who had come to see what was about, she said, "Give these to the hackney driver and see that he gets on his way. Be quick about it and there might be a biscuit in it for you."

"Sure thing, Mrs. Danvers," he cried before scampering out the door.

Elizabeth watched as the kind woman bustled about, her shoulders drooping. Safe at last, the weight of her worry settled upon her in a wave of bone-deep exhaustion. She had been strong while she had to, but now it was just nice to watch the world move around her without having to worry about being on her guard.

Mrs. Danvers paused from bustling about and, hands on hips, said, "Miss Elizabeth, you drink up that tea before I get back from speaking with Mr. Fawkes and Mrs. Teasley." Elizabeth's silent acceptance, a mere nod as she lifted the fragrant tea to her lips, seemed to satisfy her because she spun away and hurried off without another word.

For as much as she liked sweets, Elizabeth was not fond of well-sweetened tea, or at least Sally's version of it. Still, she sipped at it diligently, knowing that Mrs. Danvers would have something to say about her not working at her assigned task. She did not want to risk getting on the woman's bad side. Not that she would be cruel or nasty. No, Elizabeth just did not want to disappoint her. She had learned long ago that it was best to stay on the good side of the cook.

The cup was nearly drained when Mr. Fawkes and Mrs. Teasley burst through the door, Mrs. Danvers close behind, the sound of their hurried footsteps letting Elizabeth know just how worried they were. Mr. Fawkes, despite his usual reserved nature—he was the butler to an earl, after all—spoke first. “Miss Elizabeth, what happened?”

Snorting, Mrs. Danvers groused, “It is obvious what happened—Lady Catherine finally went too far.”

Always the one for propriety, Mrs. Teasley chided, “Now Penny, you do not know what happened, and it is not right to talk about our betters in such a manner.”

With a huff, Mrs. Danvers shook her head. “If that woman is my better, I will eat my good apron. You see if I don’t. It is obvious that if I stay in this conversation, I will say something I shouldn’t, so I am going to go pound on my dough. Just you two get Miss Elizabeth taken care of.” Turning her back on everyone, Mrs. Danvers went over to the counter by the window and after flouring the counter, plopped out a mound of dough that had been rising and began punching it with abandon.

Taking the tea up out of Elizabeth’s hands and setting it on the table, Mrs. Teasley wrapped her arm around Elizabeth’s shoulders and said, “I already have a maid preparing your room across from your sister’s. How does a nice hot bath sound? It’s completely your choice to share what happened or remain silent, but before anything else, I think you deserve a chance to clean yourself up and compose yourself.” Glancing first at Mrs. Danvers and then Mr. Fawkes, she added, “Besides, it is none of our business what happened. We are only staff, after all.”

A twinge of self-reproach pricked Elizabeth for allowing Mrs. Teasley to dictate her actions, yet a sense of peaceful surrender had settled over her. It was just easier to go with the flow of things, and she was so weary. All that she wanted was a nice nap. If she was honest with herself, she also craved a visit from Mr. Darcy, the yearning nearly as powerful as her exhaustion. Yes, she longed for a nap, with Mr. Darcy a



silent guardian nearby, but this was a whimsical dream, a comforting thought that held no hope of reality.

It had not been a simple matter to abscond with Matthew and Molly, but on the whole, it was not as complicated as it could have been. They had no family and practically no possessions, so he would have thought that it would have been simple enough to transport them to Darcy House. Only Darcy had hurried off in his search for Elizabeth alone, which he had quickly realized was a mistake. Particularly when it dawned on him that he'd need to transport all three of them on his single horse.

Still, he made it work. Putting little Molly up before him and having Matthew ride behind him, they left the slum. The children were so slight that his horse could carry them until they reached a respectable inn where a carriage could be hired. From there, it had been a quick ride through the London streets to his home where his housekeeper, a matronly woman who had always loved children, took them both under her wing with gusto.

Once he had them safe, Darcy switched his attention back to Elizabeth. Not that she had ever been far from his mind. The knowledge of her relative safety allowed him to concentrate on getting Matthew and Molly to a safe place. He couldn't stomach the idea of leaving them to face that situation alone; his conscience wouldn't allow it.

But now he paced his study, probably marring his own carpet, pondering where Elizabeth might go once she had transportation out of the slums. She would not go back to de Bourgh House, for it had already proven itself an unsafe place for her. Obviously, if she had not come to his house, she would have made it there before him. Freezing in place, he shook his head when he realized that it should have been obvious to him. She would have gone to Matlock House.

In no time at all, he was bursting out of his front door and running across the square to his uncle's house. The door opened for him before he had even had a chance to

knock, the alert footman having seen him coming. Glancing about, he looked for any evidence that Elizabeth was there, but nothing was out of place. Darcy tried to tell himself that it did not mean anything. The well-trained staff would not have let any get out of place.

“Miss Elizabeth is above stairs, Mr. Darcy.” Fawkes’s voice startled Darcy, causing him to swing around to stare at the man.

“Truly?” Relief washed over Darcy, a dizzying wave that made his head swim. Grabbing at the banister of the nearby stairs, Darcy forced strength into his legs. While he had hoped that Elizabeth would have made her way to Matlock House, he had by no means been certain.

Ignoring Darcy’s momentary weakness, Fawkes reassured him. “Yes, sir. She arrived a short while ago, and Miss Jane’s lady’s maid and Mrs. Teasley have assured me that she is well, though perhaps a little weary from whatever happened.”

“My aunt happened,” grumbled Darcy, running his hand through his already mussed hair.

Nodding, Fawkes said, “That is what Cook assumed, but Mrs. Teasley insisted that we not press Miss Elizabeth for information.”

“I have always liked Mrs. Teasley,” Darcy murmured, a fondness in his voice, before he bounded up the stairs two at a time. “Thank you, Fawkes!” The sound of his footsteps echoed in the entryway.

While he knew it was not the best idea to go in search of Elizabeth wherever she might be, Darcy could not help doing it. He just had to see her. He felt compelled to see her, to study her face and body language for any sign of distress, and to know for sure that she was well. Darcy did not know what he would do if he could not see her.

Familiar and unfamiliar hallways blurred together as he searched, hoping to find either Elizabeth or possibly Mrs. Teasley, who would know where she was. He tuned out the random sounds of the house, hoping to hear Elizabeth's voice. But when he actually spotted her through an open doorway, Darcy froze, utterly still.

Elizabeth was lying on a settee, asleep. He had found her, and it was as if all was suddenly right with the world. Moving silently, Darcy approached her, captivated as a moth to a flame. He was almost upon her when his legs gave way, and he watched, mesmerized, as her breath gently stirred a stray curl.

“While I understand you must have been quite worried about Miss Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy, please do not wake her. She has had quite the experience, I think.” Mrs. Teasley spoke from behind him, her voice no louder than a whisper. “She curled up on the settee while we prepared her room, but she fell asleep before the room was ready.”

Darcy glanced over and, spotting Mrs. Teasley sitting in the corner, felt slightly chagrined at having been seen in such a discomposed state, though he knew there was nothing else he could have done. Looking back at Elizabeth, he said, “Thank you for watching over her until I could get here.”

He tried to tell himself he would not stay so very long, but he could not imagine leaving her side, at least not yet. They had both been through so much that day and it was nice to take that moment to bask in the soft rapping sound of her breath and the peace that came with knowing that she was safe and unharmed. Darcy knew his rage at his aunt would return eventually, and he would make sure she faced consequences, and ensure that she would be prevented from hurting anyone again, but that would be later. For now, he would just watch her breathe.

### Chapter Nineteen

Elizabeth woke, feeling oddly rested despite the stiffness in her shoulders, a lingering ache from the previous day's stresses. It was not an unusual problem for Elizabeth, as more than once she had had a trying day that led to a sore body the next day. She stretched, her eyes still closed, attempting to get the kinks out of her knee and shoulders. Then, with a sigh, she opened her eyes and looked around the room. As she had suspected, she was in the room she normally stayed in when she visited Matlock House.

The weak purple light filtering through the window indicated it was still quite early, a pre-dawn hue painting the room in soft shades. Elizabeth had always been an early riser, so waking early did not surprise her, especially knowing that she had fallen asleep quite early the evening before. Her last clear memory was the soft cushions of the settee, the lingering scent of Jane's honeysuckle scented soap still on her skin, before the hazy void of sleep swallowed her whole. She couldn't even recall getting into bed.

She did remember her dreams, though. A blush crept onto her cheeks as she recalled the delicious dream; the feel of Mr. Darcy's arms as held her, protecting her from the world. The low tone of his voice as he murmured sweet nothings she couldn't quite make out, the feeling of his touch lingered even now in her waking hours. It all fueled her longing for the man that she knew was out of reach.

Rolling over with a sigh, Elizabeth slid her feet to the floor and stood up. Then, stretching at the waist, a yawn escaping her lips, she scanned the room for her robe, only to find Jane asleep in a chair beside her bed, a sight that caused her to gasp.

Elizabeth mused that she must have been heavily asleep not to have taken note when Jane came in the room to watch over her. It was an odd feeling as she was more often than not the person who looked over others, especially as she had been so involved in Anne's care.

Jane's maid had told her that Jane was at a ball the night before. Elizabeth reflected that she likely arrived home in the early hours, only to learn of Elizabeth's arrival while she was out. Soft-hearted thing that she was, Jane had not gone on to her own bed as she should have. Shaking her head, Elizabeth moved to her sister's side, shaking her gently. "Janie, dear heart, why are you not in your bed?"

Eyes still closed, Jane mumbled, "Why would I be in my bed when my sister needed me?" Then, after stretching, she opened her eyes and reached out, capturing Elizabeth in an embrace. Speaking into her hair, Jane said, "Mr. Darcy and Richard explained what Lady Catherine did. Are you well?"

Hugging Jane back, Elizabeth sighed, "It is not an experience that I would ever repeat if I had a choice, but I managed it and today is a new day." Elizabeth righted herself and sat on the edge of the bed across from her, a small smile playing on her lips as she watched Jane moved to sit next to her and link their arms, laying her head on Elizabeth's shoulder. The habit was a comforting familiarity that she had always adored and found strength in now. "It is still very early; you should go to bed and get some much-needed rest in something besides a chair. I am sure you will want to look your best for when your Mr. Bingley comes to call."

