



The Dignity of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy

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Category: Historical

Description: If Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy hadn't seen Miss Elizabeth Bennet by chance at a theater in London on the eve before she was about to embark to Kent to visit Hunsford, he never would have offered to convey her in his own carriage. Then the carriage would never have overturned, and they would never have sought help, and they would never have ended up set upon by bandits, huddling together in the cold, Mr. Darcy with a gunshot wound from protecting Elizabeth.

But since that did happen, and since Mr. Darcy's aunt Lady Matlock set tongues wagging about Elizabeth's reputation, it's only honorable that he marry her.

Elizabeth accepts. It's a choice between marriage to wealthy, respected man and ruin. She is not a particularly stupid woman, after all.

However, she knows, deep down, that marrying her is a mark against his dignity. She knows men like Mr. Darcy don't fall in love with women like her.

And that's all right with her. There are worse things than a companionable marriage with a man who is cordial to her, after all. True, he has never visited her bed, but perhaps she's rather relieved about that. There are many, many worse things than her life as Mrs. Darcy. She refuses to be displeased with it.

Dear reader, though this version starts out with violence and fear and bandits, I believe it's actually one of my lighter offerings. I wanted to write about a very honorable Mr. Darcy, who holds back his passion for his wife because he feels she's been through too much already. But eventually, yes, they succumb, of course. Anyway, this is as low-angst as I get. There are puppies. Enjoy!

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CHAPTER ONE

MR. FITZWILLIAM DARCY wasn't exactly good in a crisis.

It pained him to admit this, because he was a proud man in many ways, and he expected quite a lot from himself. He was not one to shirk duty, and he did not attempt to get around rules. He did not place pleasure above propriety. In every way he knew, he tried to be a good man, and for the most part, he succeeded at whatever task he put to himself.

But he had to admit that he didn't like it when plans went awry. He felt a great deal of anxiety when things went badly, and he wasn't always proud of the way he handled that anxiety.

So, now, standing outside a broken and ruined carriage, the driver lying prone on the ground with his neck bent in such a fashion that it was obvious he would never be moving of his own volition again, his cousin Colonel Fitzwilliam unconscious, and Sir William Lucas with what looked like a broken leg, Mr. Darcy's voice was short and clipped when anyone attempted to ask him questions.

"Silence, Miss Lucas," he said to Maria Lucas, who was wringing her hands, standing over her father, "if you don't mind it. I am trying to think."

"What's there to think about?" Miss Elizabeth Bennet's voice was brisk. She was kneeling next to the carriage driver, holding his wrist.

"Is that necessary?" said Mr. Darcy to her. "He's obviously no longer with us."

“Yes,” said Elizabeth, wincing. “Yes, I think you’re right.” She stood up, smoothing out her skirts. “Well, there’s nothing for it. We must go for help. Mr. Darcy and I shall set off on foot, and you stay here with the wounded, Maria.”

“All right,” said Maria, who looked ready to start crying. “But how long will you be and where will you go and what should I do if the colonel wakes up and—”

“Your job,” Elizabeth interrupted, “will be to keep your father as comfortable as possible and also to watch the road for another carriage, which you should flag down. Use your shawl, all right? Can you wave it for me?”

“My shawl...” Maria looked about for it. “Oh, it must be in the carriage.”

The carriage was turned on its side. It was impossible to get in unless one climbed all the way up the top of it, which was how they’d all gotten out of the thing in the first place. Mr. Darcy had done that, had opened the door and then had hauled his cousin out and helped Sir William out. At that point, he’d felt ignited from within, functioning as if according to instinct. But now, he was confused.

“Here it is,” said Elizabeth gently, touching the shawl, which was actually draped over Maria’s shoulders.

“Oh,” said Maria. “Oh, of course.” She snatched it off and began waving it wildly. “Like this, then?”

“Exactly right,” said Elizabeth, smiling at her. “If you see a carriage, that is what you do.”

Mr. Darcy didn’t see that it mattered. Anyone along the road would see the overturned carriage and stop. But he wasn’t going to argue with Elizabeth about that. “There’s no reason for you to accompany me,” he said to Elizabeth. “You should also

stay here with the wounded.”

“Oh, nonsense,” said Elizabeth. “You’ll need me. You’re rather in shock, Mr. Darcy. I’d go on my own, even, if you’d like.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” He gaped at her.

“All right, then,” she said with a shrug. “Sir William, you keep your leg as still as possible, won’t you?”

Sir William nodded, gritting his teeth. He’d been mostly silent, owing to the pain, Mr. Darcy thought.

“Good,” she said with a stiff nod. She started walking off, heading down the road. “Mr. Darcy, are you coming?” she called, without even looking behind her.

Mr. Darcy fumed, silent, looking at Sir William, who winced and didn’t meet his eye, and at his cousin the colonel, still unconscious, where Mr. Darcy had laid his body in the grass after hauling him out of the carriage, and at Maria, clutching the shawl and looking down the road. Then he turned and looked at the disappearing figure of Elizabeth Bennet. He hurried after her.

He fell into step with her in several moments, and she looked up at him with a little nod. “What a horrible afternoon we’re having, hmm?” she said, letting out a little laugh.

“Indeed, madam,” he said softly.

By all rights, she shouldn’t have even been in this carriage with him. He had not planned to come to visit his aunt, Lady Catherine, at Rosings for several more weeks at least.

However, by chance, he'd come across Elizabeth at the theater in London only last night. She was there with her vulgar relations who lived in the unfashionable part of town, and some sense of proprietary exclusion might have led him to ignore her, but he found he could not do it. He'd seen her. She'd seen him. It seemed abhorrent to simply turn away and pretend as if they had not, in fact, seen each other.

He must at least say hello, even though, weeks ago, he'd done his best to keep his friend Mr. Bingley from knowing that another Bennet sister was in town, staying with these same vulgar relations. When it was Jane Bennet, it was easier, he thought.

Something about Elizabeth...

He didn't know. It was ridiculous, really, positively ridiculous. He became different around her. Sputtering, tongue-tied, like a schoolboy. She wasn't even that pretty. He'd once called her tolerable, and he tried to convince himself that was how he saw her now.

The evidence was stacking up against him. Even if he hadn't had those few verbal sparring sessions in Netherfield, where her fine eyes had danced as she lifted her chin. I am no longer surprised at your knowing only six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing any. Even if he hadn't danced with her at the ball Bingley had held. Even if she hadn't brought up Wickham of all people. Even if...

Well, whatever the case, the evidence that she swayed him dangerously was there.

What had happened at the theater?

His intention had been to exchange pleasantries quickly and get away from her. To this end, he'd placed himself in her path and bowed to her, and said, "Miss Elizabeth Bennet, so good to see you. I hope your parents are in good health."

“Oh,” she said, giving him a smile that was so fine and bright that he felt promptly dazzled. “Yes, of course. They are quite well. So kind of you to ask.”

“This is my, erm, my sister,” he said, nodding at Georgiana, who was with him. “Miss Darcy.”

Georgiana gave him a funny look at this, having not expected it.

Indeed, it wasn't in the plan, but he couldn't not introduce her. It was pointedly rude

“Miss Darcy, this is Miss Bennet. Miss Bennet, Miss Darcy.”

“Such a pleasure,” said Miss Bennet.

“Oh, quite, so lovely to meet you,” said Georgiana. “But we are just on our way to the carriage, are we not?”

“Yes,” said Mr. Darcy, and then he stood there, as if struck dumb, looking at her. She wasn't pretty. Or was she? What was it about her? Maybe it was the way she smiled. She seemed to smile in such a way that indicated that she knew a great many secrets and that she was not inclined to share any of them. She smiled as if, oh, he couldn't say, but almost as if she thought herself superior to him. Certainly as if she found him amusing in some way.

Him. Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

She shouldn't do that.

And it should enrage him, by all rights, when she did. Why didn't it enrage him? Why did it... intrigue him?

“Yes,” he said, finally, nodding. “We are heading to the carriage. And I do hope your parents are in good health. And all your sisters? And...”

“Oh, yes,” said Elizabeth, laughing now, as if unable to help herself.

Lord, she thought him ludicrous. He was ludicrous. She cut him off at the knees. He must be in love with her, he supposed, because this was how men supposedly behaved when they were in love, but he did not wish to be in love with her. Perhaps he could talk himself out of it.

“And your sister, she seems in good health,” said Elizabeth, turning her smile on Georgiana. “Truly, we are heading home ourselves.”

“Perhaps we will see you here in town on another day,” he said. “Good evening.”

“Oh, no, we are leaving in the morning for Kent, in fact,” she said. “But I am ever so happy to have had this time to speak with you, of course. You have a good evening as well.” She made to go around him, now. They were in the lobby of the theater, and the doors were behind his back.

“Kent?” he said. “Do you have relatives there?”

She stopped, turning back to him. “Sort of, I suppose. Mr. Collins is my cousin, but I am primarily going to visit Mrs. Collins, who you may remember as Miss Charlotte Lucas. Now, she is married and settled at the rectory there.”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “How interesting. You know that my aunt lives at Rosings, quite near to the parsonage there. What is it called? Hunsford?”

“Oh, yes, you know it,” she said with a smile.

“I do indeed,” he said. “I am, in fact, planning on a visit there, to my aunt’s estate, in just a few weeks.”

“Truly? What a small world. We shall be there for some weeks, so perhaps our visits shall overlap.”

“How are you getting there tomorrow?” he said. “I don’t suppose your relations here have a carriage.”

“No, we are going post, of course,” she said.

“Oh, how dreary,” he said. “I am sorry.”

“No reason to be sorry,” she said, laughing. “It is no hardship, Mr. Darcy, but of course you would find it so.”

He cleared his throat. She was laughing at him. Again.

Georgiana glared at him.

He tilted his head to one side. “You know, I could quite move up my visit to my aunt. It seems a waste if we are both going the same direction, after all. We should travel together. You should take my coach.”

Elizabeth drew back, shocked at this. “What?”

He swallowed. Why did I say that? “Well, it’s not as if it’s an inconvenience to me, Miss Bennet,” he said. “After all, I am going anyway.”

“In a few weeks, you said. So, it would be an inconvenience, and I’m afraid I couldn’t possibly—”

“No, no, you most certainly could possibly, and I—”

“Mr. Darcy, truly, we cannot impose upon you in such a way, and I must insist—”

“It is I who must insist, madam, and I wish to assure you that I know my own mind in this matter—”

“But, sir, changing your plans so quickly? No, please, I shan’t be able to forgive myself for it.”

“I have told you, it’s convenient for me,” he said. “Not another word.”

She let out a breath, but she was silent.

“Now, we shall come for you tomorrow, in fact. I shall send a servant with a message to arrange the times and all the rest of it, but I insist that we all travel together.”

The smile she gave him was flat. “That’s... very kind of you, sir.”

Yes, it is. And nonsensical. And awful. “Think nothing of it.”

This was how it came to pass, then, that they were all traveling together today. No one had been pleased to discover he had volunteered the carriage to transport Miss Bennet and her party, or that he was leaving, in the morning, for Rosings. None of the servants were ready for such a thing, and Georgiana had expected him to be available the following week for a dinner party with the Bingleys, and Colonel Fitzwilliam, who was accompanying him to see his aunt, didn’t wish to go there so soon.

He told everyone he was just being polite.

They all gave him a look, as if they could also tell that he was in love with her and

that they were just as horrified with him as he was with himself.

Mr. Darcy had no intention of falling in love, really. Embarrassingly, he'd sort of hoped he might be immune to such things. Everything about being in love sounded messy and unpredictable and altogether unfavorable. He wished to make a proper match that pleased everyone in his family and pleased propriety. It would be nice, of course, if she were pretty or pleasant, but it hardly mattered. He hadn't thought he would care overmuch about such things.

Well, seeing as everything was now in a state of disarray, clearly this would have chased off his feelings for this woman. Especially since she hadn't listened to him when he'd told her to stay behind.

This was awful, and he was not pleased about the death of the poor driver, and he hoped his cousin was going to recover without serious damage, but at the very least, it would have served a purpose if it drove away his wretched attraction to this woman.

He glanced at her sidelong.

Damnation, she looked pretty with her hair falling out of her traveling bonnet in little wisps, didn't she? She was pretty. She was ever so pretty.

"I'm so sorry," she said ruefully. "And to think, if you hadn't seen us at the theater last night, you wouldn't even be here."

"It's no one's fault," he said. The horses had come loose from the carriage and run off into the wooded area when the carriage had overturned. He wondered if they should have run off after them instead of going on the road. Having horses would prove to be helpful, wouldn't it? Maybe, if they found the horses, they could put the wounded on the horses' backs to transport them.

These were the sorts of things that made him agonize in a crisis. It was hard to know what the right thing to do even was, and crises seemed to demand action and certainty. He hoped it hadn't been a bad idea to leave the horses.

Anyway, the horses would have run off, breakneck speed. They might have no hope of catching them.

Yes, going down the road for help, it was likely the best thing. It had to be.

"It's only that I know you don't even like me, Mr. Darcy, so it must rankle indeed for this to have happened."

"What?" He stopped walking.

She did not. She let out a long trill of laughter. "Oh, what has gotten into me? I shouldn't have said that out loud, should I have? Here we are, though, and there was a dead man, and I am out of sorts, I must say. Who can be polite in this situation?"

He hurried to catch up to her. "Miss Bennet, I like you."

"All right, of course you can be polite," she said. "Nothing disturbs your disposition. Not Mr. Darcy."

Why had she put that strange emphasis on his name? "I do like you," he said.

She glanced at him, brow furrowing. "Really?"

He understood, then. She didn't like him. Oh, yes, he should have realized, shouldn't he? She had mocked him, really, on more than one occasion. That sense he got from her of superiority—he was interpreting it wrong. It was dislike he was feeling from her. He felt horrifyingly embarrassed, now, his throat closing up, his face getting very

hot.

Why hadn't he seen it? It was very obvious now, actually, when he thought back over their conversations and interactions, especially that one at the ball at Netherfield where she said the things about Mr. Wickham, and he'd been too angry to even defend himself. He wondered what it was that Wickham had said to her. A pack of lies, undoubtedly.

But it didn't truly matter, did it, because she had been like that before. The conversation about the accomplished women was only one of the examples. Your defect is a propensity to hate everybody, she had said, after all.

He was an idiot.

This woman despised him. And he'd trapped her on this carriage ride with him, insisted upon it, leaving her no way to refuse him. "I think," he muttered, "it is you who have been drawn into an unfortunate situation, not me, madam."

"Oh, both of us, of course. Everyone. The driver most of all, though, truly."

Well, she was right about that.

"Do you know his name?" she said softly.

"I do," he said, nodding. He felt miserable. "It's on the tip of my tongue."

"It doesn't matter, really, not at this moment."

"He hasn't been with us all my life or something," he muttered. "I just hired him, only two weeks ago, so that's the reason I don't remember—oh, poor man. It's awful this happened to him. We were sheltered inside the carriage, but he was out there

with nothing over him, and he was easily unseated. He must have been flung far and wide.”

“I think it happened quickly, anyway,” she said. “He wouldn’t have suffered. I suppose that’s something.”

“Precious little, really, to his loved ones.”

“Is he married? Does he have children?”

“I haven’t any notion, I’m afraid,” he said, and he felt even worse. “Miss Bennet, I know you must see me as some sort of arrogant, short-sighted man, who is involved with himself and who does not notice the world around him, and I can see why you might think that about me, but you must understand, I’m not indifferent to others, not at all. I simply need things to be predictable to a degree, and if they’re not... never mind. I am out of sorts. And I feel quite foolish, I suppose.”

“Well, you shouldn’t feel foolish,” she said. “It’s not as if you could predict the carriage rolling over. And whether or not you knew the driver’s name is of little matter at this point, after all. If I indicated that it was some slight on your character, I didn’t mean it. We have so few servants, it is quite different for me, I must say.”

“That’s not why I feel foolish, although, you’re right, it really should be why. I feel foolish for not noticing your dislike of me. I feel extraordinarily arrogant and conceited. It must seem to you that a man like me cannot even comprehend being disliked.”

She stopped walking, hand to her chest. “I didn’t— that is, I—”

“It’s all right,” he said. “You don’t have to like me.” He stopped walking, too.

She bit down on her bottom lip, very contrite. “Oh, you really have been rather kind to me, and my family—my mother—my sisters... you wouldn’t have a good impression of me, anyway, I suppose, so it’s really out of the bounds of decency for me to judge—”

“It’s fine,” he said and started walking.

She caught up with him. “You deprived Mr. Wickham of his living, though, and I don’t know what excuse you have for that—”

“That’s what he said,” he muttered.

She fell into step with him. “Is that not what happened?”