Sitting up straighter, Jane looked at Elizabeth, an eyebrow raised. "We may not live in the same house as your typical sisters do, but I still know you, Elizabeth Rose. So I know that you are avoiding talking about what happened yesterday. As I see that you are well, I will accept that you do not want to talk about it and move on. Besides, I am not certain Mr. Bingley will come today, he does not come calling every day."

Only Jane, with her insightful gaze, would catch her in the act of dodging the topic. But wasn't that what sisters were for—to know everything about you and always wish for your happiness? The best of sisters had a bond that resonated with quiet strength. A sly smile played on Elizabeth's lips as she said, "Ah, but I suspect you would want to look your best for him should he show up. His name appears frequently in your letters. Most recently, I believe you said he was everything that a gentleman should be."

Stifling a giggle in Elizabeth's shoulder, Jane squeezed her arm. Then with a sigh she said, "Lizzie, He is truly the best of men! He is everything I have ever thought to want in a gentleman, but I want you to meet him and his sisters before I'm completely lost in love."

Concerned, Elizabeth asked, "Are you uncertain of something?"

"No, not exactly," began Jane, tracing the flower pattern on her night rail. "At least I am not uncertain of Mr. Bingley. It is his sisters who are in question. Richard harbors a dislike for the sisters, deeming them capricious and cruel to those they deem beneath them. Mother asserts the younger sister is an avaricious social climber."

Elizabeth nodded slowly, a frown furrowing her brow as she wondered what could have happened to put Richard so on edge. "And you are too kind-hearted to think ill of them, and so you seek to know my opinion. I will be glad to grant it."

The two of them lapsed into companionable silence, both soaking up the comfort of the moment, though Elizabeth's mind was quick to start ruminating on the things she would have to face that day. For one thing, she would not be staying at de Bourgh House anymore, so she would somehow have to have her things brought over. She also would have to decide how she wanted to handle Lady Catherine moving forward.

Uncle Reggie would not stand for how his sister had behaved. Elizabeth was certain

of it. Oh yes, the earl was already devising a plan to deal with Lady Catherine, and Mr. Darcy and Richard, with their own desires for retribution, would undoubtedly want to have their say. Elizabeth knew she would have to decide at least whether or not she wanted to confront the woman, but she did not want to think about that decision yet.

Though she wished to disregard Lady Catherine, Anne's well-being weighed on her mind. Breaking the silence, Elizabeth asked, "Do you know what, if anything, has been explained to Anne about my disappearance from de Bourgh House?"

Jane shook her head, a slight frown furrowing her brow as she answered, "Mr. Darcy didn't mention it at all when I saw him this evening."

Jane's simple phrase had Elizabeth's heart stuttering as she blurted, "Mr. Darcy was here?"

"Yes." A mischievous glint sparkled in Jane's eyes as she watched Elizabeth. "In fact, Eliza, my lady's maid said that he was the one who ended up carrying you to your bed when you fell asleep in my sitting room."

Richard sat across from Darcy in the quiet morning room, the only sound the gentle ticking of a grandfather clock. The light from the window was more of a murky shadow than true illumination, so they sat in shadow at the table that was not yet ready for anyone to break their fast. He took a large gulp of his coffee before he asked, "So when are you going to tell Elizabeth that you are in love with her?"

The shock of his cousin's words did more good to wake him than the two cups of coffee he had already imbibed. Eyes wide, he glared at Richard, exclaiming, "I have barely come to grips with the fact that I love her. I am not nearly ready to do anything about it. Besides, I do not want to push her into anything after such a traumatic ordeal."

Both men regarded one another in expectant silence as a maid entered with a tray of food, set it upon the sideboard, and, upon noticing them, stirred the fire and lit several branches of candles. Watching the woman leave, Richard got up and grabbed a pastry from the platter. Taking a large bite of the pastry, Richard rested his hip on the table and looked down at Darcy. “A little birdie told me that you stayed by Elizabeth’s side last night watching her sleep for hours. At this point, everyone knows you are in love with her. Is there a reason you think Elizabeth should be the only one who does not know of your feelings for her?”

A groan escaped Darcy’s lips as he dropped his head onto the table, the action prompting a fit of laughter from Richard. While he could see the logic in what Richard said, Darcy could not for the life of him come up with any logical plan of how to reveal his feelings for Elizabeth without dying of humiliation. Maybe he should just propose? Surely if he proposed she would know that he cared for her?

Darcy pulled his head up and looked over at the still smiling Richard and said, “You know Elizabeth well. How do you think she would react if I proposed?”

Eyes narrowing, Richard asked, “Is this supposed proposal before or after your declaration of undying love?”

Sitting up and pushing back from the table, Darcy ran his hand through his hair. “Surely a proposal of marriage works as a declaration of love. I would not be proposing if I did not have feelings for her.”

Hand to his head, as if massaging a burgeoning headache, Richard explained, “You do know that most of the proposals in the ton have nothing to do with love. If any emotion is involved, it is greed. You are a man of logic; surely you can see your reasoning is not sound.”

With a sigh, Darcy stood and began to pace back and forth, his hands clasped behind



his back. He truly wanted to marry Elizabeth, and the prospect of not having to reveal his deepest emotions was appealing. He was Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, and he had spent so much of his life hiding how he felt that the thought of changing that, even for Elizabeth, was overwhelming. While a voice of reason told him Richard was correct, a stubborn part of him clung to the idea, refusing to let go. He stubbornly refused to acknowledge his own denial, a knot of resistance tightening in his chest.

He could find a way to propose the right way that would avoid a grand confession, he was sure of it. Darcy stopped, faced Richard, and said, “I just have to come up with the right words to use in the proposal. Something like... The situation you experienced firsthand when my aunt unleashed her wrath will have convinced you of the value of a powerful ally, and I’m more than happy—eager, even—to be that for you. Knowing that you were in danger yesterday moved me to understand I want nothing more than to have you as my wife and have you always safe at my side. While your background is unusual for a woman marrying into the Darcy family, your close relationship with the Fitzwilliams and your beauty are undeniable; therefore, I accept you without question.”

Confident in his well-crafted proposal, a self-satisfied smile touched Darcy’s lips. Though that smile disappeared when he caught sight of Richard’s expression. Darcy replayed his words in his mind, trying to pinpoint the flaw in his logic. There was nothing incorrect about what he said. He had said that he wanted her for his wife, that he wanted to protect her from the cruelties of the world. How could that be wrong?

“You are an idiot.” A moment of stony silence passed across Richard’s face before the telltale twitch of his eye as he spat, “No, ‘idiot’ is far too kind a descriptor. You are a lout, an addlebrained fool, and a bafflehead, and if you try to say anything of the sort to Elizabeth, I will be forced to thrash you.”

“But—”

“Keep your mouth shut, Darcy, and let me teach you something vital to the rest of your existence,” snapped Richard. “First off, you cannot propose to a woman like Elizabeth without first speaking of how much you love her. There is no getting around having to share your emotions with her because she will not accept anything less and your life will be better for it. Both she and Jane have promised that they will not marry for less than love. Didn’t you think it was odd that Jane has been out for two years and with as beautiful as she is, she has never even been closed to engaged?”

Tilting his head, Darcy considered Richard’s words. “I never thought about it much.”

“Jane has had several proposals, but she has turned them all down because she knew there was no love in the proposed match. She even turned down a viscount. Love is that important to her, and Elizabeth is no different.” Richard watched Darcy for a moment, his eyes narrowed, before continuing, “Second, a strong woman like Elizabeth would disdain the idea that she needs to get married to be protected. If anything, her experience yesterday proved she has the ability to get out of scrapes without your assistance. Never, under any circumstances, insult a woman by questioning her background—a factor entirely outside her control—especially when proposing marriage. It is incredibly disrespectful.”

Moving back to his seat from earlier, Darcy collapsed into it. He knew that Richard was right. Even before offering his poorly worded proposal, a nagging doubt had surfaced—a quiet understanding that gaining Elizabeth’s affection wouldn’t be the simple task he hoped.

Elizabeth was a remarkable woman. With her sharp mind and inner strength, she had even saved herself from Lady Catherine’s plot, making his attempt to avoid responsibility all the more galling. But wasn’t Elizabeth worth putting forth the effort? Didn’t she deserve to know she was loved beyond all reason?

“Have you finally made sense of it all?” Richard asked, the question hanging in the air between them as he sat back down and took a sip of his coffee.

With a rueful smile and a glance at Richard, Darcy murmured, “Yes. It will be difficult for me, but if I cannot prove my love, I have no right to hope for hers.”

“Carried me to bed?!” Elizabeth let out a sound that was part screech, part gasp.

Though Jane did not laugh at her sister outright, she did smile widely at her reaction to the news. “Does it bother you that he took care of you while you were not aware of it?”

Not wanting to feed into Jane’s enjoyment of the situation, Elizabeth was quick to laugh and say, “I am simply surprised that he would do such a thing. I did not even know that he knew I was here.” Worrying her lip, Elizabeth pondered why it upset her to think of Mr. Darcy carrying her to bed. Jane was kind enough to let her think without pestering her for a more complete response.

Elizabeth could not recall a time that she had ever been carried in her life. Though she assumed that she must have been held and carried as a baby, she was too young to retain any memories of it; the sensations of gentle rocking and soft touches were lost to the past. So the fact that Mr. Darcy carried her was a jarring realization, though not entirely unwelcome.

Her dream of being held by him was explained by the fact that she had been. She would admit, if only to herself, that she had enjoyed the dream and had, in fact, relished the sense of security and warmth it gave her. She dreamt of his tender embrace, a vision of cherished love, but the chilling suspicion his actions were driven merely by a sense of duty, rather than genuine affection, pierced her soul like a poisoned arrow.

Reaching out, Jane took Elizabeth's hand in her own and gave it a squeeze. "What about the fact that Mr. Darcy carried you upset you so much?"

"What if carrying me to bed does not mean the same thing to me as it does to him?" With a frustrated shake of her head, Elizabeth rubbed at her eyes, where the warmth of the impending tears was almost unbearable.

"And how do you feel about the fact that he carried you to bed?" questioned Jane.

Elizabeth took a deep breath and admitted, "Knowing he did something so kind, so caring for me, is more than delightful. It is a dream come true." With a blush rising on her cheeks, she gazed at Jane and whispered, "I dreamt last night that he held me safe in his arms. That feeling of being cherished, even if it was only a dream, was unlike anything I'd ever known—a breathtaking, heart-swelling joy. However, the possibility of him not feeling the same is a crushing, agonizing blow. The realization that I love him while he might view me as an obligation is a humiliating, desperate agony, a stark contrast to the easy confidence I usually possess, and I do not know what to do about it." Elizabeth's voice became increasingly wretched as she spoke, and she finally collapsed backward onto the bed, gazing hopelessly up at the ceiling.

"Oh my dear girl," began Jane. "You have always been so strong, so assured. I have always been in awe of your inner strength, the way you meet every challenge head-on, never giving in to weakness. I must confess that your resilience overwhelmed me. Even as a child, it was you who took care of me, though now that I look back, I can understand you were just as afraid. Only you would not, could not let yourself show it. I should have realized that love, a force as powerful as gravity, would ultimately bring you back down to earth to join the rest of us mere mortals." Reaching out, Jane smoothed the hair back from Elizabeth's brow.

Silence filled the room, and Elizabeth did not have the heart to say anything to disturb it. It was true Elizabeth did not show weakness, but that did not mean that she did not

feel it, and she was certainly feeling it at that moment.

A poem about love's empowering nature, about the strength it gave, came back to her, its message mocking her current feelings of vulnerability. Elizabeth did not like feeling vulnerable. She had not liked the feeling while she walked through the slum, and she did not like it now. Still, she had no desire to let go of her love for Mr. Darcy. Although it left her feeling exposed, the knowledge of her love for Mr. Darcy filled her with a cherished warmth, a sweet, secret joy.

Apparently feeling that the silence had gone on long enough, Jane asked, "Why do you suppose Mr. Darcy does not return your feelings?"

Brow furrowing, Elizabeth gazed up at Jane. "Mr. Darcy is a man of prominence. He attends society events regularly. He has multiple estates, the largest being Pemberley. I would not be surprised to learn that he is wealthier than Uncle Reggie. The better question is, why would he return my feelings?" she questioned, genuinely puzzled that her sister even deemed it a possibility. "I am the daughter of a gentleman, yes, but I have no ties to an estate. I lack wealth and seldom find myself in the company of the elite. I have not even been presented to the queen. Mr. Darcy requires a sophisticated bride, someone who can hold court, unlike me, who would probably insult his guests and launch into a discussion about agricultural policy. I am not special enough to be Mrs. Darcy."

Pulling Elizabeth up with a jerk, Jane gripped Elizabeth's shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. "Now you listen here, Elizabeth Rose. You are a remarkable person and a splendid lady of worth, and you are not allowed to undermine yourself. So what if you have not had your curtsy before the queen? Mother Judith can make that happen without blinking. You are the only woman I know who would look at being mistress of multiple estates as an adventure and who would care for the people there with kindness and compassion." Taking a gasping breath after such an impassioned speech, Jane crossed her arms and asked, "Do you think Mr. Darcy

would rather talk of lace or crop reforms?”

Fighting a chuckle, Elizabeth was forced to admit, “Crop reforms.”

Eyebrows raised, Jane stared at Elizabeth. “Then why do you think he deserves a society miss who only knows how to sparkle and could not converse with him about anything of substance? The poor man would go mad in short order. Why do you insist on assigning him such a horrid fate?”

Jane’s words brought Elizabeth up short. It was true that Mr. Darcy hated talking with most women of the ton. They were all trained to discuss safe topics like gossip and the weather, while Elizabeth had thought it a ridiculous restriction and talked about what she wished to. When given the opportunity, they could converse on nearly any subject that interested either of them at the time. Did that signify, however minuscule, the presence of hope?

### Chapter Twenty

Darcy had much to consider and, in all likelihood, little time in which to do so. He felt the urgency to confess, fearing the longer he waited, the more difficult and daunting the task would become. Still, he was clueless as to how he would confess his feelings to Elizabeth. So with agitated steps, Darcy paced the stone path of Matlock House's garden, the cool morning air a contrast to the heat of his anxiety. He couldn't make himself go further away from Elizabeth, despite his home being so near.

For the past several years, he'd been avoiding women. The incessant fluttering of their eyelashes and the constant stream of gossip grated on his nerves, and he had as little to do with them as possible. He was, as Mrs. Reynolds would term it, smitten with a breathtaking woman, but the challenge of winning her over left him flustered and unsure of how to proceed.

Richard had shown him earlier just how mistaken he was when it came to his original thoughts about proposing, or even really interacting with Elizabeth in a meaningful way. Darcy wanted to do things right. The question was, what was the right way to do things?

He had just completed what must have been his fifty-seventh circuit of the small garden when he came face with Elizabeth as she stepped outside. Though every instinct urged him to retreat, Darcy chose instead to follow his heart and moved toward the woman he loved. Without thinking, words made their way from his lips. "Have you found yourself in need of a refreshing walk this morning, Elizabeth?"

Drawing a shawl closer around her body, Elizabeth smiled and, walking towards him, replied, “Yes, I am rather fond of a nice walk in the morning. There is just something about nature that restores me.”

“Yes, I know.” Darcy inwardly winced the moment the words left his mouth. What a ridiculous thing to say. At this rate, he would make a complete spectacle of himself. Clearing his throat, Darcy asked, “I was just strolling about the garden. Would you be interested in joining me? Or would you rather stroll about on your own? I can leave if you wish me to.” While waiting for Elizabeth’s reply, Darcy felt the tension in his shoulders tighten and he silently congratulated himself for at least not insulting her outright.

The smile that spread across Elizabeth’s face nearly caused Darcy to stumble. He was so distracted by the glory of her smile that he almost missed it when she said, “I would be delighted to accompany you on a walk about the garden.”

Instinctively, Darcy offered his arm, attempting to ignore his elation at her touch. He had to maintain his composure long enough to declare his love, and in time, to propose. There remained much to be done before he could allow himself the luxury of celebration. It did not help that he could almost feel the heat of her hand through the fabric of his coat. Though it might have just been his imagination.

The pair of them walked in silence for only a few steps before Darcy paused and said, “First and foremost, I must offer my sincerest apologies for my aunt’s behavior. Her actions were inexcusable, and I deeply regret that I was unable to prevent them.”

With a reassuring squeeze of his arm, Elizabeth responded, “I’m certain you would never do anything to put me in harm’s way. You’re far too protective. You do not carry the weight of Lady Catherine’s choices; they are hers alone.”

Darcy felt a warmth spread through him as Elizabeth commended him, her



unwavering belief in his goodness touching him deeply. Continuing on down the path, Darcy said, “Thank you. Your belief in me means quite a lot.” Hesitating, he added, “I was told you arrived at Matlock House unharmed but wearied. No one provided any more details. Are you truly well?”

“Though shaken, I escaped the situation unscathed. I am well, especially after a good night’s sleep.” It might have been his imagination, but it felt as if Elizabeth squeezed his arm that much tighter as she added, “I will admit that it was not a comfortable experience and I would never want to repeat it, but it is over.”

His heart in his throat, Darcy murmured, “I am more grateful than I can express that you emerged from the ordeal unscathed.”

They walked for a time, pausing briefly for Elizabeth to admire various plants. Then, having completed the circuit, they continued walking. Darcy couldn’t bear the thought of parting from Elizabeth before he had laid bare a few essential truths, despite his pounding heart.

Finding it easier to speak while walking, Darcy ignored his typical hesitation, and his words tumbled out in a rush. “I searched for you, but you, with your characteristic brilliance and strength, had already extricated yourself from the situation before I arrived.”

Elizabeth was quick to say, “I would not have been able to manage it without the aid of two children I met.”

“Yes, Molly and Matthew,” Darcy said. “I found them during my search for you. You might be happy to know they are currently at Darcy House under the loving care of my housekeeper.”

Elizabeth turned to face him, her expression eager. “Truly?”

Shrugging self-consciously, Darcy said, “I could not leave them there. It was no place for two children, especially when they had gone so far as to help you. And when I asked if they wanted to escape their difficult circumstances, their faces lit up with relief, and they eagerly agreed to come with me.”

This time, Darcy was certain that Elizabeth squeezed his arm as she spoke. “I am so glad. I was worried about them.”

“They are both safe and sound now, likely enjoying hourly meals prepared by my cook, who’s convinced they require extra nourishment and pampering. They have probably had a whole tin’s worth of biscuits by now.”

Darcy had only walked a few paces beside Elizabeth before frustration overtook him. He had yet to say what he truly meant, and with sudden resolve, he blurted, “I cannot express how incredibly frantic I was when I realized what my aunt had done. Knowing you were in danger, my mind was a maelstrom of paralyzing fear and fierce resolve. It illuminated the true depths of our friendship and revealed nuances of our relationship that I had not realized before.”

Elizabeth froze, her heart in her throat. She knew Mr. Darcy had previously spoken of their friendship with Georgianna. Her letters had even contained several indirect references to their friendship, and at the time, Elizabeth had been happy to know he thought so well of her. Now, however, things had changed. She now understood, with a pang of longing, that her feelings for Mr. Darcy exceeded mere friendship. She wanted more. Did his comment subtly suggest a shared desire, or was she allowing her optimism to run wild?

Swallowing thickly, Elizabeth asked, “What exactly did you discover about our friendship?” A dizzying hope filled Elizabeth as she waited for Mr. Darcy’s response. Part of her wanted to make him stop and look at her, but the other, larger part of her feared that any interruption, however slight, might prevent him from saying what she

wanted so desperately to hear.

Mr. Darcy kept on moving, his long strides eating up the earth at a faster speed than before, as if he was hurrying away from something Elizabeth could not see. She was grateful she was accustomed to walking with a larger stride than most young ladies, otherwise she would have struggled to keep up with him, even in the small little garden that they circled.