“Mr. Wickham is a young man who wishes life to be different than it is,” he said. “He thinks he is entitled to have pleasure and excess and money. I may have advantages myself, advantages that come only from the accident of my birth, but I work to deserve them. As for him? Well, he, too, has had advantages, ones a man of his birth should not expect, and he has squandered them. He does not get more advantages, not after he’s proved he does not deserve them.”

“What do you mean?” she broke in.

He sighed heavily. “This is not the time to get into all this, madam.”

“Perhaps not,” she said.

“Look,” he said, “is that smoke?”

“I think it is,” she said, smiling. “Oh, that must be a chimney, that must be a house.”

“At least we shall have help soon,” he said.

She walked faster, picking up her skirts. “Yes, indeed, sir. That is all we must focus on for now.”

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN THEY CAME upon the smoke, however, it was not from a chimney.

It was a house, but part of the house was collapsed and on fire.

The house was not exceedingly large. It couldn't rightly be called an estate, but neither was it a small tenant house for a farmer, either. It had two stories. Flames were coming out of the windows of the upper stories.

Elizabeth gasped, feeling her entire body go onto high alert. How much could go wrong today? How could there really be an overturned carriage and a burning house within two miles of each other?

“Oh, this isn't good,” said Mr. Darcy.

“We can't ask anyone there for help,” she said.

There were people running in and out of the house, bringing buckets of water from the well, yelling at each other.

“No, but perhaps we should help them,” said Mr. Darcy.

She turned to look at him. “But we're—”

“I know, but if we leave them here with this conflagration and prioritize our own hurts above theirs—”

“We should simply keep going,” she said. “There’s got to be another house—”

“There is no other house for miles,” interrupted a deep voice.

She and Mr. Darcy both turned to see that a man was behind them, pointing a rifle at them.

Mr. Darcy looked from the barrel of the rifle to the man’s face and back. “Could you put that down?”

“What brings you here?” said the man.

“Our carriage overturned,” said Mr. Darcy. “Not very far back. We were hoping to find someone who could go for help or even use of a horse to ride off myself. I have coin, if there’s—”

“Let’s see that, then,” said the man, gesturing with the rifle.

“The coin,” said Mr. Darcy flatly. “Why is this house on fire?”

The man chuckled. “Hand it over.”

“Can this day get worse?” said Mr. Darcy, reaching into his jacket to pull out a small purse. He handed it to the man. “What are you? Bandits?”

“The fire was an accident,” said the man with a shrug. “And no one was supposed to be here except a few servants, what we understood. We thought we’d chase them off easy, but it’s all gone bad. Then you show up.” He sighed, tucking away the purse. “Turn around and walk, if you don’t mind.”

“How’s it gone bad?” said Mr. Darcy.

“Keep asking questions, that’s the way,” said the man, darkly amused. “It’s gone bad, because we had to shoot them. I don’t mind shooting you either. Maybe not the lady. It’s a bit unsettling killing women. Besides, women have their uses, don’t they?”

Mr. Darcy stepped in front of Elizabeth. “We’ll just go on our way, sir. You have all my money. We have no way of hurting you. We can keep looking for help—”

“There’s no other help,” said the man. “This is the only house for miles and miles, I’m telling you. Walk. I have no qualms about shooting you.”

Elizabeth snatched at the back of Mr. Darcy’s jacket. “Let’s walk,” she whispered. She was surprised that she was still so calm. However, it had been that way since the carriage turned over.

She was on high alert, yes, and her heart might be beating more quickly than usual and her senses attuned, but she was rather calm, strangely. It was as if her body had shifted into some other sense, where she was certain of everything. No time for doubt. Action was the order of the day.

It wasn’t really like her, but she sensed that if she questioned it too much, it would all crumble and she’d be like Maria Lucas, falling apart.

She didn’t wish to fall apart.

She didn’t think she could handle that.

Mr. Darcy glanced at her over his shoulder.

She pulled on him.

Sighing, he turned to face the house.

Elizabeth started walking towards it, and Mr. Darcy went with her.

“Good,” said the man with the gun from behind them. “That’s just right. Head straight towards the door, if you don’t mind.”

“We’re not walking into the burning house,” said Mr. Darcy tightly. “Neither of us wishes to be shot, but I think we’d both prefer it to burning to death.”

Yes, he threatened to shoot you, thought Elizabeth, but didn’t say anything out loud, because she wasn’t entirely sure what it was that men did to women in these circumstances. People were very vague when they discussed ravishment, after all, but it didn’t sound pleasant. Still, she supposed she’d be alive on the other side of it. Alive, yes, but shamed and worthless.

No one would marry her afterward and it would be shameful for her family, though it was different when a woman was ravished than when she did something with a man willingly. Different, sort of, she supposed.

Was it the same thing? Was ravishment that? The thing that men did with women on their wedding night?

It must be, she realized, feeling very, very stupid not to have put this together before.

Yes, belatedly now, she was remembering some discussion about ravishment and being with child and how that woman—who had it had been, no one she knew, just someone who was being gossiped over—would not wish to marry the man who had attacked her and what must become of the babe, and how awful it was.

She hadn’t been part of that conversation, not truly. She likely hadn’t even been meant to be listening to it. She’d been at a card party, and at a different table. The women at the other table were all married. They wouldn’t have been so free around

her innocent ears, undoubtedly, if they'd known she was listening.

And she hadn't been, anyway. She'd been looking at her cards, only half-listening, and that was why—clearly—she had not put it together before now.

So, it would be like when they bred the animals on the farm, and she would have to be... She looked over her shoulder at the man with the gun. Would it be him? Or would it be... more than one of them?

She walked faster. Maybe she did want to burn to death.

As they approached, the men who were running to and fro with buckets of water stopped what they were doing to turn and look at them.

“What's this?” said one of the men, who didn't have a bucket, but who did have a pistol.

“Their carriage overturned,” said the man with the rifle.

Elizabeth wasn't sure if they should keep walking or not, but she did, only because she thought they should obey.

“They came here looking for help,” said the man.

“So, you pulled a rifle on them?” said the man with the pistol. “God in heaven, but you're stupid, Patrick.” He advanced on Mr. Darcy and put the pistol to his forehead.

Mr. Darcy's eyes widened.

“Wait,” said Elizabeth in a breathy voice. “Wait, just...”

“Could have just sent them on their way,” said the man with the pistol to Mr. Darcy’s head.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Elizabeth. “You don’t have to...” She racked her brain, trying to think of why they would do that at all. Did they think she and Mr. Darcy would try to stop them? They were outnumbered, really. It would be foolish. “We’re no threat to you,” she said.

“Much less of a threat with bullets in your skulls,” said the man. He nodded at the man with the rifle, who was Patrick, she supposed.

“Oh, I have to shoot the woman?” said Patrick.

The man with the pistol glared at him but shifted the pistol so it was against Elizabeth’s temple.

She whimpered.

Mr. Darcy moved so fast, it was a blur. He tackled the man with the pistol, and the gun went off, but into the sky, over Elizabeth’s head, and it hit nothing.

Darcy and the man both went down on the ground, wrestling each other.

Mr. Darcy yanked the pistol out of the man’s hand and hurled it away. He kned the other man in the stomach and put a hand to his neck, pinning him down.

And then the rifle went off and Mr. Darcy toppled over and Elizabeth screamed.

The man who had been pinned down got up.

Mr. Darcy lay there, lifeless.

The man nudged him with his toe.

Mr. Darcy didn't move. His eyes were open, and he—

Elizabeth let out another whimper. Was he dead? She hadn't really liked Mr. Darcy, but she'd never wished for him to be dead.

Patrick was reloading the rifle as the other man used his toe to nudge Mr. Darcy over onto his back. Now, Elizabeth could see that the front of Mr. Darcy's shirt and cravat were a mess of blood.

She shuddered.

"Do I really have to shoot her?" said Patrick.

"What else would we do with her?" said the other man.

The two men both turned to look at each other and then they both laughed.

THEY TIED HER up, tied her hands and tied her feet, and they left her sitting there, looking at Mr. Darcy, which was how she realized he was breathing.

It had looked as if he'd been shot in the chest, but now she realized it was lower, somewhere in his stomach somewhere, and that he was alive, and his heart was beating. She'd seen him blink, seen his eyes follow the men. He was only pretending to be dead.

She tried to catch his gaze so that he knew that she knew, but he didn't look at her.

So, she began to scoot closer and closer to him.

In the distance, she could hear the men talking about trying to get the fire out so that they could get to whatever it was they wanted inside the house. They were planning to loot this place, and their way was blocked by the flames, apparently.

She didn't know what it was they were looking for, and she didn't care.

What she cared about was simply that they weren't paying any attention to her as she worked her way closer and closer to Mr. Darcy.

Eventually, he did notice. His gaze flicked to hers, even though his body didn't move.

She licked her lips. "Mr. Darcy," she breathed, so low she wasn't sure he could hear her.

"Come closer," he said, his mouth hardly moving. "Put your feet near one of my hands and I'll untie you and then you run."

She shook her head. "You come too."

"Can't," he said. "I can barely move. You wouldn't believe how much this hurts." But he didn't sound as if he were in pain. He was matter-of-fact. "You go back to the carriage, and there's a gun in there. If my cousin is awake, have him get it. You can come back for me. They think I'm dead, after all, so they won't—"

"They'll know you're not dead if you untie me!"

"Shh.

She had said it too loudly. She shut her eyes, letting out a shaking breath. "I can't leave without you."

“Miss Bennet, if you stay, all that happens is that I get myself killed trying to stop them from ravaging you. I won’t know what happens to you after that, but it’ll likely be for naught. So, I’ll be dead and you’ll be ruined. You have to leave.” This, too, was matter-of-fact. “Give me your feet.”

She chewed on her bottom lip, casting her glance out towards the men, who were still rushing in with buckets of water. Did the flames look less? What did it matter? All that was important was that they weren’t paying her any mind.

She moved very quickly, scooting around and thrusting her tied-up feet near one of Mr. Darcy’s hands.

Then, heart in her throat, she stared at the men, hoping none of them would look at her and wonder what she was doing next to him.

His fingers began to move against the ropes on her feet.

Tears started to leak out of her eyes, and it was odd, because she hadn’t been aware she was going to start crying. She was not entirely in her body anymore, she didn’t think. This other realm she’d shifted into, the realm of certainty and action, it was shielding her from certain emotions in some way, but her body was still functioning in some other way.

Something was simply wrong with her.

No, something was wrong with the situation and she was handling it the best she could.

“I won’t leave you to die,” she said. “I can’t do that.”

“I appreciate that,” came his voice. She couldn’t see his face anymore, not from the

way her body was angled now. “But you do have to do that. And with any luck, I won’t die. I need you to get help, though, Miss Bennet, do you understand?”

She did, actually. Yes, it made sense, she supposed. If it all went according to plan, and she came back with Colonel Fitzwilliam and the pistol in the carriage and—

But how did that matter?

One gun was one shot, and there were so many of these men. No, Mr. Darcy was doing a stupid male, honorable thing, where he was sacrificing himself for her, and she couldn’t let him do that. She wouldn’t have even thought he would do that. Maybe she’d been wrong about him. Maybe Mr. Wickham had been wrong, too. Maybe she’d believed the wrong man.

She hadn’t blamed Mr. Wickham for his connection to Miss King, because he needed to have money to live just as anyone did, and she must pay some mind to a suitor’s financial status, after all. It would have been hypocrisy for her to have blamed him.

However, it was true that Mr. Wickham had put money first, wasn’t it?

Well, this was neither here nor there. What did Mr. Wickham matter right at this instant? The point was that if the men came back and realized that she was gone, they would examine Mr. Darcy, and they would discover he was alive, and this time they would shoot him in the head. They’d already been ready to shoot them both, so casually. She still wasn’t sure why it mattered to the men. What was even in that house?

“Mr. Darcy,” she said in a low, urgent voice, “if I leave, you will die, and we both know it.”

“I’m halfway dead already, Miss Bennet.” Still matter-of-fact. “Your staying does

nothing to make the situation better except it puts you at risk.”

“No one is discussing me staying,” she said. “The options are my going alone or my going with you.”

“Impossible.” No emotion in his voice. “I can’t move.”

“You haven’t tried.”

“They’ll see. They’ll come for us, and it’ll come to the same thing.”

“They’ll see if I go.”

“Not if you wait for the right moment.”

“We can both wait for the right—” She broke off because one of the men had turned to look at her. She let out wild, shaking breaths. “Stop with the rope,” she said, but it was hard to understand what she said because she didn’t move her lips at all.

Still, somehow Mr. Darcy did understand. His fingers went still.

She glared at the man, silently accusing him.

“Billy, another bucket! We’ve got it down to the first floor. Hurry up now!” called a voice.

And the man looking at her hurried away to fill the buckets he was carrying.

Elizabeth watched as he went back into the house. “All right,” she breathed.

There was only a trickle of smoke now, no flames coming out of the windows. They

really were putting this fire out. She was impressed. She remembered when the Grovers' house in Meryton had gone up. It had burned to cinders.

Of course, Elizabeth rather thought people had given up on it straightaway, only the Grovers themselves seeming to want to keep fighting the fire, others saying they must think of their lives.

Maybe that was the difference. If you had a lot of very determined people who all benefited from putting out the fire, they tried harder?

Maybe this fire had just been smaller.

All of the men were inside now.

She turned, twisting to look at Mr. Darcy. "Now is the time. They're all gone. Can you untie me faster?"

"Going as fast as I can," he said.

A figure darted out of the house. It was the man with the buckets, Billy, the one who'd been looking at her.

"Stop!" she said again, freezing.

Mr. Darcy stopped.

Billy rushed over and skidded to a stop next to her, brandishing a small knife. "Don't." He pointed right at her nose with one, thick, sooty finger.

Don't what? What was he going to do?

But all he did was cut her ropes. “Now, run. Mind, if they catch you, and you say it was me who let you free, you’ll regret it.” Billy scrambled back to the house without a backward look.

Elizabeth stood up, brushing at her skirts. Her legs were shaky and her inner core felt as if it had been stretched too tight and released and now everything was the wrong kind of loose. She reached down her hands to Mr. Darcy. “I’m going to pull you up.”

He hesitated. But then he put his hands in hers.

She gave a mighty tug.

He got up, throwing back his head in agony at the movement, but somehow not making any noise. He sagged into her, and she staggered, butting her shoulder up into his armpit to steady them both.

They both panted noisily, trying to find their balance.

“I can’t,” he breathed, his voice threaded full of anguish.

“Attend to me,” she managed, “we shall simply get out there, to the treeline.” She nodded ahead of them at the wooded area of which she spoke. “You will stay there, hidden, and I shall go for the carriage, as we spoke of.” It wasn’t a perfect plan, for perhaps the men in the house would come looking for Mr. Darcy and perhaps they would find him. But at least it gave him a chance.

“All right,” he gasped. “I think I can make it that far.”

Together, they began to walk.

He tried very hard not to cry out loudly in pain, but his face was twisted and his

breath was labored.

She wished there was something she could do to assist him, but she felt helpless.

It took a very long time, for they could not walk quickly. She turned to look over her shoulder at intervals, frightened she should see the men coming out of the house toward them.

But luck was on their side and no one came out. They made it under the canopy of trees without incident.

Mr. Darcy was covered in blood, and so was she, for that matter.

She helped him sit down against a tree trunk, and his head wavered backwards and his eyes rolled up in his head.

Oh, Lord! He was going to pass out from loss of blood. She didn't know a great deal about caring for wounds, but it was common knowledge to bandage, to stanch blood. She sat down, ripped at her skirts, and then, with trembling fingers, began to unbutton his waistcoat and shirt beneath.

She wasn't sure why she was feeling nervous about this. It was improper, yes, but certainly the man's impending death mattered more.

His eyes fluttered open and he looked down at his half-open, bloody shirt. "Miss Bennet—"

"I need to stop the bleeding," she said.

"Oh, yes, that's smart." He shrugged out of his jacket and waistcoat, letting out a low groan.

“Careful,” she said.

“Here.” He used his waistcoat to dab at his wound. “It’s small. I can feel the hole the bullet made, and it went through and through, so that’s... that’s good, I think.”

There was a great deal of blood. Elizabeth looked down at the piece of her skirt she’d torn off. It would do to tie around his chest, perhaps, but it was too dirty to go against his wound. She set it aside and wriggled out of her petticoat beneath.

Mr. Darcy raised his eyebrows. “What are you doing now? You don’t have some wound, Miss Bennet?”

“This,” she said, balling it up and placing it against the hole in his stomach, because now that he’d sopped up the blood with his waistcoat, she could see the seeping wound there. Then, tightly, she tied the strip of her skirt around his body.