Elizabeth was uncertain how long she waited for Mr. Darcy's answer. It was at once both an eternity and the span of a few heartbeats before he said, "When we first started truly coming to know each other, I was surprised by just how much I enjoyed myself when we were together. It took some time to adjust to the fact that we were developing a friendship. Even though I found it peculiar to be friends with a woman, it wasn't inconceivable." Looking at Elizabeth with a wry grin, he added, "I know you may be offended by the fact I found it so unusual to befriend a female, but you must realize that, in our rigidly structured society, genuine friendships between men and women are rare—a fact I'm sure you're aware of given your own experiences."

It took Elizabeth a moment to recover enough from Mr. Darcy's smile to think, let alone reply. "The only friendship I know of between a man and a woman would be the Matlocks, so I will forgive you for thinking it so impossible to be friends with me."

"I will gratefully accept your forgiveness, though I hope you'll understand when I confess that the fear of losing you to my cruel aunt's machinations made me realize I feel something far deeper than friendship." Stopping his long strides, Mr. Darcy faced Elizabeth, the warmth of his gaze intense as he took both her hands in his. "Elizabeth, I have realized that I have come to love you."

Elizabeth felt the ground disappear from beneath her feet at his declaration. A breathtaking sense of exaltation surged through her. She was weightless and only

tethered to reality by the reassuring warmth of Mr. Darcy's hands clutching hers.

It must have seemed to Mr. Darcy as if she was not responding quickly enough because he rushed to say, "I am by no means expecting anything from you in return. I understand that my feelings are my own, and you will not necessarily feel the same way. Though I do hope that one day you might be able to look on me with affection."

A wave of affection threatened to overwhelm Elizabeth as she battled the impulse to throw her arms around Mr. Darcy's neck. Elizabeth instead asked, her voice laced with a hint of playful challenge, "Were you supposing that it would take me a long time to return your feelings?"

A faint blush, barely noticeable, tinted Mr. Darcy's cheeks as he looked her in the eye, his gaze unwavering. "While I hope you could return my affection sooner rather than later," he said, his voice a low murmur, "I am willing to wait as long as it takes."

Intrigued by his curiously gallant words, Elizabeth decided to put his charm to the test. "And if I am never able to return your affection?" she inquired.

If Elizabeth had not been studying him so closely, she would have missed the subtle widening of his eyes, like a flash of surprise, before he softly replied, "Then I will spend the rest of my life making sure you are happy in whatever life you choose for yourself. If you are happy, I will find a way to be satisfied, even if I am not what makes you happy."

Drawing closer to Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth freed one of her hands in order to reach up and rest it over Mr. Darcy's heart. "Then it is fortunate that you are my source of happiness, because I would never want you to be simply satisfied with life."

Wrapping his free hand around hers where it rested lightly on his chest, Mr. Darcy twined their fingers together. Lost in each other's eyes, they stood motionless, only

the solid beating of their hearts breaking the stillness of the morning, until Mr. Darcy finally breathed, “Are you telling me you return my affection? That you want to be the best part of the rest of my life?”

“Affection seems to be too small a word for what I feel. Even the word love feels inadequate to describe the depth of this emotion. What I feel for you is so large that I am surprised it all fits inside my heart.” Swallowing against the growing lump in her throat, Elizabeth professed, “I only know that being granted your love will be the greatest gift I ever receive.”

Had she later been asked the details of what happened next, she would have found herself quite unable to explain it. One moment she was confessing her love, and the next, she felt the soft warmth of Mr. Darcy’s hands on her face, and his lips were meeting hers in a surprising kiss. It only lasted a moment, but it was enough for Elizabeth to realize she did not wish for a long engagement.

Darcy looked down at Elizabeth, her eyes wide and her face flushed, feeling the warmth of her skin against his. He fought the overwhelming urge to kiss her again, the feel of her lips still fresh on his. Forcing himself to take a step back, Darcy murmured, “Can I take this to mean that you might consent to be my wife?”

“If you had bothered to ask me,” Elizabeth responded, a playful glint in her eyes, “I might have said yes by now.”

A wide grin spread across Darcy’s face as he wrapped his arms around Elizabeth, pulling her close. He murmured, his voice a low rumble, “Elizabeth Rose Bennet, will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

Elizabeth’s answer was a quick, resounding, “Yes!” He resisted the urge to kiss her again but couldn’t help but grab her waist and spin her, her laughter filling the air. Joy overflowing, Darcy joined in the laughter as he brought her back to the ground,

steadying her until she had her feet under her once more.

Darcy's thumb brushed against the delicate curve of her cheekbone, and compelled by a sudden tenderness, he murmured, "Thank you. You do not know how much this means to me. I promise to spend the rest of my life working to make you just as happy as you have made me."

Laying her hand over his as his fingers traced the soft curves of her skin, Elizabeth said, "I believe the feeling is mutual."

Darcy was uncertain how long they simply enjoyed one another's presence and murmured sweet reassurances before they were interrupted by a deep chuckle. "Have you finally realized that you are perfect for each other?"

Dragging his gaze away from the enchantment of Elizabeth's eyes, Darcy spotted Richard standing near them, his eyes dancing in mirth. Though slightly embarrassed at being caught unawares, a warm smile bloomed on Darcy's face as he confessed to his cousin, "Though I am anything but perfect, Elizabeth, in her grace, has honored me with her affection and love by agreeing to be my wife."

Clutching Darcy's arm with both of hers, Elizabeth chided, "While neither of us are perfect, I believe Richard said we are perfect for each other, which is something I agree with."

"She has you there, old man," chuckled Richard. Stepping forward, he clapped Darcy on the back heartily and added, "She will keep you on your toes and make you the happiest of men with the best run estates in the nation."

"Too true," Darcy grinned first at Richard and then down at Elizabeth, who still held his arm. "You manage Rosings with such efficiency that even with a millstone like Lady Catherine around your neck, the estate thrives. Once we marry, I can relax,

knowing you'll handle everything with the grace of a seasoned diplomat and the strength of a Roman legionnaire.”

Stepping back from Darcy, Elizabeth put her hands on her hips and mock glared at him as she demanded, “If you want to spend any time with your perfect wife, you will have to do your own share of the work. If we each tackle our necessary tasks, I believe we can each enjoy half our time free from obligations. Just think of the opportunities to read and debate.”

Darcy leaned close, the sweet scent of her hair filling his senses as he murmured, “Do not forget the games of chess.” His lips lightly brushed her temple before pulling away.

“All right, you two,” complained Richard as he separated them and then, standing between the couple, prodded them back to the house. “Father is up and would like to discuss what we will do with the Gorgon that is his sister. There will be time enough later to moon over one another. Mother will be overjoyed to aid in planning Elizabeth’s come out and wedding, but only once we have seen the last of Aunt Catherine.”

With a wide grin plastered on his face, Darcy walked alongside Richard, their steps perfectly in sync. Though his heart soared with happiness over the love that he shared with Elizabeth, a cold resolve settled over him—his aunt would answer for her foul deeds. He was not going to allow Aunt Catherine the freedom to endanger the woman he loved ever again.

They found his uncle waiting for them in the morning room, taking a sip of his morning coffee. “Ah, it seems you found them, Richard. Have the pair of you eaten? I had thought we could discuss matters over a hearty meal.”

Clapping Darcy on the back once more, Richard laughed, “Yes, I found them in the

garden, and you were right—it seems that recent events finally brought matters to a head.”

Darcy, pointedly ignoring Richard, escorted Elizabeth to the ornate table, the scent of bacon and sweet bread filling the air. He smoothly pulled out a chair and reassured her, “I will fetch you a plate.”

A surprised smile from Elizabeth was all the thanks he needed as he moved to the sideboard to collect some of the items that he knew Elizabeth preferred. He was not yet done when his uncle chuckled and said, “So they have finally admitted that they are in love. About time!” Speaking to Elizabeth, he continued, “You will be a marvelous mistress for Pemberley, my dear, and though I do not think he deserves a remarkable woman like you, I believe you have it in you to keep him in line and from becoming too dour.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, Uncle Reggie,” Elizabeth beamed as Darcy placed a plate in front of her. Shifting her gaze to Darcy, she murmured, “You managed to get me all my favorites, thank you,” a smile playing on her lips as she touched the soft fabric of his sleeve.

Cutting up a piece of ham steak, Uncle Reginald grinned. “Already you are becoming the perfect doting couple. Judith will be relieved.”

“Yes, the only problem is that she will now focus on me,” complained Richard as he sat down with a full plate and began to dig in.

Gesturing with his fork, Uncle Reginald said, “Do not worry too much, son. Your mother has a wedding to plan first, so you still have a few months free from her pestering.”

Walking into the room, Aunt Judith chuckled. Kissing Elizabeth on the cheek, she



said, “They forget that women long ago mastered the art of multitasking.” Then, peering down at her, she tilted her head and added, “You are looking well, dear. I am glad you have recovered from your ordeal. Though I believe that my nephew might have something to do with it.” With a blush and a grin, Elizabeth nodded up at Aunt Judith, who smiled back.

The room was filled with the gentle clinking of cutlery and the soft sounds of chewing as she moved to the sideboard. Aunt Judith picked up a pastry and a cup of steaming coffee and proceeded to sit next to her husband. Taking a sip, she sighed appreciatively before turning to look at the others and asking, “So, what shall we do to humble my intolerable termagant of a sister-in-law?”

### Chapter Twenty-One

Elizabeth clamped both hands over her mouth, fighting back hysterical laughter that threatened to send the food in her mouth flying across the table. A muffled giggle escaped her grasp. Next to her at the table, Mr. Darcy's fork had stopped midway to his mouth at his aunt's comment. Aunt Judith peered at them over her coffee cup and declared, "I defy you to come up with a better description for that woman. For the cruelty Catherine has dispensed—the callous disregard for others, the deliberate infliction of suffering—she deserves punishment far exceeding anything we can easily inflict, but I will ensure she faces the consequences of her actions. We need to decide her comeuppance and be done with it so I can get to more enjoyable pastimes."