He grunted, shutting his eyes, letting out a series of labored breaths. Finally, he opened his eyes. “Where did you learn about field dressings?”

“I don’t know. Nowhere. Just... when something is bleeding, you cover it. It’s what you do.”

He nodded. “True enough. Thank you. It’s well done. Will you go now?”

“You’re very eager to get rid of me.” She eyed him. Now, he was half-dressed and she found her gaze skittering over places where his skin was bare. What was wrong with her? She pushed to her feet. “I should go, I suppose.”

“Yes, to get help,” he said, looking up at her.

“You promise you’re not simply shooing me off because you think it would be

impolite to die in front of me.”

“I don’t wish to die if I can help it, Miss Bennet,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “Because I don’t wish you to die.”

“Well, go find my cousin,” he said. “Go find Sir William.”

“I shall,” she said, nodding at him.

“Godspeed, Miss Bennet.”

She scampered off into the woods, back in the direction of the carriage.

CHAPTER THREE

AT FIRST, SHE told herself that she must have gotten the spot wrong, and had come to the wrong place in the road. She couldn't walk back on the road itself, in case of the men from the house finding her. She'd been obliged, therefore, to skirt the back of the house, staying in the wooded area, and then go as close to the road as she dared, while still being hidden within the trees.

But then she found Maria's shawl, discarded, and the place where the carriage had lain, the grass flattened, and also the indentation that had been the body of the carriage driver in the tall grass as well, and she knew.

The carriage was gone.

So, someone must have come along and found them. They'd even righted the carriage and tied it to some other carriage and pulled it away. They were gone, all of them, and there was no help to be found.

She sat down on the ground in the middle of the grass that had been flattened by the overturned carriage and felt flattened herself.

Tears threatened, but then they couldn't seem to rally themselves. She was feeling more and more numbed as the day went on.

She sat there, numb, stunned, horrified.

Then a thought occurred to her that bothered her.

Why hadn't the rescuing carriage come to the house? It was two miles down the road and quite conspicuous due to all the smoke pouring up into the sky and Maria knew that they'd gone looking for help. So, the rescuing party should have stopped and inquired after them at that house.

And they had not.

Why not?

It didn't make any sense.

She got up and marched onto the road, furrowing her brow, hands clenched in fists.

Now, on the road, she looked at the marks there, the freshest ones, and she could see how the carriage had been hauled up and dragged away—

That way.

She turned away from the house, back towards London.

Why would they go that way? Maria would have known which direction she and Mr. Darcy had walked off in, and she would have—

Well, no, that wasn't necessarily true, was it. Maria was young and had been flustered and hadn't even realized she was wearing her shawl, and she might have gotten confused about the direction.

Even so, Sir William, he would have known.

But of course, he'd been in a great deal of pain and might not have been paying attention. The colonel, of course, had been unconscious.

Maybe no one had known which way they'd walked off.

Or maybe the rescuing carriage didn't offer to go and look for them but simply to haul the carriage and the wounded and the... the body of the driver also—no, that seemed like quite an inconvenience. Why agree to all that and not to seeking out her and Mr. Darcy?

She rubbed her forehead, trying to puzzle it out.

She couldn't, however. She couldn't make it make sense.

It didn't matter, anyway. The only reason to figure it out would be to determine what she should do.

Well, she had to go back to Mr. Darcy, that was all there was to it.

Maybe she should bring him here. Maybe they should wait for rescue at the site of the carriage wreck.

No, he could not walk this far. That was impossible.

She let out a shuddering breath and then took off back to where she'd left Mr. Darcy.

"GONE?" MR. DARCY said. He was swimming out in a strange, liminal place right now. As long as he didn't move, the pain was bearable, he thought. He was concentrating entirely on not moving at all. However, the tree trunk at his back was digging into his skin in ways that were unpleasant, and he thought he might like his jacket draped over his shoulders. That, however, would require a great deal of movement, and he was weighing whether or not it was worth it.

Elizabeth was babbling a lot, and he couldn't make much sense of it.

He let her talk. Finally, she stopped. He had been meaning to tell her something. What was it? Oh, yes. "They left."

"That's what I've just been saying," she said. "I know they left, but it doesn't make sense to me, and I'm not sure what we should do."

"No, I mean, the bandits at the house." He tilted his head towards the house. It was late now, and the sun was sinking behind the trees in the west. He was not sure he wanted to spend the night outside in the dark and the cold, but he also never wanted to move again. "They saw we were gone, and they looked around only a little, before the one in charge said to forget about it, and they all left."

"Well, that's good, I suppose," she said.

"Maybe."

"Only because they didn't come after you. I was worried they would, you know," she said. "I thought they might find you and shoot you."

"I don't wish to move, Miss Bennet, let alone to walk."

"Of course you don't."

"So, you don't think I have to?" He felt like a small boy, asking for permission for something of his nanny. Nanny, please, mayn't I stay in bed all day, because I feel poorly.

"I don't see why you would." She tapped her lower lip. "But I wonder if I should go back to the place where the carriage turned over. They must come looking for us, mustn't they? Will they know where to seek us, that's what concerns me the most. And with you, with your wound, time is of the essence. Perhaps I should keep going

down the road. I know that Patrick person said there was nothing nearby—”

“It’s getting dark, Miss Bennet,” he said.

“Right, I supposed that would be stupid,” she said.

“The bandits may be somewhere nearby,” he said.

“Oh, Lord, I hadn’t thought of that.” Her voice went high-pitched.

He sagged into the tree trunk, shutting his eyes.

A few moments passed, and neither of them spoke.

Finally, though, he had to say something. “Miss Bennet, I have been bleeding quite a lot.”

“That’s true,” she said. “Have you soaked through my petticoat, because if so, maybe I can—”

“We are in the woods, and there are animals that can smell such things,” he said. “If it’s birds, we’re probably all right, but at night sometimes... wolves.”

“Oh, dear,” she breathed.

“I think we must go into the house,” he said. “Only I don’t wish to. I don’t want to get up. So, I’d like you to convince me, if at all possible, that there are no wolves out here, that we can simply stay here in the forest and—”

“Oh, Mr. Darcy,” she wailed. “No, I can’t. We must go into that house. You’re right.”

“I was thinking you might say that,” he muttered, very chagrined.

She suddenly began to sob. It happened out of nowhere. One moment, she was sitting there, looking at him very gravely, the next, she had doubled over and was shaking all over with the force of the sorrow working its way through her.

He let her cry for a while.

He wanted to cry, too.

It would be nice if he had a nanny right now, some large and self-important woman—or maybe his housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds. Yes, if Mrs. Reynolds were here at this moment, she would fix everything, he just knew it.

“Miss Bennet.”

She lifted her tearstained face. “I’m sorry. I simply... it came over me... it has been a very horrible d-day and I am overcome.”

“You can cry once we’re indoors,” he said.

She sniffed hard, hiccuped, and then nodded sharply. “You’re right, of course.” She got to her feet. “All right, I shall help you up as we did before.”

He grunted. “I don’t wish to. Let me stay here. I don’t care, really.”

“Mr. Darcy, you do care. You told me that you don’t wish to die.”

“Maybe I do,” he said. “Maybe it’d be easier at this point. Everything is very, very painful, you see, and I think I’d like that to stop and—”

“You do not wish to be ripped apart by wolves!” This was very stern.

Well, she had him there. He reached his hands up to her.

She seized them.

Then, together, struggling, using the tree trunk behind him to help, they managed to get him to his feet. He screamed like a woman, and it echoed against the setting sun, and then she staggered under his weight, and he would have apologized if he'd been able to make words, but it all hurt far too much.

Tears streamed down his face, but he ignored them. “All right, let's walk now,” he panted.

She supported him.

Laboriously, they made their way back to the house. He thought of how stupid it was that he'd had to move at all, but he supposed it had saved his life, and he supposed that was a good thing. God, but it hurt.

Inside the house, it was dark and the walls were blackened from the fire. Everything smelled like soot, and the air was damp because water had been flung all over everything.

They veered into a room on the side of the house where the fire had not been burning. It was a sitting room. They staggered over to a couch and then both flopped down on it.

He moaned.

She leaned over and put her head between her knees.

Then he passed out, he thought, because she wasn't there anymore and the sun was down, and it was dark.

Her voice carried from the other side of the room. "I can't find any flint, but I have a lamp. I simply can't light it. There's no way to light it."

"Pocket," he managed. He always carried flint. Except his jacket... "Oh, dash it all, we didn't bring my jacket inside, did we?"

"You have flint in your jacket pocket?" she said.

"Aye, I do. But it's outside—"

"I'll get it. Here, you take this."

He opened his eyes to see that she was shoving a bottle into his hands.

"It's laudanum," she said. "There was willow bark, too, but I thought it would make you bleed too much, so this is better. You might welcome the sleep." It was a known side effect of chewing willow bark. It thinned one's blood.

"Oh, you're an angel," he said, giving her a smile. "Christ in heaven, thank you." He uncapped it and tipped it to his mouth.

"Not so much, Mr. Darcy." She yanked it away.

He reached out for the bottle again, angry. "The devil take you, you idiot woman."

"You're just calling me names because you're in pain," she said.

She was right. He settled into the couch, tears pricking his eyes again. "Apologies,

Miss Bennet,” he breathed.

“I’ll go out and find your jacket,” she said, and she was gone.

He was asleep before that, though, sucked out on the tide of the opium, which was a welcome world of dreamy strangeness, where he floated, happy, weightless, detached.

When he woke, it was light outside again.

She was gone, but there was a note written on a piece of charred parchment, saying she’d gone to seek help. She’d left him some water in a bucket drawn straight from the well with a cup to drink it out of.

He wished she would have left the bottle of laudanum.

She hadn’t.

He sat up and examined his wound. He thought he likely needed a new bandage, but there wasn’t anything here, and he didn’t think that getting up and looking about to seek some linens or anything of that nature would be a good idea. He’d likely tear apart any part of his body that had begun to mend itself.

He felt helpless.

He lay on the couch and stared at the ceiling and tried to summon the energy to do anything to better his situation, but all he could think was that if Mrs. Reynolds was there, everything would be better. He mused that most people would wish for their mothers in this situation, but that he had always known his mother was too delicate to be of any use. She hadn’t survived bringing Georgiana into the world after all. With his mother gone, his father had seemed on borrowed time.

Hours later, Elizabeth returned.

She was dirty and exhausted and she collapsed into a chair near him on the couch. “There’s nothing. Nothing at all. I walked and walked and walked, and all I found was the bandits.”

Alarm shot through him. “Miss Bennet, did something happen?”

“No, they didn’t see me. I stayed out of sight. I’m not that foolish,” she moaned. “But neither could I keep going in that direction, not with them out there. So, then, I went all the way back to where the carriage was overturned, and I walked towards London for an hour, looking for someone there, anyone at all. I found a house, but it was empty and no one answered when I knocked at the door. There are horses in the stables, though, so someone must be coming back, don’t you think? Who leaves horses in a stable and disappears? Perhaps it was a farmer and he is out in the fields. I am thinking about going back later, once the sun is down, for he is sure to be back by then—”

“Not in the dark. Don’t be foolish, Miss Bennet.”

She glanced at him. “Why haven’t they come looking for us yet?”

He sighed. “It’s been a day?”

“Yes, longer now. It’s late now, and I’m starving, and I swear I didn’t notice it yesterday—”

“Food,” he said softly.

“Well, you may have been shot in the stomach, and if so—”

“I don’t think so,” he said.

“Well, your guts or something,” she said. “I don’t think you should eat, not that it matters because there’s nothing in the larder of this house except potatoes, mealy potatoes, and you must cook them. I thought maybe a carrot at the least, but nothing—”

“Truly? Nothing?”

“Flour,” she said. “There’s a large bag of flour.”

“Why would a house only have—”

“Well, maybe the bandits took the food,” she said.

“It seems like there must have been something else here for them to loot, though.”

“I did look last night. Upstairs, there’s a room where the floor has caved into the level below, and there are ever so many open trunks in that room, and a few stray pearls on the floor, too.”

He gave her a confused look.

“Well, a woman’s wardrobe might be worth a great deal of money,” said Elizabeth. “For the fine fabrics used and the laces and all those things. Even if it were very old, and no one would wear the dresses because they are outdated. So, what I think is that the people who lived here had the wardrobe of some old female relative, and that they left on a holiday or some such, and then the bandits came and killed the servants—I did find the corpses—”

“Christ, Miss Bennet,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yes, well, they’re just dead people,” she said. “That’s really the least of the horrors of this entire experience, sir.”

“No, true,” he said. “Entirely true, I’m afraid.” He’d been swearing in front of her a great deal, hadn’t he? Taking the Lord’s name in vain left and right. She was correct that horrors had been visited upon her, visited upon them both.

“Why hasn’t anyone come for us?” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“I think they must have tried and they can’t find us,” she said. “I think they don’t know where the carriage overturned. They must not have thought to leave a sign for themselves. So, they would be left to try to remember where it was, and perhaps they are relying on Maria Lucas—”

“Oh, Christ,” he said again. “Apologies for the swearing, madam.”

“You have a hole in you,” she said. “It’s all right. I wish to swear as well. I likely have. I don’t even know.”

“Miss Lucas didn’t know that she was wearing her own shawl,” he said.

“Exactly,” she said. “What if they never find us, Mr. Darcy? What if you just die out here?”

“Miss Bennet—

“That is why I am going to the farmer’s house after dark, because I can’t stay here and watch you sleep again.”

He grimaced, feeling useless. He couldn't walk. He knew that. But he wished he could do something to help her. "Not at night. The bandits are still about—"

"No, they are far down the road by now, and I shall be going in the opposite direction."

"Well, there are wolves—"

"I haven't heard any wolves!"

"I forbid it," he said. "Think of it. If I die and you live, it will be one thing, but if you die, and I'm alive here, while you're taking all the risk, it's abominable. I can't bear that."

"Oh, well, I shouldn't wish to inconvenience you with my death," she muttered.

"You must stay," he said.

"Last night..." She let out a little moan. "Oh, I wasn't even going to tell you."

"What?"

"Well, I found your jacket, but there was no flint," she said. "So, I couldn't start a fire. And it was cold, and you were warm, and I..."

It took a moment for him to put that together, but when he did, he smiled. "Did you stay warm, then, Miss Bennet?"

She tilted her head back and let out another moan. "I can't do it again. It was one thing last night, and you were gone on the laudanum, and I thought that no one would ever know. But now I've told you. You don't even like me."

“No, no,” he said, still smiling. “I like you. You simply don’t like me.” He had a funny thought. Maybe I’ll have to marry her now. They were trapped out here, together, no chaperone. True, it was unlikely anyone was going to believe he was ruining her with a hole in his belly, but it wasn’t as if he was incapable. I could be ruining her. Certainly, I could. He chuckled at the thought, how painful it would be, how maybe it would be worth it, even so?

“What are you laughing at?”

This made him laugh harder, which hurt, so he broke off, groaning.

“Mr. Darcy, don’t laugh,” she said. “I mean it. You’ll make yourself bleed.” She sighed. “Oh, I should go and see if I can find anything to redo your bandages before I go back to the farmer’s house.”

“Miss Bennet, you’re not traipsing about after dark, do you hear me?” He raised his voice, because she had left the room.

There was no response from her.

He decided he was going to get up from the couch. Maybe it was the thought of ruining her that made him think he was capable of it. Whatever the case, he didn’t manage it. He did sit up, though, feet on the ground, dizzy as he gazed out at the shadowed sitting room. Was he dizzy from all the blood loss or the lack of food?

She appeared with some fresh linens and a knife to cut them. She used water from the well to clean him. It was shockingly cold. He swore at her more. He might have said “bloody hell,” but she ignored him, steadfast in her task.

He let her clean and bind him, but then he tugged her down to sit next to him on the couch.

She huffed, but she looked exhausted. She didn't protest, at any rate.

"You have to stay," he said softly.

"No," she said. "I have to go."

He lifted his arm and draped it over the back of the couch. At this point, he was bare from the waist up, and this made it all seem odd and dreamlike, too intimate. Maybe it was those awful, inappropriate thoughts he'd been having about ruining her, which...

She was exhausted and dirty and she'd lost her bonnet at some point, but he thought she looked very pretty. "You'll take some laudanum and sleep," she said.

"The devil drag you to hell, madam," he said with a groan. "Because now I know I can't have any laudanum. The minute I drift off, you'll leave, and I can't let you go out in the dark like that."

"Mr. Darcy... I know you are only caring about my welfare, but you must realize that someone has to do something."

"I think you need to rest," he said, and his voice was scratchy, and his arm was moving over the back of the couch to drape itself over her shoulders.

She eyed his fingers as they curled down over the sleeve of her dress. Her breath came out noisily. "Mr. Darcy..."

"Both of us need it," he rasped. "Rest and warmth, and stop moving for a moment, Miss Bennet, all right?"

Her jaw worked and her eyes shone and she looked ready to leap up from the couch

and scamper off like a determined rabbit—were rabbits determined? Was that a remnant of the laudanum working its way through him? But then, slowly, by degrees, she drooped and then carefully lay herself down against him, avoiding his wound, but putting her head on his shoulder. He pulled her closer and ran his hand up and down her spine and put his nose in her hair and breathed in the scent of her.

She smelled like ash and sweat and blood—his blood—but underneath there was this other smell, and he knew it was her, and it was sweet and good. He breathed it in, sighing her name—her first name—softly, just under his breath.

She put her hand on his chest, her bare hand on his bare skin, and she whispered, “We shouldn’t.”

“Shh, Elizabeth,” he said.

She moaned again, but she didn’t protest anymore and she didn’t say anything else.

And then, her breath went even and deep, and he could tell she’d fallen asleep. He curled around her—into her—and let himself drift off, too.

CHAPTER FOUR

“ELIZABETH.”

SHE DIDN'T recognize the voice. It was some male voice, and that wasn't right, because no male voice ever wakened her. It was almost always Mrs. Hill, but sometimes it was Jane or even her mother Mrs. Bennet, but it was never a man.

“Elizabeth, there's someone here. We need to wake up.”

Right. Mr. Darcy. The burnt house. The overturned carriage. The wound. Her eyes opened, and she had her cheek pressed into Mr. Darcy's bare chest. She jerked back and now they were looking into each other's eyes. He had his arm around her.

“I heard horses,” he whispered.

“I'll get up and go look,” she said.

He nodded.

“There's no one here. We need to move on to the next house, I think,” came a voice.

“Besides, it's dark now, and we need to get home.”

A light spilled through the doorway of the room, illuminating the face of a man with a dark mustache. He saw them, on the couch, entwined, and his eyes widened.

Elizabeth got to her feet in a hurry.

“Alex?” said Mr. Darcy in a wondering voice. “Alexander?”

“Good God, Fitzwilliam,” said the man, coming closer. “It is you.”

Mr. Darcy let out a helpless laugh. “Oh, you’re a sight for sore eyes, Alex.”

The man—Alex, Elizabeth supposed—raised his voice. “I found him! He’s in here.” He turned back to look at Darcy and then his gaze settled on her.

Mr. Darcy groaned. “This is Miss Bennet. She’s been assisting me.”

“What’s happened to you?”

“Oh, I was shot by a band of ruffians,” muttered Mr. Darcy. “It’s a story. What took you so long? How is Richard?”

“My brother is fine, just a big lump on his head,” said Alex.

“You’re Colonel Fitzwilliam’s brother,” said Elizabeth in understanding. “That must make you Viscount Banvolk.” That was one of the Earl of Matlock’s lesser titles, given as a courtesy for the use of his heir.

“Yes, that’s right. But I’m afraid I don’t know nearly as much about you,” said the viscount.

“She’s been doing everything she could for me. Likely saved my life. I was going to bleed to death otherwise,” said Darcy.

“Well, then, thank you,” said the viscount to her, but there was something in his voice that Elizabeth thought didn’t sound much like gratefulness. “Thank you for looking after my cousin.”

“Oh, he got shot because he was protecting me,” said Elizabeth. “This is really all my fault.”

“Don’t be foolish. It was not your fault at all,” said Mr. Darcy, shutting his eyes and lying back against the couch. “I want the laudanum before they move me, though, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, yes, I’ll fetch it,” she said, scurrying off.

When she got back with the bottle of laudanum, someone took it from her. The search party was all men. It was Banvolk and a number of male servants from the Matlock household. They escorted her to the carriage they’d come in, and then Mr. Darcy was carried out, crying out in pain the entire time.

He fell asleep, though, sprawled out in the carriage, almost as soon as they took off.

This left her in the carriage with Banvolk and the other men, who didn’t speak much to her at all, talking amongst themselves mostly. They were speculating on what might have happened, and she had the answers but the one time she did speak up, she said, “Oh, no, I could not keep going that way because I found the bandits again.”

And then Banvolk gave her a look. “What were the bandits threatening to do to you that my cousin intervened, anyway?”

She felt her face turn bright red and she sputtered, “They were going to kill us both.” Which was the truth. Why was she embarrassed?

Banvolk tipped his head back, surveying her.

After that, she decided to be quiet.

She had questions, of course, questions that—as it happened—would never really be answered. She knew that yes, as she had surmised, someone had come and taken away the overturned carriage, and brought back the Lucases and the colonel to London. She did not understand, however, why it was that no one had come to seek them at the burnt house, which seemed to her to be the obvious place to look. She did not know if perhaps Maria Lucas had indicated that they'd walked off in the opposite direction than the one they'd gone or if they had simply taken far too much time to get a search party together. She did not know if they simply could not find the spot where the carriage had overturned and had been seeking them in the wrong place. She would never find this out, because she didn't ask now, and there was no discussion of it later.

They were all taken to the Fitzwilliams' house in town. She was given a room and a bath and a maid to wait on her, and then supper was brought up for her, and she ate every bite of it. She collapsed on the bed in the room afterward, still dressed, and fell immediately to sleep. She had ever so many questions—where were the Lucases, for instance?—but she was too exhausted to seek the answers.

Sometime later, she awoke to hear the door opening.

She sat up in the bed and realized the lamps were all still burning.

“Oh, dear,” said a woman's voice as she made her way into the room. She was tall and severe, older than Elizabeth's own mother, and the smile on her face wasn't quite a smile. “I should have realized you'd be tired.”

Elizabeth got off the bed. “You must be Lady Matlock.” She curtsied. “It's a pleasure, madam, and I must thank you deeply for your hospitality. I am ever so grateful.”

“Prettily done,” said Lady Matlock. “But let's be frank with each other, my dear. We

both know what it is you've attempted to engineer here."

"Excuse me?" Elizabeth drew back.

Lady Matlock shrugged. "I don't think you wanted him shot. I don't think you counted on bandits. But here are the facts, as I understand them. After the carriage was overturned, you were quite keen and insistent, even though many people protested to the contrary, that you and Mr. Darcy must go off together alone. Do you deny that?"

Elizabeth blinked at her. "I... I can't even remember, to be honest. After the carriage overturned, I wasn't rightly myself. You can't imagine what it's been like, going through all of that."

Lady Matlock only smirked. "He changed his plans for you, so you've clearly made some impression upon him. I daresay you're a pretty thing, but it is troubling, turning a carriage over, getting my son Richard knocked unconscious, and Sir William badly hurt besides. And I don't think you meant it, but Fitzwilliam—that is, Mr. Darcy—he was shot. He could have died. You didn't think this through when you put your little scheme into motion, I don't suppose."

Elizabeth was very, very confused. She gaped at Lady Matlock, trying to put it together. Eventually, she grasped it. "You think I turned the carriage over? Me?"

"Richard says he can't be sure how it happened, but he couldn't rule you out as the cause. He was quite concerned that his cousin had changed his plans for a chit of a girl with relatives in Cheapside. It worried him. Then... this... I can't say that I don't applaud the effort in some ways, my dear, but it's all too far, truly. You hurt people. You might have gotten by with it, even so, but the way you two were found, all wrapped around him in that indecent way, well, we see what you were attempting, but you have failed. You will go home to your family, to your sad country house, in

disgrace.”

“You think I did it so that I could be alone with Mr. Darcy, to engineer a compromise,” said Elizabeth. “You think I could claim he compromised me? He could barely walk. He was in such pain, there is no way he laid a finger on me. Furthermore, I don’t even like him. And he... well, I don’t think he likes me either, though he claims otherwise, and I suppose we did grow somewhat closer while we were almost dying together, but you’re wrong, is the point.”

“Oh, don’t protest your innocence. I haven’t the patience for that. Simply understand this, girl, you shall not marry my nephew. Never. Do you understand?”

“I don’t wish to marry him,” said Elizabeth, furrowing her brow. “If he were the last man in England, I could not be prevailed upon to marry him. He’s arrogant and snobbish and he orders me about in such a way that is unbearable!” Elizabeth had begun to gesture with both hands, partly because she was appalled to have been accused in such a way and partly because she really wished to explain to the countess her error. This was all wrong.

Lady Matlock only laughed. “Well, then, good, we understand each other. You sleep. You have been through an ordeal, of course. Someone will convey you home in the morning. You won’t see Mr. Darcy, so don’t ask.”

“All right,” said Elizabeth. “I do feel it’s a bit rude to simply disappear. Could I leave him a letter?”

“No. Definitely not.”

“I really don’t wish to marry him. He doesn’t wish to marry me. You’re not seeing this clearly, my lady, I swear it to you.”

“I see it quite clearly,” said Lady Matlock, and with that, swept out of the room without a goodbye.

Elizabeth sat down on the bed. It did not feel good to be accused of something one hadn’t done. What a preposterous thing to accuse her of! How very horrid.

It was not as easy to fall back asleep after that, even though she had the benefit of changing into something clean and comfortable and slipping between the sheets of a luxurious and comfortable bed. She lay awake for a time, blinking at the ceiling, thinking through the conversation with Lady Matlock, thinking of twenty other things she could have said which would surely have convinced the woman!

Finally, though, she did sleep.

Morning dawned, but she had no chance to speak to Lady Matlock again, nor any of the family in the house. Instead, she was packed away in a carriage and taken back to Longbourn.

MR. DARCY WAS given as much laudanum as he liked in the Matlock household, where he was convalescing. This meant that the next two weeks passed mostly in a haze.

On a few occasions, he asked after Miss Bennet, but he was gone on the laudanum and said ridiculous things, things about ruining her, he thought. Anyway, he supposed this was why he got responses from his aunt Lady Matlock that he would never see that dreadful woman again or from either Richard or Alex that he certainly hadn’t ruined anyone and not to worry, he was safe from social-climbing manipulative chits.

He might have protested about these things, but he didn’t suppose anyone would take him seriously, not while he was essentially drugged.

It was in the midst of the third week, when he was healing more, that he had a lucid moment and began to think about how it might be dangerous to be taking so much laudanum. He'd heard of people who had terrible wounds who became dependent upon it, and he'd always vowed he didn't want that to happen to him.

He knew, however, here in this household, he would not be able to accomplish it. He needed to get back to—well, ideally, Pemberley, because Mrs. Reynolds would see to it that he would never develop a dependency. She was God's gift, that woman.

But, failing that, and he could not make such a journey, he could rely on the butler at his house in town, Mr. Briggs, to do his wishes.

So, the first thing he did was to ask someone—he thought it was Richard—whether or not he could go home to his own house. Richard went and spoke to others and reported back that Darcy was far too wounded, even still, to be moved, so Darcy knew he would have to take control of this in his own way.

He composed a letter to Mr. Briggs and had a servant here deliver it. Within a day, an army of Mr. Darcy's own servants, including all of his footman, appeared and carried him out to his own carriage, even over the protests of Lady Matlock.

Lady Matlock was his aunt and he loved her, but he had to admit the woman had a tendency for involving herself in matters that did not concern her. He knew she couldn't be reasoned with, not when she'd decided on something. It was best to go around her.

Back in his town house, he was still eager for laudanum. He began to suspect that he wasn't even in as much pain as he was feeling, for it was horrid—just as bad as when he'd first been shot—and he thought some healing should have occurred by now. But he'd heard of this. Laudanum could deceive a man's senses, make him feel such pain that he would beg for the stuff, even when he was physically unhurt. It was powerful.

He had to be half-drugged on the stuff to have any conversation with Mr. Briggs at all, but he told the man in no uncertain terms that he wished to go off of it.

Mr. Briggs suggested that Mr. Darcy should ease down off the laudanum, that he should take a bit less day in and day out.

“No,” said Mr. Darcy, “no, that will only prolong the agony. I should like it very intense but quick. So, tomorrow, you will not give me any, and you will instruct everyone to comply to this order.”

Mr. Briggs nodded. “Very good, sir.”

“I shall change my mind,” said Mr. Darcy. “But you won’t listen to me then, you will listen to my edict now.”

Mr. Briggs nodded again, but he looked worried.

“You will tell me, this future me, this maddened, laudanum-dependent me, that I have already given orders and that these orders cannot be broken. You will tell me that no matter what I say or do, there shall be no more laudanum. You will do it, and I shall reward you for it on the other side.”

Mr. Briggs swallowed, looking nearly ill.

“You don’t want a master who is dependent on laudanum,” said Mr. Darcy. “You must do it for your own sake, for the sake of all the servants I employ.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Briggs, as if this had spoken to him in another way. “Yes, sir, I see what you’re saying. You can depend on me.”

“Good,” said Mr. Darcy.

Darcy went to sleep that night in an opium haze, and thought to himself that it likely wouldn't be as bad as all that, anyway. He was a very strong man, and he was capable of imposing his will, and he wouldn't even ask for laudanum, likely. He'd suffer through the pain silently. Feeling confident, he drifted off. He dreamed dreams of Elizabeth Bennet in his arms, her head upon his shoulder, her small, sweet body in his arms.

Then morning came, and it was awful.

It was so much worse than he had imagined. The pain, it was not simply the pain of his gunshot wound anymore. Now, it was as if his entire body was on fire, as if he was burning from the inside, and he knew—oh, yes, he knew—that a dollop of laudanum would cure it all.

He began to think he'd been hasty. Perhaps it was too soon to get off the stuff, and perhaps he should delay a few days or perhaps a week. Perhaps Mr. Briggs had been correct, and to ease off it would be best.

It was only mid-morning before he had a servant come in and he explained to the man that he would rather ease himself off the laudanum and that he could not do it this way, that it was agony, and if some could be brought forth.

The servant nodded and left.

Mr. Briggs was the one who came back. "I made you a solemn vow last night, sir," said his butler. "I do this for your own good and for the good of your whole household. The answer, Mr. Darcy, is no."

Mr. Darcy was outraged. He sacked Mr. Briggs on the spot, and went on a rampage throughout the house, going through every nook and cranny he thought might hold some laudanum. Every servant that he came across who looked at him crosswise, he

also sacked.

When the house proved empty of any of the drug, he went to the stables to have a carriage take him to the apothecary.

But Mr. Briggs was there and prevented this, with the help of the stable hands, who folded their burly arms over their chest and refused to follow his orders.

“I sacked you,” he said to Mr. Briggs.

“Well, sir, let’s get you free of this laudanum and we’ll see if you still feel that way.” He gave Mr. Darcy a small smile.

Mr. Darcy hated him.

He wished he’d stayed with the Matlocks. With the Matlocks he’d be given as much laudanum as he liked.

“Back to bed, sir,” said Mr. Briggs. “You’ve still a hole in your belly, one that’s not quite healed. Don’t want to damage yourself. Don’t worry. I have everything well in hand.”

“I hate you,” Mr. Darcy seethed at him. “I want you out of my house.”

“Yes, quite, sir. I understand that, yes indeed.” The man was entirely unruffled.

To the depths of the deep with the man!

Mr. Darcy raged a bit longer, but he was obliged to go back to bed, after all, and there he stayed, as the desire for the laudanum grew worse. He began to sweat and shake. He had chills, as if he had a fever. There was one unfortunate incident when

Georgiana came down to see him, and he was half dressed and alternately yelling and alternately blubbering.

Mr. Briggs came along and ushered Miss Darcy away, telling her that her older brother was ill.

But in the end, it only lasted—well, the very worst of it, anyway—lasted for about three days. By the third day, he was feeling much better, and he was himself enough that he was able to give his thanks to Mr. Briggs and to assure him he was not, in fact, sacked.

It was a week before he felt entirely through it all, and he wasn't sure of his capacity to avoid the laudanum, even still. He felt as if he'd just been through hell itself. Laudanum, like most things, was too good to be true. It solved every problem in the world, even the worst pain, but because it was so good, it extracted a price. He would weigh all things heavily before accepting its gifts again. They were not gifts, not in the end. They were loans against the future. All the pain he'd avoided? He'd got it back in the end, hadn't he?

It was only at this point that he began to turn his thoughts to what had happened to Elizabeth Bennet. Where was she? Was she all right? And he owed her a debt of gratitude, of course, not to mention the fact he had been alone with her for one and a half nights and he wasn't sure what that might do to a woman's reputation, but he must do whatever he could to make sure that there was no detriment to her because of it.

So, he contacted the Matlocks, and the letter he got back from his cousin Alex was preposterous.

CHAPTER FIVE

IF ELIZABETH HAD expected her return to Longbourn would be met with joy that she was not, in fact, hurt, she was soon disabused of this notion. She should have known better, of course. Her mother, Mrs. Bennet, still held a grudge against Elizabeth for not having married Mr. Collins and leaving him to be swooped up by Charlotte Lucas.