Elizabeth had swallowed what was in her mouth by the time Aunt Judith finished, and with the morsels gone, she no longer felt like a greedy squirrel stuffing its face. Across the table, Richard used his coffee cup to toast his mother and said, "Well said, Mother." Turning to his father, he took a sip before asking, "So do you have a plan, or shall I draw up the battle plans with Darcy?"

Not wanting to voice the ideas that had first appeared in her mind when it came to punishing Lady Catherine, Elizabeth chose to fill her rumbling stomach while listening to the conversation at the table. Putting his fork down and wiping his mouth, Uncle Reggie intertwined his fingers with his wife's before he looked at the younger people at the table. A thoughtful expression crossed his face as he considered his words and then, he spoke in measured tones, "I've heard that Darcy threatened my sister with the Bedlam, but I'd much rather find a less extreme solution if we can."

Putting down her cup, Elizabeth reached out to Mr. Darcy and grasped his hand where it rested on the table. “You threatened her with Bedlam?” she questioned. “I am sorry to have missed it.”

Eyes soft but earnest, with a hint of a smile playing on his lips, Mr. Darcy admitted to Elizabeth, his voice low and tender, “She would not tell us what she had done with you, and I was beside myself. I would have taken her that very moment and left her there if I thought it would help me find you.”

Elizabeth’s mouth fell agape, mesmerized by the stormy intensity she saw in Mr. Darcy’s dark eyes. She had never once in her life had imagined ever being so loved by anyone. To see someone go to such lengths for her, so freely and without regret, filled her with a sense of awe and profound comfort. Elizabeth succumbed to the heady feeling with amazement.

Even as a child, she had shouldered the mantle of protector; it was a role she had never truly relinquished. That did not mean that people did not love her. Elizabeth was certain that Jane loved her, but her sister lacked a certain amount of forcefulness that would be required to confront someone like Lady Catherine over her well-being. Anne loved her as well, but her frail health prevented her from reciprocating any type of protection. The knowledge of Mr. Darcy’s unwavering devotion—his willingness to move heaven and earth for her, his lifelong commitment to her happiness, evident in every tender glance and heartfelt word—kindled a warmth in her heart that deepened her love for him beyond measure.

“Yes, yes, he handled Aunt Catherine with strength and command and went searching for you like some white knight. Put aside the intense gazes. For now, it is time to focus on dealing with the rampaging dragon of Rosings and de Bourgh House.” A light, teasing tone in Richard’s voice interrupted Elizabeth and Darcy’s lingering, meaningful look.

Blushing, Elizabeth looked down at her plate, embarrassed at having been caught behaving so unlike herself. It helped that Mr. Darcy reached out and took her hand in his, giving it a squeeze. Looking over at Mr. Darcy, a small smile touched her lips; his own expression was equally abashed. Their mutual love made the situation less awkward.

“Dragon might just be the right image, Richard. Like a figure from folklore, your aunt amasses gold for her hoard and flies into furious rampages. The question is what are we to do with her?” teased Aunt Judith with a smile. Then, looking to her husband, she said, “I assume she has lost all right to any of Lewis’s estates and their dowager houses. Where will we put her?”

Pushing his plate away from himself, Uncle Reggie steeped his fingers deep in thought. “There is a cottage I was going to offer to one of Matlock’s long-time servants that might just be appropriate for my sister. Situated on one of my properties near the northern coast. As a former hunting lodge, the building offers few luxuries. My sister would have to adjust to stone floors, rough furniture, and, if I remember correctly, the only decoration is a dusty, imposing stag’s head. The town’s folk are a sturdy group who knows their own minds, so there is no one there who would bow and scrape to her as she might wish. It would be nearly impossible for her to find her way back to town or anywhere close enough to bother us.”

Brows narrowing, Elizabeth spoke up for the first time. “As much as I like the idea of sending her there, I know she will not be able to fend for herself in such rough accommodations. At the very least, she will need a maid, a cook, and a man of all work to chop wood and the like. We also need to decide what to do with her companion, Mrs. Cuthburt. Will she stay with Lady Catherine, or do we let her look for other work?”

“Elizabeth, do you believe the woman is complicit in Aunt Catherine’s poor behavior? Or has she acted out of fear?” asked Mr. Darcy.

“I hate to say this,” began Elizabeth, looking at Mr. Darcy, “but I have always thought she enjoyed being Lady Catherine’s stooge.”

With a delicate clink, Aunt Judith lifted her cup, and after taking a sip, she announced, “Then I say they deserve each other.”

“So when do we confront her?” asked Darcy. He was beyond ready to confront his aunt and finally be done with her. He had much better things he wanted to do with his time than deal with a recalcitrant family member.

“I say we go today, the moment we’re all done with this delicious meal,” Richard declared, pushing his plate aside. “Arriving early shall take her by surprise and serve our purpose well. That woman has overstepped her bounds and has no business retaining her supposed place in society. Indeed, I no longer consider her to be of my family.”

While Darcy fully agreed with Richard, he was uncertain how the others in the family would feel. Family did mean a lot to the Matlocks. It was easy to see how disturbed his uncle was at the thought of disowning his sister, a frown prominent on his grim face. Leaning over, Aunt Judith caught her husband’s hand in hers and said, “Our son has a point, Reggie. I know she is your sister, but we both know that she has been allowed to have her way far too long. It is time to withdraw our protection. All of our protection. If you must, think of poor Anne—she is the one who needs our support. Focus on removing Catherine so that we can focus on the people who deserve your attention and care.”

Patting his wife’s hand, Uncle Reginald sighed. “You are right, my dear. The moment has arrived to confront my sister, and a half-hearted attempt would be inappropriate. I must address the issue completely. Hence forth she will no longer be recognized by any member of this family.”

Silence filled the room for a time, but then, as if by some unheard signal, Elizabeth and Aunt Judith stood in unison. “If we are to confront my sister-in-law, then I must change into something else. I will expect you gentlemen to be ready when I come downstairs.”

With a slight blush, Elizabeth turned to Darcy and said, “I must change as well, Mr. Darcy, but I will be right back down.”

Catching her hand before she could turn away, Darcy said, “Fitzwilliam, or even William, would sound far more appealing than Mr. Darcy. We are engaged, after all, and I would truly like to be given the permission to call you Elizabeth.”

Blush crept up Elizabeth’s cheeks as she smiled. “Georgianna calls you Fitzwilliam, but William feels more comfortable, if you don’t mind.”

“I would not mind in the least, Elizabeth, my dear.” Bringing her hand to his lips, Darcy kissed the back of her hand. Then, with great difficulty, he let her go, but not before adding, “Go change. I will wait down here for you. We can go confront Mrs. de Bourgh together with Richard. Uncle Reginald and Aunt Judith will probably take their own carriage.”

As Elizabeth turned to leave, a sudden hesitation in her step and a lingering look back at him filled Darcy with an electrifying thrill. In all of his thoughts about how much he loved Elizabeth, he had never once considered she might respond in such a way or that it would feel so spectacular when she did. It was Richard’s chuckle that ended up pulling him out of his dreamy haze.

“You have it bad,” his uncle observed with a knowing grin. “I was much the same with my Judith in the beginning. I foresee a loving marriage on your horizon.”

Slouching, Darcy ran his hand through his hair but did not say anything to Richard

about his goofy grin and simply returned his uncle's smile. "Thank you, Uncle. I have long thought your marriage to Aunt Judith was something to be lauded and imitated."

Finished with his meal, Darcy stood and went to find a member of the efficient staff to ask for his carriage to be brought around so that he could leave with Elizabeth and Richard as soon as possible. As much as he would rather spend time gazing into Elizabeth's eyes, he was not about to let his Aunt Catherine, or rather, Mrs. de Bourgh, get away with her foul behavior.

With nothing to do but wait for Elizabeth, he stared out the window, the rhythmic ticking of the grandfather clock a stark contrast to the animated discussion between Richard and his uncle concerning Felton's latest exploits. Darcy rolled his eyes; his cousin, whose taste in clothes was as loud as his lack of sense, proved himself foolish in every way. Though Darcy still hoped he would have some sort of awakening to the foolishness of his actions. Maybe he would understand the seriousness of his father's expectations when he heard about the predicament his aunt was about to face.

As the rhythmic sound of steps on the stone staircase reached his ears, Darcy whirled around, a happy sigh escaping his lips as his eyes met his future bride's. In a stunning display of current fashion, Elizabeth wore a richly colored gown with elaborate embroidery, a stark contrast to her usual simple attire, causing him to pause. Though he found her no less beautiful in her usual clothes, the rich fabric and regal cut of her dress lent her an imposing air.

Seeing his expression, Elizabeth rushed to explain, "Jane's lady's maid insisted on doing me up in one of the outfits that Jane and Aunt Judith keep here for me." Her fingers traced the intricate embroidery of the dress, a nervous habit, as she confessed, "I know this is far more elaborate than my usual attire, but these types of gowns are impossible to manage alone, and I do not have a lady's maid at Rosings and de Bourgh House."

As Darcy approached Elizabeth, his hand gently brushing hers, he murmured, “Frankly, I do not care what you want to wear as long as you are comfortable. I always find you beautiful.” Offering her his arm, he signaled to Richard. “Shall we?”

A deep breath steadied Elizabeth as she nodded, a grim acceptance in her eyes, and with quiet strength she replied, “Yes, it is, as you said earlier, time to beard the dragon.”

There was something powerful about standing before Lady Catherine on William’s arm. He, the man whose love she cherished and returned, stood shoulder to shoulder with her against the woman whose callous acts had wounded countless souls, Elizabeth among them. Lady Catherine’s eyes narrowed as she, William, and Richard stood across from her in her sitting room.

The thrill of their newfound love for each other was so intense that Elizabeth had to fight the urge to snuggle closer to him, but she showed restraint. She settled instead for holding her head high and relishing in the stunned look on the Lady Catherine’s face. Her face flushed crimson, then drained of color as she comprehended Elizabeth’s arrival at de Bourgh House with William. The implications were clear, and they were not good for her. “...But I got rid of you,” she gasped.