Elizabeth had been trapped overnight with a wounded man, in a situation that—while not strictly proper—was extraordinary. Society might not look well on it, but they did not cast blame in this situation, at least they shouldn't have, not normally.

She was quite sure that, typically speaking, there should have been minimal damage to her reputation from the incident. However, it came down to servants, as it always did when gossip was afoot. Servants overheard things and servants whispered to other servants and then everything was being repeated and twisted and embellished. It was also spread far and wide. The servants from the Matlock household who conveyed the Lucases home spoke to the Lucases' servants—such as there were, for the Lucases only employed one married couple to see their entire household. They were not quite as well-off as the Bennets, who were not themselves well-off exactly, either.

The Lucas maid-of-all-work went to the marketplace in Meryton, where she bought food for the table, and she told everyone there that Elizabeth was a manipulative social climber who had wrecked the carriage on purpose to engineer a compromise with Mr. Darcy, and that he had rejected her in the wake of it, even though she had thrust herself into his arms and was very likely ruined.

This was the story, then, that spread like wildfire through Hertfordshire.

To say that Mrs. Bennet was displeased was an understatement.

When she heard of it, she went into one of her passions, which often lasted for hours. She railed and whined and sobbed and nothing anyone could do would soothe her. Eventually, she put herself to bed with a pronouncement that the entire family was destroyed, and that Elizabeth had brought calamity down on their heads.

And from then on, she refused to speak to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth herself felt frustrated and angry. Every night, now, she lay awake, turning over that conversation with Lady Matlock, wondering why she hadn't said the right thing. Of course, she had been exhausted and fresh from an ordeal, and no wonder she hadn't been articulate. But surely, surely, if she had simply explained it all better, then none of this would be happening.

And surely, surely, if she explained it now, then these rumors would stop.

And surely, surely, she was not ruined.

Her family was not destroyed.

Everything was not in ashes.

She waited, as weeks passed, hoping that the talk would die down. It did. But there were no invitations issued to the Bennet family, not for tea, not for dinner, nothing. Word even came that Sir William had a dinner party, broken leg notwithstanding, and that they had been excluded.

It would almost have been better, Elizabeth thought, if her mother had screamed

again, or if Lydia or Kitty had hurled insults at her.

But everyone was mostly quiet and solemn, and that cut her deeply.

Was this somehow her fault?

What should she have done differently?

It must have been her fault, she thought, it must have. She began to have dreams at night, strange dreams, which would whirl up all manner of elements of her recent past.

Sometimes, she would dream that she had stopped the carriage from turning over, that she had grown thick, strong arms and she had flung herself out and held the carriage upright with her strong, strong arms, even as the horses were frightened. That dream she didn't mind, because she often woke from it feeling better, sorted, as if she had solved the problem.

The other times, the other dreams, they were not nearly so reassuring.

She would dream that she was outside the house, Mr. Darcy telling her to put her feet near his hands so that he could untie them. And Lady Matlock would come appear out of nowhere, in the way of dreams, where things that make no sense seem as if they do make sense. Lady Matlock would sit down next to Elizabeth and say, "You have failed. You will go home to your family, to your sad country house, in disgrace."

Elizabeth would try to protest to the woman that she wasn't trying to trap Mr. Darcy into marriage.

Lady Matlock would gesture to Elizabeth's skirts, saying that a woman who put her

ankles so close to a man only had one thing in mind.

Mr. Darcy's hands would be on her, then, but caressing her ankles, her thighs, and Elizabeth would try to tell him to stop, but then Mr. Darcy wouldn't be Mr. Darcy, but would be Patrick, his hand moving steadily under her skirt as he pointed the barrel of a gun at her head. "Women have their uses, don't they?" he would sneer.

And then she would wake, her heart pounding, sweat gathering at the back of her neck and in all the creases of her skin, and she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep, not at all.

Sometimes, she dreamed that she had been shot, not Mr. Darcy, and that he had left her there, on the couch in the house, telling her that she was a conniving woman who'd only gotten herself shot in order to trap him in a marriage.

"Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable," he would say to her, and then she would lie there, all alone, very thirsty, thinking that she might die very soon until she would wake up again, in much the same fashion as she always did after these dreams, in quite a state of fear and anguish.

The dreams continued, and time marched on, and Elizabeth was nothing except miserable.

"YOU NEEDN'T HAVE come all this way," said the Earl of Matlock, seated behind the desk in his study. "You are still healing, as I understand it, and you should be abed."

Mr. Darcy was still in pain and was still healing. He would have stayed home, except his uncle had not deigned to come to see him, sending word that he was too busy. So, Mr. Darcy'd had no choice but to come and see him. "I'm doing better," he said. "And I need your assistance with something, I think."

“My assistance? Well, name it, my boy. Whatever I can do for my sister’s son.”
Matlock smiled at him.

“I need a special license, and I think you can get me one.”

“What?” Matlock made a face. “Now, see here, my wife has told me that this awful woman may have gotten in your head—”

“Your wife has misread the entire situation,” said Mr. Darcy. “Furthermore, she has damaged the poor girl’s reputation and hurt her entire family. They are a family of five daughters, none of which are married, and the estate is entailed. It’s cruel, what she’s done, truly. Now, the truth is, Miss Elizabeth Bennet does not like me, so I don’t suppose she’s going to be pleased by the news she has to marry me, but your wife has forced my hand, and it’s the only honorable thing I can do at this point.” He sighed heavily. He wasn’t exactly displeased about having to marry Elizabeth Bennet, but he also knew that it wouldn’t be the kind of marriage he’d like to have with her. She hated him; he would stay clear of her.

“How could she not like you?”

Mr. Darcy laughed. “People don’t like me, sometimes.”

“Not women such as her.”

“Well, to be honest, I may not have done much to recommend myself when I was in her company. I said a number of things. I may have been overly harsh on the entire female sex. I may have insulted her family members, all of them. I may have portrayed myself to be a person who refuses to forgive other’s faults. I may have painted a picture of a man who is exacting, arrogant, and impossible to please. I don’t know what woman would have liked me. Indeed, I don’t know that the picture is that far off from the truth. If I didn’t have a significant income, would I attract anyone?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said his uncle. “This girl, she—”

“Overturned the carriage?” Mr. Darcy sighed heavily. “Now, this I happen to know is not true, because I was looking out the window, and a whole string of deer darted out in front of the carriage—startling the horses and the driver, who paid with his life, mind you. It was an accident. Furthermore, she didn’t even wish to be traveling with me.”

“What? Surely, she wished it.”

“No, she did not,” he said. “At the time, I was too stupid to see it, probably because I have some faulty idea of how appealing I really am, but she tried, very effusively, to get out of the offer, and I insisted. I said that I would not hear any arguments to the contrary, and silenced her every protest.”

“She probably protested prettily—”

“I assure you, no. She’s not like those sorts of women. There’s a distinct lack of artifice to her. She’s blunt, bordering on impolite sometimes, and I made it impossible for her to refuse me. I realized this after the carriage was overturned. We talked, and it became clear what she really thought of me.”

This seemed to affect the earl for the first time. “You mean, after the trauma of it, she was very honest. She had no reason not to be.”

“Precisely.”

The earl sat back in his chair, sighing heavily. “So, Lady Matlock is entirely wrong.”

“Entirely.”

“Oh, heavens.” He rubbed his forehead. “Truly, I thought she was being too hard on her myself. That poor thing, coming back, wild-eyed, exhausted, blood spattered, and Lady Matlock would do nothing but send her off with no sympathy? I think women are too severe on each other sometimes.”

“Perhaps,” said Mr. Darcy.

“But see here, Darcy, you don’t have to marry her. We’ve done her a disservice, perhaps, but there are other ways to make it right.”

“Marriage is the best way,” he said.

“We’ll arrange a marriage for her,” said the earl.

“Definitely not,” said Mr. Darcy, too quickly.

The earl raised his eyebrows.

Mr. Darcy sighed. “Well, there’s a reason I bullied her into riding with me to Kent in the first place, isn’t there? Perhaps it’s not to my credit that I am not saddened by being compelled into matrimony with her, but I certainly don’t want someone else marrying her.”

Lord Matlock regarded him, a small smile playing on his lips.

“If she indicates she is not even remotely interested in marrying me, then I shall pursue other options, of course, but she won’t deny me. Will she?” He worried at his lower lip with his teeth.

Lord Matlock laughed. “Are you certain this woman hasn’t manipulated you?”

“I think so,” said Mr. Darcy. “I did think about it. For her to have done it all on purpose—not overturning the carriage, I mean, but being so perfectly intriguing to me? For her to have done that, she’d have to understand that I am tired of women who cater to me, bored with the incessant flattery, that I am roused by her sharp tongue and disdain for propriety for her directness. She would then have to feign those things in such a way that it appears that she’s not feigning them.”

“And to continue to feign them in the face of a dead driver, an overturned carriage, and a group of bandits brandishing firearms,” finished the earl. “Not likely, I don’t think. Why did I even let my wife convince me of this? I suppose I didn’t think on it overmuch, leaving it mostly to her. She is protective, you know. Ever so protective of her own sons, of course, and you by extension.”

“Yes, I see that,” said Mr. Darcy. “I wish to believe it was done with good intentions. I do think it was because of the way Alex found us. We could not find flint, and we were cold and exhausted and propriety was the last thing on our minds.”

“So, you’re not denying she was asleep in your arms?”

“It was about warmth and comfort and safety, nothing more. I was bleeding. She had traipsed up and down that road looking for help, in vain. We were starving. We’d had nothing to eat in days. It... I can see why Alex thought it, but it’s preposterous.”

“Right,” said the earl. “Yes, I see what you’re saying.”

“Alex was shocked to see us entwined. He spoke to Lady Matlock, and she made assumptions. And then I’m told she went to terrorize poor Maria Lucas—”

“Terrorize?”

“Well, that girl is young and impressionable and had been through an ordeal,” said

Mr. Darcy. “I’m sure she said anything at all that Lady Matlock suggested she say.”

“No, I suppose that’s likely true,” said the earl with a sigh.

“So? A special license? You’ll help me?”

“Go see if she even wants you, Darcy, since you’re so convinced she hates you,” said the earl. “To be honest, you have no title, and she is the daughter of a gentleman. It’s not a good match, of course, but it’s not outlandish.”

“Thank you. So, you’ll do it?”

“Why the rush?”

“I tell you, her entire family’s reputation has been dragged through the mud!”

“And a speedy marriage, that will repair things? Won’t that make it look as if you got her with child or something?”

Mr. Darcy snorted.

“I’m only saying, you don’t seem to be viewing this situation clearly. Perhaps the laudanum—”

“I haven’t had a drop in two weeks,” said Darcy.

“Oh,” said his uncle. “Well, good. Quite good. That was quick. Lady Matlock had a cousin who took eight months to wean off the stuff after a hunting accident, so I am impressed.”

“It wasn’t easy,” he said. “Honestly, it’s down to the steadfastness of my butler more

than it is to me, I think. I broke easily, but he did not.”

“I see,” said the earl. He cleared his throat, lowering his voice. “There isn’t a chance you have gotten her with child, is there?”

“No,” said Mr. Darcy, appalled. “I could barely walk.”

“All right,” said the earl.

“I suppose I want it quickly,” said Mr. Darcy. In his mind, she was going to be angry with him, probably for some time, but she’d eventually have to stop being angry with him, and then... well, then their marriage could properly start. The sooner he got through the angry part, the better, in his opinion. “But you’re right. She may not wish it that way. I suppose I’ll ask her. But you will intercede for me with the archbishop, if we wish to be married quickly?”

“Oh, all right, yes. Since you’re so insistent. I shall see what I can do.”

CHAPTER SIX

“LIZZY,” SCREAMED LYDIA at the top of her lungs from the bottom of the house. “Get down here this instant.”

Elizabeth, who had been lying down in her bed on top of the covers, face down in the pillows—a pastime she engaged in more often than she cared to admit these days—got up and went to the top of the stairs.

Lydia was at the bottom. “Lizzy!” she bellowed up, saw Elizabeth, and then lowered her voice. “Get down here. It’s Mr. Darcy.”

“What?” said Elizabeth, her heart climbing into her throat.

Certainly, some part of her had hoped Mr. Darcy would come to her defense in some way. Certainly, she’d hoped he would have defended her character or explained the way of it to someone.

She had to admit that she’d begun to have strange, meandering wonderings about Mr. Darcy. He’d been so insistent, after all, that they take his carriage to Kent. He’d rearranged his entire schedule just to convey her. And there were other things. She remembered, once, at Netherfield, he’d fixed her with this look and said that she willfully misunderstood him, and she wondered, well, what if she had really misunderstood him?

She examined everything he’d done, including that disastrous dance at the Netherfield Ball and the way he’d pulled her into his arms on that couch the night

they were found by the Matlocks, and she realized she'd have to conclude he was in love with her.

Only...

Well, there was the thing he'd said that first night at the Meryton assembly, when he hadn't realized she was listening. Tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt him. That seemed to rather go against everything else, didn't it?

What was he doing here?

She banged down the steps, her heart similarly banging against her rib cage. She rushed to the foyer, where Mr. Darcy was just then alighting inside the house, removing his hat from his head and speaking to the servant who'd greeted him.

Except, then, he looked up and saw her. "Ah, Miss Bennet," he said.

"Mr. Darcy," she gasped.

"You look... are your cheeks always so rosy?"

She flushed deeply, looking down, mortified.

"Can we speak?" he said.

"Of course," she said.

The servant said that Mr. Darcy must be shown into the sitting room, where Mrs. Bennet and the others were gathered.

"Oh," said Mr. Darcy, "well, I need to speak to Miss Bennet alone, I think."

“Let’s walk,” she said. It was April now, warm enough for rambles outdoors.

“Very good,” he said, putting his hat on his head.

She snatched up a bonnet from where it hung by the door and tied it on. She wished her heart would stop its incessant pounding.

They left the house together and then began to walk a stone pathway that wound its way behind Longbourn.

Abruptly, she stopped. “Oh! You’re still healing. You can’t walk!”

He gestured. “I’m on my feet, aren’t I?”

“But you know what I mean.” She threw up her hands, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. Apparently, I’m very out of sorts.”

“I’ve come to apologize,” he said.

“I see?” She was very confused.

“For my aunt, Lady Matlock, and the awful things she said and the rumors she started and the detrimental effect it’s had on your family.”

“Well, it’s not your fault, sir.

“I think it is, however,” he said. “I got you in that carriage with me. I forced you into it, and you didn’t want to come with me.”

“Oh, it was no hardship avoiding traveling post,” she said.

“You were not enjoying yourself,” he said. “I look back on it, see how strained you were, and I realize... I made a fool of myself, I see that now. I’m ever so sorry. I’m especially sorry because your reputation—your family’s reputation—I want to fix it.”

“How could you fix it, sir? The rumors are so widespread, and I don’t think any of us girls shall make a good marriage, and my mother is—”

“I thought I’d ask you to marry me,” he said.

She was speechless.

He winced. “My uncle, he’s pointed out that there are other things I could do, and I most certainly can put my influence into finding you a suitable husband, someone who’d be willing to marry you even after...” He cleared his throat. “Well, no, that’s sounds horrid, as if I’m trying to get someone to take my leavings or something, and I don’t think of you that way. Heavens, Miss Bennet, I think you saved my life out there. I might have bled to death without you.”

“I did precious little.”

“You fetched me water and gave me clean bandages and kept me warm.”

She flushed again. “I was entirely inappropriate and—”

“You were perfect,” he countered. “The situation was such as it was, and you were quite astounding.”

She bowed her head.

“All right, here it is,” he said, “I know you never wanted to marry me. You won’t hurt my feelings if you refuse me. I know how you see me. I could not blame you for

seeing me that way.”

“No, I was hasty, sir. You were rather insistent on sacrificing yourself for my safety while we were out there, and I realized I had misjudged your character.”

“Truly?” He gave her a wide smile. “Is that so? Well, that’s something.” He looked quite pleased.

“You don’t wish to marry me.”

He cleared his throat, and now he wouldn’t meet her gaze. “Oh, I don’t know, Miss Bennet.”

Dash it all! He was in love with her.

But then he said, lifting a shoulder, still gazing at the ground, “I suppose I was being foolish behaving the way I did, though. I shouldn’t have maneuvered you into that carriage or asked to dance with you or fantasized about all the times we’d walk together on the grounds of Rosings. The truth is, I couldn’t have married you, not then. Your family is not well connected, and you are not at all the sort of woman I am expected to marry. You have relatives in Cheapside, for goodness sake, and I hardly know what a wedding might look like, what a gaudy sort of spectacle that would have been. So, what I was doing, anyway, it was abundantly unfair to you. I repent of all that.”

She sniffed, drawing herself up.

He looked up at her. “Oh, Lord. Of course, you’re going to refuse me. This is the worst marriage proposal of all time.”

“Well, why do you want to marry me now?”

“I always wanted to marry you. I just couldn’t.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “You don’t have to lie to me, Mr. Darcy, especially when you’re clearly simply proposing to me out of guilt.”

“It’s not out of guilt.”

“I heard you the first night you came to Meryton with Mr. Bingley,” she said. “I heard you say that Jane was pretty and that I was not.”

His eyes widened. “You heard that?”

“So, don’t pretend,” she said. She didn’t want him to marry her because he felt guilty. She wanted a man who truly regarded her, and who she would respect in turn. She wanted mutual affection, maybe even true love, the violent kind in stories.

Of course, all of those wants had bloomed in the soil of a heart of a young woman who was not in the position she was in, buried under rumors and scandal and having denied the proposal of Mr. Collins and now thought to have been, well, used and discarded by Mr. Darcy.

Yes, she could see why his guilt was making him marry her. He was an honorable man, wasn’t he, not at all like Mr. Wickham had made him out to be. What had he said about how if he lived and she died, it would be abominable? He cared about the way he appeared to the world, and to look as if he were a man who would use a woman like Elizabeth ill and leave her to bear the brunt of it, it was not something he could bear.

Of course, of course.

This was all about appearances.

“I’m not pretending, Miss Bennet,” he said. “I don’t entirely understand it myself, but haven’t you had someone’s looks sort of grow on you before?”

She did know what he was talking about, because it had happened with him in reverse. At first, she’d thought him quite handsome, and then the more often he opened his mouth and spoke, the less so she thought him.

He winced. “Oh, dash it all, that’s a wretched thing to say to a woman a man wants to marry. I’ve never actually done this before, you know? It’s not as if I ever bothered to practice. I thought I’d propose naturally. What a fool I am.”

“It’s all right,” she said, taking pity on him. “You think that if you leave me here, taking the brunt of this rumor, it makes you look bad.”

He considered. “I suppose so, yes. I had thought of that a bit, but most of my concern was for you. I thought, if you and I marry, it would help the relative position of your sisters. Also, I, erm, I may have interfered with your sister and Bingley, so, I could undo that and—”

“What?” She was incensed. “You what?”

He grimaced. “Can this get any worse? I should go, I think. I should simply leave.”

“You’re taking it back, then?”

“Taking what back?”

“The marriage proposal.”

“I can’t take it back,” he said, affronted. “I’m a gentleman. If I’ve asked you, I’ve asked you. No, I don’t wish to take it back. Obviously, I still want to marry you.

Very, very much. I'm in love with you, Miss Bennet."

Oh, yes, he was in love. She let out a little laugh. He was awful at pretending, but he was trying. He wasn't a bad man. He cared about propriety too much, but at least he did it in a way that made him kind. Of course, she would have to find out more about Mr. Wickham. But he was very, very wealthy, and she would be utterly foolish to turn him down.

It was really a choice between disgrace and ruin and being mistress of his large estates and hosting lavish dinner parties and hobnobbing with the peerage. If she denied him, she was just being stupid.

"I accept," she said.

His jaw dropped in surprise.

She let out a laugh. "Oh, it's not that shocking, is it?"

"You hate me."

"I assure you, I do not hate you."

"You did," he countered.

"I suppose I was harsh on you, but I know you better now, and... well, being your wife, it does not sound unpleasant."

"I see," he said, his smile a little rueful.

"Oh, I don't mean it in that way. I am not what your aunt implied. I'm not trying to use you to climb socially. To be honest, while I do enjoy attending social functions, I

am just as happy at home with a book curled up near the fire, and I don't need lavish things. You needn't spend any of your income on me—"

"Apologies," he said, letting out a breath. "There's no need for that, Miss Bennet. We'll, er, give it some time, shall we? And perhaps affection will grow between us."

She smiled. "I feel quite certain it could. I have a great deal of respect for you, sir, and I shall endeavor not to be embarrassing to you. I shall do exactly as you ask, and you won't regret this, giving this to me, helping my family. I promise you."

His jaw worked. He looked into her eyes and then, his gaze seemed to hone in on her lips. But then he jerked his eyes up to the sky. "Time," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"Oh," he said, lifting a finger. "But I think a quick marriage. I can procure a special license."

Of course, he wished to quell those rumors of his bad behavior right away, didn't he? "All right. I certainly don't have a number of social engagements these days. My calendar is quite open, sir."

"You don't object, then?"

"No, why should I?"

"If you think it might make things look... more salacious, I suppose, the rush."

"Oh, no," she said. "It will only preserve the ruse you wish to perpetrate, I suppose, that you're actually madly in love with me instead of doing this out of duty and all that."

“I said I was in love with you,” he said, with a laugh.

She laughed, too. “Yes, sir, well, you’re not very good at that.”

“At what?”

“At lying.”

His expression froze and he looked rather devastated.

“Oh, I don’t mean it to be...” She reached out, taking his hand, wishing to reassure him. “I’m sorry. I have this way about me, simply saying whatever I think without thinking of how it will sound until it’s too late.”

He put his other hand over hers, clutching her hand between both of his. “Don’t apologize for that, Miss Bennet. I like that about you rather a lot.”

Her lips parted and now she felt almost trapped in his gaze. Oh, maybe he did... maybe he was in love with her, sort of, somehow? Maybe...

No, don’t be foolish, Elizabeth. A man like Mr. Darcy doesn’t fall in love with a girl like you.

CHAPTER SEVEN

EVERYTHING HAPPENED QUICKLY after that.

Well, except the moments where Elizabeth was alone, which were sometimes late at night and sometimes in the morning and sometimes in the afternoon. She would walk in the gardens at Longbourn or sit in the sitting room with embroidery on her lap as she only stared out the window. During these times, she went back and forth, going over the evidence.

Did he love her?

Was that why he wanted to marry her?

She couldn't decide.

It seemed to her that there was just as much evidence to support the idea that he was doing it out of an attempt to appear honorable to the outside world as there was to support the idea that he did have regard for her. He said he loved her. He had said it more than once.

But maybe he was only saying that because he wished her to think it.

Or perhaps he was trying to convince himself that he believed it. Mr. Darcy wished to have a good opinion of himself, she thought, and his own inner strictures were such that he might try to convince himself he felt love even when he didn't.

At this point, however, she would own that it was all becoming very complicated. If Mr. Darcy believed he loved her, then he did, didn't he? Even if he was only trying to force himself into it, it all came to the same thing in the end, she thought.

Well, except it didn't actually come to the same thing. Not at all.

Anyway, it didn't matter, not in the end, because she didn't love him, and so it was likely better if he didn't love her, because if he did, that would be a difficult situation for them both, very awkward.

However, if he loved her, maybe she might find herself falling in love with him, too. There were a number of attractive attributes that Mr. Darcy possessed, not least of which was the way he looked into her eyes when they spoke sometimes, a little smile playing on his lips, as if he was growing quite fond of her.

She was so concerned with the question of whether or not Mr. Darcy was in love with her that she didn't even notice the fact that the awful dreams had stopped. She no longer dreamed of Lady Matlock or the burned house. She no longer woke with her heart pounding as if it wished to get free of her chest.

Agreements were drawn up. The special license was procured. The marriage took place in London. It was a small ceremony at a small church, nowhere fashionable, and with only a few people in attendance—not even every member of her family. There was no wedding breakfast afterwards.

She was carted off to his town house with the understanding that they'd set off that afternoon, for Derbyshire. She was shown into a sitting room, where she expected she'd be alone. Her husband had already taken his leave of her, indicating he had things to see to in preparation for the journey.

However, she was not alone in the room, for Lady Matlock was seated inside,

gripping a teacup, her expression severe. She did not get to her feet when Elizabeth came into the room. She simply glared.

Elizabeth wasn't sure what to do. She approached Lady Matlock, but she did not sit down. She stood, facing her, hands behind her back, like a scolded child awaiting a punishment.

"Well," said Lady Matlock, "I was mistaken about you, it seems."

Elizabeth blinked at her. Was this... an apology?

"Doesn't seem to have worked out badly for you, though, does it?"

Elizabeth only stared, mute. Why could she never figure out what to say to this woman?

"Well?" said Lady Matlock. "Oh, perhaps you're really just an idiot, is that it? Let me spell it out for you, then. If I hadn't assumed that you were a social-climbing, money-grubbing manipulative temptress and then spread this idea to others, including the Lucas family, who were my guests for several days, then there would have been no suffering or persecution of you or your family. If that hadn't happened, Mr. Darcy would not have felt so very responsible for everything, and he is quite concerned with his own responsibilities, you know? He's honorable to a fault. If that hadn't happened, he would never have considered rescuing you. You owe this marriage to me, do you see that?"

Elizabeth licked her lips. "W-well, perhaps, from a certain point of view, I... suppose."

"And yet, you stand there, staring at me, stammering, and do I hear any thanks? Any gratitude?"

Elizabeth choked. This woman could not be serious. “Thank you, Lady Matlock,” she breathed.

Lady Matlock smiled. “You’re quite welcome, Mrs. Darcy.” She got to her feet, setting down her tea cup. “Congratulations on your nuptials.”

“You’re too kind,” said Elizabeth faintly.

“Remember, he’s doing this out of duty,” said Lady Matlock. “He’d never choose someone like you, not if I hadn’t interfered and ruined everything. You’re not ideal, but since I only have myself to blame for this disaster, we shall weather it the best we can. Enjoy Pemberley. Do feel free to stay in the country as long as you possibly can.” Then, without waiting for a response, she swept out of the room, leaving Elizabeth alone.

Elizabeth sat down heavily and bit down on her bottom lip so hard that it hurt. She felt as if she might burst into tears, and she didn’t wish to do that.

It was possible that he loved her. There was some indication of that, she supposed. But it was much more likely that Lady Matlock was correct.

Mr. Darcy had married her for the sake of his reputation and the perception of others of his good character. Honorable to a fault, indeed.

It was not long before the man himself came back to collect her. They climbed into his carriage and set off for the north and Pemberley. They traveled throughout the afternoon, into the evening.

Quite late that first night, they stopped at an inn. He procured them separate rooms for sleeping, and he didn’t visit her, even though it was their wedding night.

She wasn't sure what to make of this.

On the one hand, she thought it was simply because it was an inn, and he likely didn't want it to happen there. And that he was also probably tired from all the traveling and that it had no bearing on anything at all.

But she couldn't help but take it as a sign that he really did not love her, after all.

They reached Pemberley the following day. Their traveling together was pleasant. They spoke to each other about books and about other various sundries. He was polite, and so was she. She enjoyed his company, as far as that went.

She had only met with his sister briefly, and they had left Miss Darcy in London, which Elizabeth had taken, at the time, to mean he did love her, because he wanted them to be alone for the first part of their marriage, which was when people were usually very wrapped up in each other, or so she thought.

But now, she wasn't sure.

He'd come to her that night, certainly.

But he didn't.

He did not come to her that first night in Pemberley, nor the second night, nor the third. She realized at this point that there was a time to have brought it up and that time would have been at breakfast the morning after he first had not appeared. She could bring it up now, but she didn't know how to do it.

He didn't love her.

He didn't want to do that with her. Whatever it even was, and she wasn't entirely

clear on that. She had been given a sort of talk by Mrs. Bennet, but Mrs. Bennet was still angry with her and she kept saying pointed things such as, “Oh, you likely already know all about this when you were overnight with the man for two nights.”

Anyway, Elizabeth was fairly certain she had the gist of it, and it was very intimate. It involved nudity and insertion of body parts and... he didn't want to do that with her. Clearly.

She tried to think of a reason he wouldn't come to her that also meant he loved her, and she came up with nothing.

Well.

Of course there was the possibility that he loved her, but she'd indicated she didn't love him, and so he didn't think she would welcome him in her bed. And if that was the case, she should tell him that she would.

Except that, erm, it sounded sort of dreadful, all of it, with the nakedness and the insertion and the beastliness of it. As if they were mere animals. And, well, maybe it was better to avoid it?

Then a week had passed, and now she definitely couldn't say anything at all.

So.

She didn't.

PEMBERLEY WAS ONE of the largest houses that Elizabeth had ever spent a night in. She had to admit that her experience with such luxury, such wealth, such size was limited. She did not feel at all comfortable in what was now her home.

She was concerned, also, for she was to be mistress of this place, and she was not sure entirely how one went about such a thing.

On the first day, after breakfast, when Mr. Darcy did not mention having not come to her room the night before to divest her of her virtue, and she had not mentioned it either, as if it were the normal way that a marriage were conducted, she had been introduced to the housekeeper, a Mrs. Reynolds.

Elizabeth liked her.

The woman was a grandmotherly sort, with apple-red cheeks and a ready smile. She clearly doted on Mr. Darcy like a son. She looked Elizabeth over and pronounced her picture-perfect. “What a good choice you’ve made, sir,” she said to Mr. Darcy, beaming.

This was heartening, of course.

Mrs. Reynolds indicated that Elizabeth must come downstairs again, later. “After you’ve see the house, I think. And take your time. Whenever it is convenient, whenever at all. Just poke your head into the kitchen and someone will show you into my sitting room and fetch me. Then you and I shall have a little sit-down, and talk about everything there is to talk about, all right?”

Elizabeth had nodded, but had felt the idea of it like dread. Was she supposed to have been making plans of what she would do to this grand house? Was she supposed to be planning dinner parties or balls or anything of that nature? She didn’t think so. Her marriage to Mr. Darcy might have made her family respectable, but there were still rumors, of course. Mr. Darcy had indicated that they’d come here, to the country, to wait out the gossips, who would eventually tire of the subject, he said. So, Elizabeth thought they were keeping a low profile out here.

Even so, maybe she needed to be introducing herself to the people of the countryside. They should invite the local parson and his wife to dinner, perhaps? Maybe a Sunday luncheon, after church?

Her stomach churned.

It was the churning that forced her down to meet with Mrs. Reynolds. She couldn't bear putting it off any longer. If she simply faced it, it would be over.

So, she went and presented herself and was taken into Mrs. Reynolds's sitting room. In due time, the woman appeared, smiling widely. She clapped her hands together. "Oh, right away, she comes to see me. That's what I like to see, initiative. I should have known he'd marry a girl who would have a drive in her."

"I don't have a drive!" Elizabeth protested. What did that mean, anyway, that she was driving a team of horses up and down a road straight through the center of her being? No, definitely not. "I only thought..." This was dreadful. She must appear nervous. She straightened up, pulling herself together. "You said to come. I have come. What can I do for you, Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Well, it's the other way around, ma'am, it's what I can do for you, of course." Mrs. Reynolds sat down on a chair and looked her over. "You needn't be frightened, dearie."

"I'm not," said Elizabeth, cringing. She bowed her head. "If you tell me what is expected of me, I shall make sure to do my best to meet the standard of a mistress of a place like this. I am sorry if I need instruction, but you'll find I am capable of taking it and implementing it. I did most of my own instruction as a girl. I taught myself a number of subjects. Mostly by reading books, though, and I don't know that there are books on how to run a grand household."

“No, no, it’s not that way,” said Mrs. Reynolds. “Nothing is expected, you see? You may do it exactly as you like. Some mistresses are very hands-on and have a great deal of opinions here and there, and if you have desires, ma’am, I am here to make sure they are carried out.” A bright smile. “Some women, on the other hand, have other things to see to, and they leave the household to be run by the servants. I want to assure you that Pemberley runs quite well, quite well indeed. I and Mr. Wickham have the place quite in hand.”

“Mr. Wickham,” said Elizabeth. “Yes, I suppose I knew that his father was the steward here.”

“His father...” Mrs. Reynolds inclined her head. “So, you have met Georgie, then?”

“I have,” said Elizabeth, and she was aware that her tone changed when she said it. She hunched up her shoulders and ducked down her head.

“Oh, dear. What did he do to you?” Mrs. Reynolds lowered her voice.

Elizabeth’s gaze snapped up. “Oh, nothing, of course.” She shrugged. “He is very uncharitable towards my husband, though, and I find it all puzzling.”

“Well that is puzzling,” said Mrs. Reynolds. “After everything our Mr. Darcy has done for Georgie, you’d think he’d be grateful.”