William’s voice, a low growl laced with fury, as he said, “So you do not deny your fiendish machinations?”

Hoping to keep him relatively calm, Elizabeth squeezed his arm and, smiling faintly, she crooned, “I am well, William.”

On her other side, Richard stood with his arms crossed, his sharp gaze cutting through the quiet morning like a sword ready to slay an opponent. Elizabeth felt the weight of his words as he countered, “You may be well, Lizzie, but that does not mean Catherine de Bourgh should escape punishment for her actions.”



Overcoming her pallor and previous concern for Elizabeth's experience, Lady Catherine swung around to face Richard, shouting, "Excuse me? I am a lady, and I am your aunt. You will show me respect!"

"You may be those things in a nominal sort of way, but I will not grant you any respect or address you as such ever again. Starting today, consider yourself completely estranged from me. There is no bond between us. In fact, the Matlock's as a whole disown you."

Sputtering, Lady Catherine declared, "What!?! You useless little fool, I will not stand for such disrespect. Just you wait until your father-"

"His father agrees with his statement, Lady de Bourgh." As usual, Uncle Reggie, the Earl of Matlock, arrived silently, his footsteps muffled by the thick, plush carpet, allowing him to approach his sister unnoticed. When he sat in the chair facing Lady Catherine, Aunt Judith stood next to her husband, her hand on his shoulder showing a united front ready to do battle.

Lady Catherine's mouth hung open inelegantly for a time before she snapped it shut with a clack of teeth. Drawing herself up in her chair, she shouted, "Lady de Bourgh? Reginald, your joke is not funny. I insist you put your son in his place."

"I have not come to put my son in his place. I have come to put you in yours." Despite the peaceful tone of Uncle Reggie's voice, an unyielding firmness resonated in his words, a quiet strength that hinted at an immovable stance. Elizabeth found herself wondering if it was something that was taught only to earls or if others could learn it. It was certainly a technique that she would want to learn.

Mouth flapping open, Lady Catherine hesitated only once before complaining, "I am the daughter of an earl and your older sister. You cannot treat me so cruelly. I demand respect!"

Leaning forward, Uncle Reggie's voice turned oddly compassionate. "You are the daughter of a charming but deceitful cad whose honeyed words and romantic gestures left a trail of heartbroken young girls in his wake. Father never did find out who he was for certain. Regardless, you deserve nothing, no courtesy title and no respect from the great and good. Despite our kind treatment, far exceeding what you warranted, your ungracious response and cruel actions made it clear you weren't deserving of such benevolence. There is nothing about you that will help you escape the consequences of your actions."

"Lies!" Lady Catherine shrieked, her voice cracking like brittle glass before she slumped back, gasping, "You speak lies!" Her face contorted with fury.

"Oh, do the math, Catty," Uncle Reggie demanded, shaking his head. "You were born seven months after our parents' wedding. And do not suggest they anticipated their vows. You know they only met the day they were to marry. Everyone liked father well enough, and they accepted the standard born early excuse. You should be happy you were a girl. If you would have been born a boy, Mother would have been forced to see you given away. As forgiving as Father was, he was not about to claim another man's son as heir."

Elizabeth's glance flicked over to William and then Richard. Their shocked expressions said it all. This was not a widely known family secret. Elizabeth was only able to think of the previous countess whom she had never met. The poor girl, heartbroken and betrayed by someone who had exploited her innocence, was forced into a marriage with a stranger. For all that it started poorly, Richard spoke happily about the rumored love between the two, suggesting it was a good match.

The information seemed to have frozen Lady Catherine in place. Her eyes were wide, her face had gone ashen, and she no longer seemed to have the will to argue. His voice still, low and steady, Uncle Reggie said, "Because Father loved you as his own, despite everything. He let you be known as Lady Catherine, but that is not who you

truly are. You are only Lady de Bourgh, the widow of a baronet. Though you possess no inherent courtesy title, as the widow of a baronet, the style of Lady de Bourgh is rightfully yours, should you choose to use it. If you do not wish to be called Lady de Bourgh, you can use Mrs. de Burgh instead, I suppose. You will never again be recognized as Lady Catherine,” Uncle Reggie declared. “You must reconcile yourself to your new circumstances. Richard, per Anne’s request, is taking over Rosings, and all attached properties immediately. Had you been remotely kind, Richard might have allowed you to stay at the dowager house at Rosings, or even at the Scotland property, but that has not been the case. Instead, your care will now fall to me.”

Learning that she had lost Rosings seemed to stir up some of her previous vigor, and Mrs. de Bourgh said, “I have been Lady Catherine all my life. I am the mistress of Rosings Park and Stonehaven Glen in Scotland. You cannot simply take that away from me on a whim.”

“This is not a whim, Catty. You were raised in luxury, with every comfort at your fingertips, yet you chose to become a cruel and manipulative person rather than the refined lady you could have been. You have harmed someone that I consider family, and I will not allow that. By exchanging compassion for cruelty, you have created your own difficult situation. It is your actions that have caused this.”

Leaning forward, face white and voice hoarse, she pleaded, “Even if I am not a lady, surely as your sister, you will see me well cared for.”

Elizabeth wondered if the woman’s down-turned gaze and trembling hands were genuine signs of heartbreak, or a calculated performance designed to elicit sympathy. Watching Uncle Reggie carefully, she saw nothing about him that would imply that his sister swayed him. In the same calm but firm voice, he said, “I am sending you to father’s hunting cabin near the northern shore. You will have Cuthburt, a maid of all work, and a man of all work. You leave immediately and starting now, you will be guarded at all times until you reach the cabin. Your belongings that are yours and not

connected to your husband's estate will arrive there shortly before you do. As of this moment, we are done with you."

In a move that proved her earlier actions were just an act, the former Lady Catherine surged from her seat and screamed, "This is all your fault! You have turned all of my family against me." With her hands twisted into gnarled claws, she attempted to fling herself at Elizabeth, only to be stopped by Richard. William had pulled Elizabeth to his side, his arms wrapped protectively around her. Through his arms, she caught only a glimpse of the struggle between the once pompous lady, now with her arms bound behind her, and the large, burly guards who were hauling her out.

### Chapter Twenty-Two

Darcy, still shaken from the scene with the woman who had been his aunt, felt a profound reluctance to release Elizabeth's hand. While he knew he would have to let her go soon enough, he did not want to, might never want to. Running his thumb over her knuckles, Darcy marveled at just how delicate they were.

The air in Anne's room was heavy with concern as Elizabeth watched her chest rise and fall, each slow breath labored, her pale lips parted slightly. The inescapable weight of grief seemed to settle over the room, suffocating any foolish hopes that Anne might be spared from her fate. Before confronting his aunt, they paid Anne a brief visit, but she remained unresponsive, her stillness unsettling. They were both aware of Anne's impending death, yet it remained a difficult reality.

"Do you think she was hurt by me leaving without telling her?" sniffed Elizabeth tearfully.

Letting go of Elizabeth's hand, Darcy instead wrapped his arm around her and murmured, "You know you did not have any choice in your disappearance. Besides, the staff adore her, and I am sure they ensured her comfort, anticipating her every need with every kindness."

Anne, surprisingly, confirmed Darcy's statement in a hushed whisper, "He is right, Lizzie. I was wonderfully taken care of."

Rushing to the bed, Elizabeth hovered next to Anne and cried, "Oh, Anne, I am desperately sorry I have not been here for you as I wanted to."

“The staff may have lied about your whereabouts, but I saw through their deception. I knew that mother was up to something.” Pausing to take a few gasping breaths, Anne added, “I had faith in you, though. I knew you would prevail... I was waiting for you to return.”

Darcy moved to stand behind Elizabeth as she sat on the edge of the bed next to Anne. His cousin looked up at them, her face pale and drawn, the dark circles under her eyes hinting at a life fading away. He placed his hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder, hoping to lend her strength for what was sure to come. “You’d be proud—Elizabeth saved herself.”

Smiling dreamily, Anne’s gaze became slightly out of focus as she said, “Of course she did. Elizabeth has always been remarkable.” She gasped, a ragged breath catching in her throat before a shaky sigh escaped.

Elizabeth looked up at Darcy, tears welling in her eyes, and Darcy longed to save her from her anguish. He knew there was nothing he could do to stop what he was sure was coming. They waited as Anne seemed to marshal her strength. In the heavy stillness of the room, Anne’s ragged gasps echoed, a stark and lonely sound.

Anne’s gaze flickered, then settled on Darcy. With a visible effort, she murmured, “You did not call Lizzie Miss Elizabeth.” The words, barely audible, seemed to catch slightly in her throat. Swallowing, she hummed under her breath and asked, “Have you finally admitted you are the perfect match?”

Chuckling mournfully, Elizabeth said, “Yes, he even went so far as to propose this morning.”

A faint smile touched Anne’s gaunt face, her eyes shining with an odd, joyful light as she nodded slightly. “That is good.” Gasping, she paused, breathing weakly before continuing, “I want you both to be happy, and I know you will be good to each

other.”

They waited, almost breathing in time to Anne’s feeble breaths, sharing the quiet understanding that their time with Anne was nearing its end. Reaching up, Elizabeth clutched at Darcy’s hand where it rested on her shoulder, knowing he was just as desperate as she was for comfort in such a difficult time.

A rattling wheeze, like stones tumbling in a metal box, preceded Anne’s murmur. “Thank you for loving me so well,” she whispered, her voice trembling with the effort of each shallow breath. Anne’s eyes fluttered closed, and she only managed two more struggling breaths before they ceased altogether.

Turning away from Anne’s still body, Elizabeth curled into Darcy’s chest, gripping the fabric of his waistcoat as she sobbed. There was nothing he could do but hold her to him, hoping that the release of tears would ease some of her sorrow. Despite his affection for his cousin, his relationship paled in comparison to the profound closeness Elizabeth shared with her, having lived with and nurtured her throughout most of her life. The years of shared experiences created an unbreakable bond that was now severed by death.

They mourned together, neither speaking until the door to the room opened and Aunt Judith walked in silently. Her eyes swept across the scene, taking in every detail, before she gave a small nod and a bittersweet smile. “Then the poor girl is finally free of her suffering,” she whispered, the words heavy with finality.