“Well, Mr. Wickham—Mr. George Wickham, that is—he indicated to me that he had been intended to become the parson here in Derbyshire, but that Mr. Darcy had put a stop to it and then blocked him from getting any inheritance at all, though he was promised it by the late Mr. Darcy.” Elizabeth bit down on her lower lip. “Perhaps I oughtn’t say anything. I don’t wish to stir things and I should likely speak to my husband about it—”

“Oh, best not to mention Georgie to Fitzwilliam, truly, my dear. Here’s what I know.” Mrs. Reynolds raised her eyebrows. “Georgie didn’t want it. He demanded that Fitzwilliam give him the value of the position, thousands of pounds, and Fitzwilliam did it. But what we hear is that Georgie gambled it away, pretending to be a gentleman.”

Elizabeth let out a little breath, nodding to herself. She had met Mr. Wickham at a card party. She had watched him play cards. She had watched him enter into bets that were too rich for her blood. She supposed it was likely true. She knew of four people, most close friends or acquaintances, who’d gotten under a bad bit of debt from card parties and the like. Most of them were good people otherwise.

No, going into debt didn’t necessarily put a blight on Mr. Wickham’s character, but lying about Mr. Darcy, that was something else. Why had he done that? She would have to ponder that, she supposed.

“He always did wish to pretend to be a gentleman,” said Mrs. Reynolds. “His father, the steward here, you’ll meet him, and he’s never approved of such a thing. I don’t have to tell you that one can’t be a proper steward without understanding that everyone must stay in their proper places.”

Yes, of course. Except Elizabeth had married rather up, hadn’t she? Was she staying in her proper place?

“Would you like to go over menus, ma’am? If you’d rather, I can handle it all myself,” said Mrs. Reynolds.

“Well, if you would prefer—”

“No, no, dear, if you would prefer,” said Mrs. Reynolds, giving her a gentle smile. “There’s nothing to learn except that. A woman of a grand estate knows her worth

and her importance and she trusts herself. Whatever you wish is the way it must be.”

Elizabeth reeled, trying to let that settle into her. She licked her lips. “Very well, then, Mrs. Reynolds. I think, then, that we shall continue on the way things are for now while I am adjusting to my new surroundings. When and if I find things that need altering or improvement, I shall come to you.”

“Very well done, ma’am,” said Mrs. Reynolds, beaming at her.

Elizabeth smiled back. She liked Mrs. Reynolds quite a lot.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ELIZABETH DID MEET the senior Mr. Wickham, but only in passing. He was a tidy man with a shock of white hair. He was dressed impeccably and quite formal. He did not smile at all, but he seemed a pleasant person overall, if somewhat strict about the way things must be done. Elizabeth supposed that was what one wanted from a steward.

At one point, she did decide to ask Mr. Darcy about Mr. Wickham, and he got very quiet and looked at her with an expression on his face that she found inscrutable.

They were having tea together. It was afternoon. She wished they could go back to discussing the sermon they'd heard the day before at church. They were having an interesting conversation on the meaning of the order of the beatitudes.

He set down his tea and fixed her in place with his gaze. "Tell me about what occurred between you and him," he ordered in a rough voice.

She flushed. "We spoke on occasion, I suppose, is really all."

He didn't say anything.

She began to pick at the edge of the long sleeve of her morning dress. She'd had new clothes made, but only at the urging of Mrs. Reynolds, who had put it all in motion for her. The modiste had come to call with bolts of fabric, had pinned and measured and made suggestions. Then the dresses had come, well, some of them, anyway. They were coming in installments. One installment was here, but the other two were

forthcoming. This dress was light lavender, and it was a beautiful color of fabric, she thought. “I think I may have thought it was more than it was. He seemed to single me out in a way, I suppose, and I thought he was taking me into his confidence about his past ills. But it seems he lied to me, actually.”

“More than it was in what way?”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter, does it? He is connected to a Miss King now—”

“I don’t think so,” said Mr. Darcy.

She lifted her gaze to his.

“You were attached to him?” His voice was cold.

“No,” she said, but it sounded false to her own ears. She snatched up her tea cup and peered into it.

“Why?”

“Why?” she repeated. “Why what?”

“I mean what does a man like George Wickham have to recommend him? He has no income and no—”

“He was in the regiment, so I assumed—”

“He was serving for someone else, as I understand. It’s not as if he purchased that commission, Mrs. Darcy, let me assure you of that.”

Oh, interesting that he’d called her Mrs. Darcy. He almost never did that. She liked it,

actually. It made her feel possessed in a way that maybe ought to have been stifling, but simply wasn't. It was like being covered up in a warm, heavy blanket. She met his gaze, letting out a little breath.

He was still cold.

She looked away again.

"Well?" he said. "Why?"

"Oh," she said. She shook herself. "I don't know, Mr. Darcy. It was a very long time ago—"

"Barely six months," he said. "And he is still there, isn't he?"

"I suppose," she said. "It's not as if I think of him."

"You don't think of him? Which is why you brought him up."

She sighed. "I am only confused, I suppose. What happened? Why do you hate him? Why did he lie to me? Why did he say things about you that made me think so badly of you? I don't understand it, sir, because you are a very good man, and he made me think you weren't."

"Well, the answer to that is simple," he said tartly. "Mr. Wickham is not a good man."

She didn't know what to say.

"Do you wish to defend him? Go ahead. I have been waiting, in fact, Mrs. Darcy, to hear why exactly you were in love with him."

“I was never in love with him,” she said, defensive, but this was sort of a lie. She had been attached to him. She had fantasized about being married to him. She had, at the very least, thought them connected enough that she’d thought he would claim her first two dances at the Netherfield Ball and had been horrified when they were taken up by Mr. Collins.

After Mr. Wickham hadn’t even appeared at that ball and after he’d been more and more distant—always pleasant, she supposed, but never making her any promises, never really behaving as if there was anything between them except friendship, she’d realized she’d been hoping in vain.

So, by the time she had heard he was especially interested in Miss King, who had an inheritance, she had hardly been hurt anymore. By that time, she’d talked herself out of whatever madness it was that had let her think it was possible for her to have that sort of love affair with any man at all.

“Convince me of that,” said Mr. Darcy.

She furrowed her brow. “Well, it’s the truth. Why don’t you believe me?”

He settled back in his seat, agitated. He busied himself by adding more sugar to his tea, which likely didn’t need it. “At the time, when we danced at Netherfield, I didn’t understand why you were bringing him up. Only in retrospect did it become clearer to me. You did it on purpose. You wished to unsettle me. It’s not the first time you’ve done a thing like that to me, after all. You seem to delight in doing things like that, as if you enjoy riling me up.”

“I don’t, sir, no.” She shook her head.

“But you did,” he said.

She considered. "All right, I suppose. But I thought that you had done him a great wrong, and that you were a different sort of man than you are."

"You thought that I was a man who cared only about appearances and not about anything important. You thought I was stupid and priggish and you delighted in knowing which buttons to push to make me lose my composure."

"No," she said. "That's a very unfair characterization of that conversation. You never lose your composure, for one thing."

He raised his eyebrows. "I think, while I had a gunshot wound, I was not entirely composed."

She sighed. "Well, that was then. You certainly been very composed for our entire marriage."

"Which isn't a good thing? You like me better when I lose my composure? Is that why you like him?"

"For heavens sake, Mr. Darcy, I do not like Mr. Wickham. He told me falsehoods, and I cannot make sense of why he did, and I feel only foolish that I was taken in by him."

Mr. Darcy blinked at her. "He does that, though. Takes people in. He can be very personable."

"Indeed," she said. "But I don't know why. Why lie to me? What did he hope to gain from it? He certainly wasn't interested in me."

Mr. Darcy's jaw twitched. "He broke your heart."

“For the sake of all that’s holy, I was not in love with him. My heart was not broken. I never gave him my heart.”

“Do you have any intention of giving any man your heart, Mrs. Darcy?”

She sputtered. “Well, no, we’re married and I’m not going to go off and—to suggest such a thing.”

He reddened. “I meant...” He bowed his head. “Never mind what I meant. It was utterly foolish.”

Oh. Well, here was evidence of the possibility that he was, in fact, in love with her and only wanted a bit of a nudge in that direction. “You mean, you meant to ask if I would give you my heart?” she said, all in a rush, and her face heated up when she said it. She couldn’t look at him.

“No, no, please. I don’t know why we’re talking about this. It doesn’t matter, anyway. I’m nothing like him. If you want a man like that, I shall never please you—”

“You do please me,” she said. “I obviously don’t please you.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Well, you don’t...” She could not finish the sentence. “You haven’t... We haven’t...”

“Haven’t what?”

She was flustered and her face was on fire. She told her tea, “If you want me as your wife, as fully your wife, I am willing, you know.”

He didn't say anything.

Lord, he didn't even understand her, did he?

"Mrs. Darcy," he said in a low, low voice, "you went through an ordeal, one which was very unpleasant and that culminated in this marriage. I know you wouldn't have chosen this outcome for yourself if things had been different. And I'm not the sort of man who would trespass against you further."

She lifted her gaze to him.

He took a drink of his tea, grimaced, likely because there was too much sugar, set it down and got to his feet. "I'm afraid I need to excuse myself, madam," he said, looking over the top of her head at the wall behind her. "Forgive me, but I must quit the room."

"Of course, sir. No need for apologies," she said.

And then he was gone, and she resolved she would never bring up the topic of his coming to her bed ever again. It was far too embarrassing, and she was horrified with herself.

ELIZABETH HAD BEEN given a maid upon her arrival at Pemberley, and the girl's name was Harmony. She was probably around Elizabeth's age, which Elizabeth thought was a mercy, for she knew that the lady of the house might often be given a mature maid, one who had worked her way into the position. However, Elizabeth would not have preferred such a thing, for she would have not felt equal to an older maid.

Harmony felt like an equal. At least, she would have felt that way if the girl hadn't nearly worshiped Elizabeth. She thought the sun rose and set in her mistress. She was

ever so excited to be Elizabeth's maid, and she often said things punctuated by statements such as, "Of course that would be nothing to a fine lady like yourself" or, "But I'm sure someone like you wouldn't be impressed with such a thing."

Elizabeth found these things privately funny, but she—perhaps not to her credit—didn't entirely disabuse Harmony to the fact that she was not truly a fine lady and that she was indeed quite easily impressed.

One day, Harmony was late to help Elizabeth dress for dinner. She appeared a quarter hour later than she should have, and she was red faced and her hair was coming free from the bun she kept it tied back in.

"Oh, Mrs. Darcy, you've had to dress yourself!" Harmony exclaimed. "I'm ever so sorry. I completely lost track of time. Oh, you'll dismiss me for certain."

Elizabeth could have said that it was all right, that she had been raised in a household where it was common that she had to put her own dresses on, and that she had developed a number of little tricks to get into complicated wardrobes, such as putting her dress on backwards so as to do up the buttons, and then scooting it around frontwards and simply getting Jane to do up her top buttons.

Speaking of Jane, Elizabeth had a letter from her just the day before, indicating that Mr. Bingley was back in Netherfield, but without either of his sisters, and that he had invited the Bennet family to dine with him—the first invitation they'd had since before the rumors about Elizabeth had begun. Jane's letter was subdued. After all, she'd been in London before and had been rather snubbed by the Bingley family, but there was an underlying hope to it that let Elizabeth know that Jane still carried a bit of a torch for Mr. Bingley.

Elizabeth wanted a happy ending for her sister. Indeed, for everyone in her family. She hoped this was the beginning of a renewed interest in courting Jane. After all,

Mr. Darcy had said that thing to her during the proposal, and she had been too embarrassed and flustered to probe it, but she resolved she must ask him now.

Of course, she hadn't yet worked up her nerve to do so, because speaking to him was so very difficult and horrid. She'd likely be late for dinner tonight, so it wouldn't do to bring it up.

Anyway, Elizabeth told Harmony to never mind it, just to set about putting Elizabeth's hair up and to fix the rest of her buttons.

Harmony burst into tears as she was braiding Elizabeth's hair.

"What is it?" said Elizabeth. "Please, please, I'm not angry. It doesn't truly matter. We can do something simple with my hair. I daresay my husband doesn't care what I look like."

Harmony tried to stop crying. "This is horrible, me falling apart like this in front of a lady such as yourself. I don't deserve being your maid. I knew I would only ruin this opportunity."

"I'm not going to dismiss you," said Elizabeth gently. "Nothing is ruined."

"It was the puppies, you see," said Harmony.

"Puppies?" said Elizabeth.

Which was how she ended up not at dinner at all, but downstairs in the kitchens, kneeling in her evening gown and gaping at the tiny, furry darlings who were all in a wooden box, huddled around a hot water bottle.

Their mother was nowhere to be found. There were four of them. They were precious

and small and wondrous.

Elizabeth rushed up the stairs to try to make it to dinner on time, and she barely, barely made it. Out of breath, she stood at her chair as Mr. Darcy came into the dining room.

“Is something wrong, Mrs. Darcy?” he said.

“Oh, no, sir. A bit of excitement with the servants is all. I shouldn’t have allowed myself to be distracted. I suppose it does me no credit getting caught up in it.” In Longbourn, such a thing as four puppies in the kitchen would have delayed dinner entirely, and everyone would have been too excited to eat. Indeed, she was planning to get through dinner as quickly as possible and then excuse herself to go down and check on them. She wanted one of the puppies, at least one, as her very own. She’d never had a dog, not in the way some people had dogs.

There were dogs who did work on the farm with the herding and the like, and her father had a few hunting dogs, but just a pet, a little companion for her to walk and dote on, she was overcome with the thought of it.

Mr. Darcy raised his eyebrows. “Is it a secret?”

She shook her head. “Nothing to concern yourself with, sir. Let’s eat, of course.”

“You’re concealing it from me?”

She cringed. “No, of course not.” She let out a breath, feeling foolish. “It’s puppies, you see. They found four tiny puppies without their mother. They’ll have to be bottle fed and kept warm and raised like little babies and I... oh, I’m sorry, it’s foolish.”

“Oh, so, that’s where you were,” he said.

She looked up at him and he was smiling. She hesitantly smiled back.

“Do you like dogs, Mrs. Darcy?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” she said with a little laugh.

“No,” he said. “Not everyone.” He laughed, too.

“Do you like dogs?” she said.

“Where are they?” he said. “How small? Are their eyes open?”

“I don’t know. They’re not hairless, so perhaps. They were all asleep. But they’re darling.”

“Where are they?”

“In the kitchens,” she said.

“Let’s go and have a look,” he said.

“Truly? But...” She gestured at the table, at everything all set up for them. “What about dinner?”

“I think we could have dinner in the kitchens, couldn’t we?” He smiled at one of the footmen. “My wife wishes to be with the puppies, so we can accommodate that, can’t we?”

“Mr. Darcy, we couldn’t possibly!” She was laughing, though, and she couldn’t stop smiling.

He came around the table and offered her his arm, grinning at her as if they were sharing a secret. “Let me escort you, madam, if you please?”

She took his arm and together, they traipsed back down the stairs to the kitchens, where they were met by at least half of the staff, all of whom got very quiet at the sight of him.

He extricated himself from her and raised both of his hands. “No, no, it’s all right. I certainly don’t mind if we’re raising puppies. I’m excited, too. Please, show them to me.”

They ended up sitting on the ground around the box with the puppies on their laps while they ate on plates on the floor, and while the other servants came in to chat with them, all of them all very excited.

Mr. Darcy had questions. Where had they found the puppies?

Mr. Falk, who was one of the footmen, knelt down to say that Harmony had shown them to him. “They were left out in this box, as if someone had simply abandoned them. I carried them in here, and we resolved we’d ask Mr. Wickham if it was all right to take care of them.”

“But then,” broke in Mrs. Reynolds, settling down on the floor between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth, “I found out about it and said if Mr. Wickham had issues with it, he could come to me. I knew you’d be pleased, sir. It’s like when you were small and old Daisy died when she was birthing her pups. You raised all of those yourself, helping me with the feedings.”

Mr. Darcy beamed at her. “Those were big Great Danes. These look like some other breed, something smaller.”

“Well, they might be mutts, but those puppies of Daisy’s weren’t pure Danes either,” Mrs. Reynolds said with a laugh. She scooped out one of them and plopped it onto Mr. Darcy’s lap and another onto Elizabeth’s, who giggled in delight.

The puppy did open its eyes. It squirmed into her warmth, and the weight of it was like something divine. She scratched it behind its tiny ears. “Oh, they’re so small and perfect. I’ve never been quite so close to puppies this small.”

Once, there had been puppies born at Longbourn, but the big mama dog who herded the cows had guarded them from the Bennet sisters, barking whenever Elizabeth or Mary had tried to get close. Jane had been disgusted by the idea of them when she’d seen them first born without their hair, pronouncing them like rats.

“Here,” said Mrs. Reynolds, scooping out the other two, one each for her and Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth had her lap full of puppies now, and she was so pleased she didn’t quite know what to do with herself.