Her steps were soft as she approached the bed and, smoothing back Anne’s hair, she kissed her brow. Then, turning to Darcy and Elizabeth, she said, “I will manage everything that is needed.” Taking Elizabeth’s hand, Aunt Judith added, “That woman is gone, but I believe you would be better off at Matlock House than here, and I am sure that Darcy can take you.”

Nodding, Elizabeth stood unsteadily, and Darcy was quick to grasp her by the elbow, making sure she did not fall. Offering his arm, Darcy turned to go but was stopped by his aunt as she said, “Make sure that Jane puts Elizabeth to bed. She has had too many upheavals in her life in a short period of time and could do with rest to regather her strength and composure. I will stay with Anne and help the staff prepare her for burial.”

Aunt Judith moved to the bell-pull as Darcy walked out of the room with Elizabeth on his arm. Elizabeth was too quiet for his tastes and Darcy was eager to follow his aunt’s instructions. The heavy oak stairs groaned softly under their weight as they descended, and in the quiet of the old house, Darcy discovered his uncle and Richard in earnest conversation within the book-lined study. It was simple enough to explain what had happened before he took Elizabeth and left de Bourgh House. Their recent victory against Catherine de Bourgh and the love he shared with Elizabeth could not overshadow the gravity of the situation; it was not a time for joy. They were a family in mourning and for a time, things would be somber.

Elizabeth blinked owlishly at the ceiling and tried to recall what she had planned for the day. It was not the easiest task. The last several days had been a blur of activity even as they dealt with Anne’s passing. Aunt Judith had insisted for Jane and Elizabeth to join her in attending a dressmaker to have new dresses made up for their time of mourning. Elizabeth was too numb to realize her aunt had also ordered several dresses of half-mourning for her as well. So at least she had the proper attire to don once she woke sufficiently.

There had been what seemed to be a ceaseless stream of callers at Matlock House offering their condolences. It was a kindness that Elizabeth had not exactly expected, having lived so isolated from society at large. Anne had not been known by anyone of consequence but that did not mean people would ignore the grief of an earl and his countess. It had at least allowed Elizabeth to be introduced to a few of the young ladies her age who were friendly with Jane.



The somber day of Anne's funeral had come and gone. Though barred from the burial itself, deemed too fragile for public mourning, the ladies of the community gathered at Matlock House, a silent, supportive presence for the bereaved family. Life was fragile and everyone had lost someone, be it parent, sibling, child, or even niece or nephew, and they shared tales of prior happiness or encouragement for the future. At times they were just a silent bulwark, there to add their presence to the gathering. As if the grief of one could be supported and lessened by the presence of many. Elizabeth found it fascinating to observe the mourning customs that bound women together in shared grief, the quiet strength in their collective sorrow palpable.

Elizabeth dragged her feet from under the covers and let them dangle off the side of the bed. Somehow, it felt like a good morning even knowing that Anne was no longer part of her life. Grief had left her numb for so long that she had barely been able to respond to the support that William had been offering. He was wonderful enough to let her know he did not mind that she had little strength to do anything but grieve by saying, "Just as there is a time to be joyful, there is a time to grieve. For now, we grieve. Just so long as you do not forget there will come a time when we will once again be joyful together."

Smiling, Elizabeth slid to the ground, wiggling her toes on the polished wood floor before moving to pull her bell-pull. She had her very own lady's maid now. The shift from self-reliance to Jemma's help was jarring, yet Elizabeth genuinely liked her, despite Jemma's persistent reminders to use her last name, Morris—a formality Elizabeth consistently ignored.

Having remembered that she would be visiting the law office of Mr. Crampton, Elizabeth resolved to wear one of her simpler gowns in lavender and gray, appropriate for half-mourning. Her birthday had passed in the midst of their deep mourning for Anne and the barrister had requested that she attend a meeting with him and Mr. Darcy's barrister. William would also be in attendance as well as Richard and Jemma, for that matter. Aunt Judith had been adamant about not being seen alone

with William. Which made a certain amount of sense. Elizabeth might have only shared one true kiss with the man, but the lingering sweetness of it, the gentle pressure of his lips against hers, told her it was an experience she'd crave again and again.

The clinking of china announced Jemma's arrival as she entered the room with an energetic grace and a tray piled high in her arms. "Good morning, Miss Elizabeth," she chirped. "How are you this morning? Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Jemma, I had a very good night's sleep," Elizabeth confirmed, feeling the energy building within her, "and I am ready to tackle another busy day. I think the dress I have set out will do the trick."

With a shake of her head, Jemma presented Elizabeth with her perfectly brewed tea, the fragrant steam curling upwards, and placed a flaky pastry on the nearby side table. Pouring water into the basin so that Elizabeth could wash her face before she dressed, Jemma chided, "You know you do not have to get out the dress yourself, and that you really should refer to me as Morris, Miss."

After taking a sip of her tea, Elizabeth put the delicate teacup down with a chuckle, and moved to the porcelain basin. Pushing up her sleeves, she said, "And you know I have compromised by referring to you as Morris in public. Besides, I enjoy looking through my own clothes to choose what to wear. If there comes a time when I am too out of sorts to pick my own clothes, you can do it, but until then I am perfectly capable."

When Elizabeth picked her face up from the water, Jemma was there with a smile on her face and a towel in her hands. They truly were a good match and got along well, despite Elizabeth's notions of independence. In no time at all, Elizabeth was dressed and ready, the silk of her dress rustling as she descended the stairs, Jemma trailing quietly behind.

Waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs was William, a smile on his face as he watched her descend. Tilting her head, Elizabeth stopped, not at the bottom of the stairs, but high enough so their faces were on the same level. With a smile that was wider than most she had worn recently, she asked, "Have you chosen to ride with Richard and me?"

Eyes dancing with a hint of mischief, William explained, "I thought it made little sense to take separate carriages when I was only just across the courtyard."

"I suppose that does make more sense," Elizabeth replied with a nod, "though I suspect Richard might look forward to ribbing you once again."

With a grin, William said, "He may make fun of me as much as he likes, so long as I get to bask in your presence. Besides, turnabout is fair play, and he will have to fall in love at some point." Offering Elizabeth his arm, he asked, "Would you care to join me in the morning room for a cup of coffee while we wait for Richard to ready himself?"

Elizabeth's hand rested lightly on William's arm as she descended the last stair, and once beside the man she loved, she smiled and said, "It would be my pleasure to spend time with you, though if you make my coffee wrong, I will make you prepare it again."

It seemed to Darcy that all barristers must prefer offices of the same sort, that or the profession required similar tools of the trade. The heavy mahogany desk, its polished surface gleaming under the soft light, the worn leather chairs, and the air of quiet competence, all mirrored the atmosphere of Darcy's own barrister's chambers. Once everyone was settled in their seats across from Mr. Crampton, the gentleman picked up a stack of papers in his hands and began to tap them on the table. "Thank you for coming today, Miss Elizabeth. I see you have brought both Richard Fitzwilliam, Fitzwilliam Darcy, and Mr. Darcy's barrister, Mr. Bailey."

Perfectly at ease beside Darcy, Elizabeth smiled and replied, “Yes, sir. The earl was unable to attend today due to a meeting at Parliament, but as I was his ward, he asked that I bring Richard along with me. And I believe we spoke of Mr. Bailey seeing to my legal rights when last we spoke. As for Mr. Darcy, we became engaged shortly before Anne de Bourgh’s passing and I felt it was best to bring him.”

“Then all is in order. I do, however, want to first convey my sympathy. I know you were very close to Anne de Bourgh and her death was a great loss to you.” Pausing, Mr. Crampton’s expression shifted from a somber one to a large smile as he added, “It seems congratulations are certainly due as well, for a union between you and Mr. Darcy can only result in a lifetime of shared happiness and success, a partnership built on mutual respect and affection.”

“Thank you,” Elizabeth murmured, a delicate blush rising on her cheeks as she stole a shy glance at Darcy, before adding softly, “we have every hope of a perfectly happy future.”

Though he nodded along to Mr. Crampton and Elizabeth’s conversation, a knot of tension was developing behind one of his shoulder blades. He had to restrain himself from bouncing his leg in frustration, waiting for Mr. Crampton to get to the point. Darcy had to admit he was probably more curious than Elizabeth in regard to the mysterious codicil, and that curiosity was killing him.

As if noting the slight twitch in Darcy’s foot, Mr. Crampton said, “Well then, let us get on with the contents of the codicil.” Mr. Crampton meticulously arranged the items on his desk, a silent ritual that seemed to emphasize his next words. “While Miss Elizabeth did not receive anything significant in Sir Lewis’s will, the codicil provides for her quite effectively. Sir Lewis’s letter, entrusted to me for Miss Elizabeth, provides a concise summation of the matter.”

With that, he handed over a sheet of paper folded in half to Elizabeth. For a moment,

she simply held it out in front of her, studying it with wide, rapidly moistening eyes. Then, looking at Darcy sitting beside her, she took a breath and unfolded it, holding it so that they could both read it. Darcy recognized his uncle's hand immediately in the crisp, clean lines of the writing, a familiar style he'd come to expect in the correspondence from the kind man. The message did not even take up the full length of the page, but still Darcy knew whatever it said would have a tremendous impact on Elizabeth. Leaning in, Darcy squeezed Elizabeth's free hand in encouragement before he silently began reading.

My dear girl, I know that by the time this letter reaches you I will have been long dead and most likely you will have lost Anne as well. I want to apologize for abandoning you as I did. If I could have managed to stay, I would have. You must know that your arrival in my life made it so much better. You brought joy and enthusiasm back into a life that had grown dull and, more than that, you brought joy to Anne's life. Please know that my feelings of gratitude are far deeper than I can possibly express.

I know unequivocally that I will pass soon, and I am doing all I can to ensure you are well provided for. If my shrewish wife makes your life difficult without me to restrain her, I trust Reginald will invite you into his home. Please do not hesitate to go. The Fitzwilliams love you nearly as much as I do. Reginald has also said he will provide a dowry for you, but that is what he is giving you, and I feel the need to provide for you as well. While I am not leaving you a monetary amount, I have done something else to provide for you.

When I found you and Jane so long ago, I began a search for your family, just in case you had people who were looking for you. I learned that you came from an estate named Longbourn in a small town named Meryton. Your father's second cousin took it over upon his death but died soon after. Sadly, his only child, a son, was by all reports a fool and ran the estate into the ground, eventually reducing the estate to financial ruin. As he had no male heirs, the entail was broken. So I dispatched a

trusted agent to make a significantly undervalued offer on the estate. Longbourn is now yours.

Careful management has brought the estate back around, though it still does not produce as much as it could. Longbourn is your birthright, and it is yours to do with as you wish. The increase to your dowry will be substantial, removing any anxieties about securing a suitable husband and offering you a greater degree of independence and comfort.

I want only the best for you, my dear. Recall our time together fondly, not with sadness. Find a life brimming with happiness and only settle down with a husband who will cherish and support you, adding to your joy. Go forth and be the amazing woman I know you are, radiating the kindness and brilliance that first touched my heart.

With all of my love,

Uncle Lewis

Upon seeing Elizabeth in tears, the letter falling to her lap as she covered her face, Darcy understood she'd finished reading the letter. Folding it carefully, Darcy moved the letter to the desk and, after handing her a handkerchief, gathered her in his arms. In a few moments, she had herself back under control and, taking a few deep, shuddering breaths, she asked Mr. Crampton, "Is there anything else that I need to be aware of besides receiving Longbourn from Uncle Lewis?"

Smiling wryly, Mr. Crampton cleared his throat and said, "Anne, before her passing, instructed me to inform you when you came to learn of the codicil that she desired her dowry to be shared equally by you and Mr. Richard Fitzwilliam. Her dowry was forty thousand pounds. I have the paperwork here, if you'd like Mr. Bailey to review it."

Elizabeth's eyes widened for a moment, then looking up at Darcy, she asked, "Were you in need of padding Pemberley's coffers? I think between what Uncle Reggie has set aside for my dowry and what Anne has done, my dowry will amount to thirty-five thousand pounds."

Speaking up for the first time from his chair where he looked over all the paperwork that Mr. Crampton had given him, Mr. Bailey said, "Do not forget Longbourn is part of that dowry, and according to this paperwork, should you want to sell it, it would bring in something close to one hundred thousand pounds. Under sound management, the past few years have yielded impressive results and hefty profits that were just put back into the property. It is the most prosperous estate in the area."

Darcy could only stare at Elizabeth, who had turned pale at the information. He had never imagined Elizabeth could have such a dowry at her disposal. Uncle Lewis had been right—she would not even have to marry if she did not truly want to, she was set for life. Drawing his attention away from Elizabeth, Richard burst into laughter and exclaimed, "It is a good thing you are already engaged! Lizzie will be the wealthiest debutante of the season. Even engaged, she is going to have any number of gentlemen chasing after her for her wealth."

Darcy might have begun to worry if Elizabeth did not immediately say, "How soon do you think Aunt Judith will allow us to marry? There is no way I will allow myself to be pursued like a fox in a hunt when my heart already belongs to someone so extraordinary."

### Chapter Twenty-Three

One year later

Elizabeth could not help smiling ear to ear. While it was not the happiest day of her life, it would have to be counted in the top ten. Her sister Jane was finally getting married to the man she loved. Gazing down the aisle, she saw Jane appear with Uncle Reginald. As they approached the altar, where Mr. Bingley waited patiently, their happy smiles were accompanied by the gentle sounds of organ music and the hushed reverence of the wedding guests.

Even Richard, who stood waiting with him, was happy despite all the attention he was getting from the women in the pews. Elizabeth suspected he would not be single much longer. Now with Jane married, Aunt Judith would focus on her youngest son's future nuptials while she waited for the babies to begin appearing.

Elizabeth, seated in the front pew of the magnificent London cathedral, could clearly hear the soft tones of her sister and Mr. Bingley exchanging vows. The ceremony itself did not take long and within minutes, Jane was on Mr. Bingley's arm, walking back down the aisle to sign the wedding registry. She had not realized that she had begun to cry until William pressed a handkerchief into her hand, whispering in her ear, "Do not cry, darling. You know they will be moving close to us once they return from their wedding tour."

Sniffing, Elizabeth cursed her high emotions and blotted her eyes, whispering back, "It just reminds me of our day not so very long ago. I am so happy she has found a love nearly as perfect as ours."



“Nearly?” he asked, looking at her with a soft smile and knowing eyes.

Taking the arm that William offered her, Elizabeth replied as they began moving their way through the crush. “As much as I love my sister, it is simply impossible for anyone else to have a love as perfect as ours. She will simply have to settle for nearly perfect.”

“Jane and Bingley look happy enough even if they do not have our perfect love.” Putting his other arm out, William protected Elizabeth from being bowled over by someone in the crowd before adding, “I will admit, if only to you, that I much preferred our wedding to theirs. Having our wedding at the Pemberley chapel allowed us to restrict the number of people in attendance to a much more manageable number.”

“Our wedding was everything that was quaint and I loved it,” grinned Elizabeth.

William’s shoulders shook as he fought a laugh. Guiding her through a side exit, he said, “You really need to stop poking fun at Miss Bingley. One of these days, you are going to get caught out by Jane and you know it will upset her.”

Taking a deep breath of fresh air, Elizabeth felt the tension leave her shoulders as she looked at William. With a happy sigh and a nose wrinkle she knew he adored, Elizabeth declared, “I’m thrilled my wedding forced Miss Bingley’s true spitefulness into the open, revealing her nasty character to Jane and Mr. Bingley. Otherwise, Jane would have been stuck with that harpy instead of having her shipped off to northern Scotland to live with her great aunt.” Sticking her lip out on a pout, Elizabeth added, “At least I did not suggest we send Miss Bingley to stay with Lady Catherine. They would have made the perfect pair, each with an inflated ego, a match made only in the heavens of self-absorption.”

This time William did laugh before crying, “They would have killed each other within a week and you know it.”

“I do not see how that could be considered our problem,” sighed Elizabeth, shaking her head.

William halted their progress down the sidewalk toward the carriages and looked down at her. “What am I going to do with you, Mrs. Darcy?”

Standing on her tiptoes, Elizabeth kissed him on the cheek and whispered, “You shall take us to the wedding breakfast at Matlock House by the long route, that we might steal a few precious moments alone in the carriage before we must once again face the crush of people.”

Darcy looked down at his relatively new bride and shook his head. The urge to sweep her into his arms and carry her away was almost overwhelming. Not only was she strikingly beautiful, with captivating green eyes that hinted at a playful spirit, but her sharp wit left him enchanted. Knowing he could never get away with simply grabbing her face and kissing her breathless, Darcy turned and half sprinted to their carriage, pulling her with him.

Safely inside the carriage, with the shades drawn to shield them from view, he finally kissed her, a gasp escaping his lips as he murmured, “What has you so spirited today?”

With a blush rising on her cheeks, Elizabeth looked up at him and admitted, “Being pregnant with your child has thrown my emotions into chaos.”

With a jolt, Darcy sat up straight, and the word “Pregnant?!” was a breathless whisper escaping his lips. It was not one of his more eloquent comments.

Nodding, Elizabeth’s blush deepened as she explained, “I have suspected for some time, but I did not know until I felt the baby move early this morning.”

Leaning forward, Darcy’s kiss was tender, a slow exploration of Elizabeth’s lips,

before he pulled back slightly and murmured, “Why did you not tell me this morning?” His touch still lingered on her, as if he could not let her go, the woman who meant so much to him.

With a shake of her head, Elizabeth replied, “We were all in such a rush that we barely had a moment alone together. Besides, I did not want to detract from Jane’s wedding.”

“I understand.” Despite their elaborate clothes, Darcy pulled Elizabeth close, the rich fabrics rustling as he murmured, “How are you feeling, my love? I mean, besides the fact that your emotions are in an uproar?”

Covering a yawn, Elizabeth said, “Save for an exhaustion I cannot seem to remedy and feelings in somewhat of a tangle, I am quite well.”

“Then close your eyes while we make our way to the wedding breakfast. Conserve your energy.” Settling Elizabeth’s head on his shoulder, Darcy smiled when he heard the happy sigh she made. A quiet hum of contentment vibrated from her as she nestled against him, getting comfortable. He ran his fingers lightly across her back, needing to soothe her in any way he could while being careful to not harm her dress. They would be getting out of the carriage in a matter of minutes, and she could not look disheveled.

While Elizabeth rested, Darcy thought. He contemplated all of the wonderful time he had spent with the woman he loved. It had started out with a kick in his shin, and as much as it had shocked him, it was a kick he deserved. With the passage of time, he grew to admire the woman Elizabeth had become, a journey culminating in the profound realization that she was not just his friend, but the woman he deeply loved.

Their marriage had only been the beginning of another stage of their journey. The tasks at Pemberley were numerous, and they worked together, the weight of responsibility shared as they completed each one, their teamwork drawing them

closer. Elizabeth and Georgianna were as close as sisters now and spent much of their time together when he was not available.

It was all he had ever dreamed of and now they would be having a child. They had spoken of children during their three months of engagement, for they both wished for a large family full of love. Their children, starting with the one soon to arrive, would be treasured, and their unique identities cherished and nurtured. Their children would not be ignored, abandoned, or forced into a mold for the sake of appearances.

He was soon to become a father, and with none other than the most admirable woman he had ever known. Realizing Elizabeth had actually nodded off in the last few minutes, Darcy shook her slightly and kissed her forehead. “Darling, we are here. It is time to go to your sister’s wedding breakfast.”

Nodding dreamily, Elizabeth sat upright and smiled at Darcy before whispering, “We will face the hordes together.”

“Yes, together,” replied Darcy with one last brief kiss before he hopped down the carriage and turned back to face Elizabeth. He helped his wife from the carriage, their hands meeting, a spark passing between them as she took his arm, and they entered Matlock House. Elizabeth was everything to him—his wife, the mother of his child, the most wonderful woman, and the prospect of a future together thrilled him beyond measure.