“I think you should name them,” said Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth looked up and realized he was looking right at her. “Me?”

“I think they came here for you,” he said. “They heralded your arrival, and they are seeking someone to take care of them. You seem to want to do that. Do you?”

“Oh, yes, please,” she said softly.

“That settles it,” said Mr. Darcy. “They are yours, Mrs. Darcy.”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t. No, no. They must be ours, of course, Mr. Darcy.”

“Ours?” He was pleased by that. “Yes, all right. We’ll raise these little rascals together. But you’ll name them all.”

“Well,” she said, “all right. But I think I must take some time to get to know them first. I wouldn’t want to give them the wrong names.”

“Absolutely not,” he said. “Quite right.” He looked to Mrs. Reynolds. “Now, I may be wrong about this, but I think my wife is going to want to be quite hands on with these little ones.”

“Yes, definitely,” said Elizabeth, petting both of the tiny little dogs on her lap.

“So, I think we must have her set up with a room on the bottom level near the door so that she can take them out—with assistance of course. Harmony, you found them, so you won’t mind?”

“No, sir,” said Harmony breathlessly.

“If you don’t wish it, Mrs. Darcy, you needn’t be bothered by it—”

“Of course I do,” said Elizabeth. “Thank you. I’m sorry to create so much trouble for everyone, however. I suppose they’re only puppies, and—”

“No, they are the children of Pemberley,” announced Mrs. Reynolds. “Nothing but the best for these little sweetlings.”

“Quite right,” said Mr. Darcy again, giving Elizabeth a smile that made her heart thud. “You’re a natural nurturer, Mrs. Darcy, and I knew that when you were so good to me when I was wounded.”

“Oh, but all I did was fetch you water,” she said. “I couldn’t even find anyone to

rescue us!”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” said Mr. Darcy, lifting up one of the puppies on his lap. “I don’t think I’m the least bit wrong about this.”

CHAPTER NINE

FOR THE NEXT several weeks, their lives revolved around the puppies. Elizabeth was given a room downstairs to take care of them. It was determined that they were probably about two or three weeks old, considering their eyes were open and they were furry but couldn't really walk yet. They crawled about on their bellies and made adorable mewling noises. They had to be fed milk from bottles and they needed help to empty their bladders and bowels because they were still yet so tiny.

Elizabeth was up in the night with them, but Harmony helped, and so did Mr. Darcy. The first night, when she woke to the sound of their mewling to see his tall form across the room, she was shocked.

He spoke to Harmony. "Let's not wake Mrs. Darcy for this feeding," he said in a low, deep voice, and she thought she might like to wake and hear that voice in the depths of the night, and then scolded herself for having such a thought as that!

Then wondered if she must scold herself after all. He was her husband, wasn't he? If there was ever a man's voice to wish to hear in the darkness, it must be his.

As the weeks passed, she allowed herself to puzzle evermore over all of it. The real question, she supposed, was whether or not she loved Mr. Darcy. She had not been fair in her assessment of all of it thus far.

She had been leaving it up to him, which put too much pressure on him. Yes, love should exist regardless of whether or not it was reciprocated, so she must simply determine whether or not she loved him.

If she did love him, and he didn't love her back, that was embarrassing and painful, but she shouldn't withhold her feelings simply because she wished to be safe.

Then she thought she was being ridiculous.

She must not be in love with him.

If she were in love with him, she would know, wouldn't she? People knew these sorts of things. When people were in love, they were certain about it, and they didn't spend time dithering over it.

Yes, well, that must be the way of it. And if that were the case, it was good that their marriage was only one of friendly regard and not of any rousing passions or strange, carnal activities.

By the time the puppies were walking on their own and did not need night feedings or special care, she had quite convinced herself that there was no reason to be dissatisfied with any part of her lot in life. She was married to a wealthy man who respected the fact that she didn't love him and didn't press for more. She had been rescued from awful rumors and the threat of disrespect by this marriage. She had every reason to be quite happy.

News had come from Longbourn. Jane was engaged.

Elizabeth was happy for her. She read Jane's letters about Mr. Bingley, and she tried to squelch any little pangs she got when she read the sweet things that Mr. Bingley did or the way Jane reported he doted upon her. She skimmed over Jane's long and detailed discussions of whatever it was that Bingley had said or done, telling herself that it was a bother to be in love and thank goodness she'd been spared the indignity.

Besides, it was not as if she had no love in her life.

After all, she was head over heels for the puppies. There were two boys and two girls, and Elizabeth had decided to give them all regal names, the fact that they were mutts notwithstanding. Just to add a little dash of ironic snobbery, she gave them Latin names—well, mostly. There were Rex and Regina, which was Latin for king and queen, and then Caesar. Then, the last little girl puppy, she whimsically named Cleopatra, for she was the most desired of them all. Little Cleo knew her power and went here and there, bestowing her favors where she saw fit, always knowing that if one person was too busy to allow her to lodge in their lap all morning, someone else would comply.

Mr. Darcy was partial to Cleo as well. Elizabeth caught him, on more than one occasion, scratching the little dog under her chin and telling her, in a little singsong voice, that she was the best little girl in the whole wide world, wasn't she?

She felt something when she watched Mr. Darcy with the dogs, too, something she couldn't explain, a kind of floaty, liquid feeling that filled her all up and made her want to sigh. She didn't know what that was about.

Occasionally, she examined it. Did it mean she loved Mr. Darcy?

Oh, no, that was foolish. Who felt love when watching a man with animals? That couldn't be the case.

Even after Elizabeth moved back into her room and the dogs were not cared for like infants, they were an integral part of her day. She and Harmony took them out onto the grounds of Pemberley in both the mornings and the evenings where they let the dogs ramble and run all over the fields. They taught them to fetch and to heel and to sit and to bark on command.

Elizabeth never went anywhere without a little reticule that she had repurposed for various treats the dogs liked, cured meats and specially made biscuits, which Cook

made with regularity. All of the servants doted on the dogs as well. They really were the children of Pemberley.

Evenings were spent with the dogs curled up around her skirts, sometimes at her feet, but more often on the couches and beds with her, which she knew wasn't quite proper but was so nice that she couldn't quite break the little darlings of the habit. There was nothing better in the world than being surrounded by the four little furry bodies, being surrounded by their love and adoration.

She was happy.

Then one day, while she and Harmony were giving the dogs their afternoon exercise, a man appeared at the edge of the grounds. Harmony saw him and she went still over, her eyes going wide, like a frightened deer.

"Do you know that man?" said Elizabeth to Harmony.

"No, never seen him before, ma'am," said Harmony, too quickly.

The man melted back into the wooded area, out of sight. Elizabeth gathered up the dogs and Harmony. They all went inside.

She knew she must get more information from her maid, who was concealing something from her. But Harmony was also clearly terrified, and Elizabeth did not wish to further frighten the poor girl. She thought about that for a while, trying to think of a strategy that would assure Harmony of her safety.

Why would the girl lie? Obviously, she was frightened of that man, which could mean he had threatened her if she said anything. Elizabeth must find a means to secure Harmony's safety before Harmony would reveal anything. But without more information about who the man was, she didn't know how to do that.

Harmony lived at Pemberley, of course. Most of the staff did, though there were a few couples—husbands and wives who were both employed at the estate—who kept their own cottages nearby. Those servants would retire to their homes for the evening. Harmony, however, would be tucked inside the walls of Pemberley at night. As long as Harmony was with Elizabeth or on the grounds, she should be safe from the man.

Of course, there were periods of time here and there when Harmony was not with Elizabeth, and during those times, could she be going off to see that man?

Maybe Harmony was lying because she was trying to conceal her own wrongdoing? Could that man be a sweetheart, or someone she was sneaking around with? Maybe that explained the fear. Maybe the man was forbidden to her in some way, and she didn't want anyone to know about it?

It didn't quite seem right, however.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth couldn't make heads or tails of it and was stymied in a way forward. However, she should have known her maid better. Elizabeth did not have to ask any questions, because the next time that she was alone with the maid, Harmony was wretched.

"Oh, ma'am, I have to tell you about that man we saw this afternoon," she said. "I lied to you about him. I do know him. I'm so sorry for telling a falsehood. It was only that I thought he would not come here, to Pemberley. I know not how he found me."

"It's all right, Harmony," said Elizabeth, feeling a bit amused at how hard the poor girl was on herself. She shouldn't have even considered the possibility that Harmony was trying to conceal her own wrongdoing. The poor girl couldn't let herself do anything wrong without falling to pieces. "Truly, I am not angry with you, not even a little bit. I am only worried. You seemed very frightened of him."

Harmony nodded. "He is where I got the puppies."

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "What?"

"Oh, ma'am, it was awful what I did. I didn't think that it would go like this, really, when I took them. I thought maybe the servants might feed them and that then they'd be given out in the community or some such. I didn't know everyone would become so attached to them."

"You took the puppies?"

"Well, that man, he has a lot of dogs," Harmony said, "but he uses them in awful fights and he has men bet on them. He had taken little Rex and Regina and Caesar and Cleo away from their mother because he says that you have to train fighting dogs mean, and that means no mothering at all. Says it makes them soft that way."

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. "That seems utterly foolish. All animals are better raised up on mother's milk!"

"I agree with you," said Harmony. "Anyways, the thing is, he was at my family's house because my father has gotten into debt with him in some way, what with betting on the fights, and that man—his name is Mr. Grayson—was there to collect from my father. But there is nothing to collect, not in the way of money, so he comes and takes eggs and milk and sometimes a plucked chicken here and there, whatever he demands, it must be given. He says he is tallying up the debt, but it never seems to have even made a dent, ma'am, and I hate him." Harmony's lower lip started to tremble.

"From what I hear of him, he doesn't seem very likable," said Elizabeth.

"I shouldn't have taken the dogs, but he had them there, and I... oh, they were so

sweet and so tiny and I just couldn't bear it, the thought of him turning them into mean, cruel dogs. Besides, they wouldn't have lasted long in those fighting matches. The dogs get killed quite a lot."

"I would imagine," said Elizabeth, who knew of such things. People would gamble over anything, it seemed. Fighting animals turned her stomach, but she knew many who saw nothing wrong with the practice.

"But really, deep down," said Harmony with a little grimace, "I just wanted to hurt him in some way, take something from him, because he has taken so much from my family. We never have any eggs to sell anymore, and sometimes not enough for ourselves to eat. It was vengeance, you see, ma'am." She was very solemn. "I had vengeance in my heart, and that's what drove me to it."

"Harmony, you did nothing wrong at all," said Elizabeth. "Why, it's not vengeance to want fairness. That man is taking advantage of your family."

"He knows, you see. He saw the dogs, and now he is going to... well, I don't know, but I think he will take it out even worse on my father, and I know it's all my fault, and I don't know what to do."

Elizabeth shook her head, a fierce feeling rising in her. "I shan't let that happen, Harmony. I shall fix this problem, one way or the other. I don't want you to worry about it."

"No!" Harmony was aghast. "A great lady like yourself shouldn't have to muck about in the dirt with something as this. And it is my fault, and I should pay the consequence. I wonder if..." She took a deep breath. "I am thinking about asking for an advance upon my wages to pay Mr. Grayson for my father's debt, but I'm afraid he will also demand I pay for the puppies, and I don't know if I can get an advance that large. Furthermore, it will be ever so hard to have no income for months or

maybe years—”

“No,” said Elizabeth, getting to her feet. “No, those are my dogs, now, Harmony. It is my business now.”

“But they wouldn’t have been your dogs if I hadn’t taken them.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Elizabeth. “I tell you, I shall find a way to fix all this.”

BUT HOW?

ELIZABETH did not have an allowance, and she was loath to ask for one, not least because she’d been accused of trapping Mr. Darcy in this marriage for his money. She did, however, have use of various lines of credit with certain merchants in town which was how she’d managed to procure dresses and some bonnets and ribbons, that sort of thing. If she occasionally felt guilty about making these sorts of purchases, she reminded herself that she must not embarrass Mr. Darcy by looking too shabby, either. And, compared to his income, her purchases were not exorbitant.

Even so, she would prefer, if at all possible, to find some way to solve this problem herself. She had a bit of pride in that way, she supposed. She was stubborn.

To this end, she set about examining all manner of ways to raise funds, including selling her dresses or even getting some sort of monetary advance on the credit that Pemberley had.

In the end, however, all of these things really involved using Mr. Darcy’s money, didn’t they? She fussed over it for two days, but there was nothing for it. She could not find a way to solve this problem without going to her husband.

Then, resolved, she did not ask.

It was dreadful. She was put in mind of many various conversations she'd witnessed in the Bennet household, her mother's voice going shrill as she bemoaned the lack of money lavished upon herself and her daughters. Her father would be, at first, sardonic and amused, making jokes about alchemy and turning straw into gold.

And then it would turn ugly.

Her mother would narrow her eyes and say that her merchant father had a better ability to provide for his family than her penniless gentleman husband. She would say that Mr. Bennet spent too much of his time being idle and that his family would be beggared while he buried his nose in books.

Her father would grow angry, but he wouldn't shout. He would make worse jokes, more and more cutting, and they would be about his wife's intelligence or her manners. When it was truly bad, he implied Mrs. Bennet was hideous to behold: old and fat.

This always left her mother in tears and her father looking abashed and ashamed of his petty cruelties.

Elizabeth didn't know how to ask a man for money, that was the problem. How did a wife broach the subject with her husband?

She could bring it up over dinner, perhaps. But no, it was gauche. Dinner conversations should be polite and diverting. Similarly, tea was not the time. Sometimes, Mr. Darcy joined her and Harmony with the dogs on the grounds, and that was perhaps the optimal time, for Mr. Darcy would have the sweet darlings right in front of him, and he could not but be moved by the plight they had escaped.

She tried one afternoon, but the opportunity to bring it up never quite seemed to present itself.

Harmony, bless her, never once asked how Elizabeth was coming along with the plan to solve everything for her family, but that only made Elizabeth feel more guilty.

So, one evening, Elizabeth paced in her room until she finally got the courage to seek her husband out. She thought she would find him in his study, but when she arrived, it was dark, the fire burning low, and she knew he must only be in his rooms.

Elizabeth had never ventured into her husband's bedchambers, though she knew where they were. He was not situated far from her own rooms, after all, just round a bend. He had a sitting room and a bedchamber and a room with a built-in tub, she understood, something ornate if the servants were to be believed. She had heard them talk about hauling water to fill it.

She crept down the hallway, looking now and then at the long curtains that were drawn over the windows. They were ornate, too, embroidered with tiny shimmering threads.

She felt ill.

Her stomach was turning over and over and she almost convinced herself she must go back to her own room and empty the contents of it in a chamberpot. But no, she could not give in. She must face this.

So, steadfast, she arrived at her husband's bedchamber and rapped upon his door.

The sound was rather more loud than she might have anticipated. She cringed from it, her heart exploding in a fit of fluttering heartbeats, like a flock of birds trying to beat their way free from her body.

And then... nothing.

She let out a breath, practically on the verge of tears. Wasn't he here? Hadn't he heard?

Well, she would knock once more, and if there was no answer, she must simply give up, having tried her best.

She raised her hand to do so and the door opened.

Mr. Darcy was not dressed. His jacket was removed, and his shirt was pulled out of his trousers. His waistcoat was unbuttoned over his untucked shirt. He was wearing no cravat. His shirt opened tantalizingly, showing off a little triangle of his bare chest. He had a bit of dark hair there. It looked soft. She was amazed at how much she liked that hair.

Such a strange thing to like, really, a man's chest hair, but it was utterly appealing in some way that made her body do ever stranger things. That flock of birds in her chest fluttered and stretched and preened.

"Mrs. Darcy," he said in a wondering voice.

"Sir," she said, and her voice had no strength.

He cleared his throat. "You are, erm, at my door."

"I am," she said, licking her lips. She was trembling. Her hands shook. She thrust them behind her back. Her mind went entirely blank. She tried to look at his face, but her gaze kept getting dragged down to that tantalizing triangle of bare skin just below his throat. Why was it doing this to her?

"Are you frightened?" he said.

She shook his head.

“You’re shaking like a leaf.”

“No, I’m not shaking,” she said, which was foolish. She most certainly was. She wished to die at this very moment. She would like an arrow to burst through that window behind her, skewer her through the throat, and put her out of her misery.

He dragged a hand over his face. “You don’t need to do this. There is positively no obligation on your part in this way. I swear to you, I am perfectly happy as we are, and if and when things may progress, madam, we shall do it as a pace that is comfortable, especially for you. To see you like this, like a terrified rabbit, I assure you, it does not move me in such a manner. I am not the sort of man who enjoys it as a kind of awful conquest.”

She blinked at him. What was he talking about?

“Let me escort you back to your room,” he said, his voice soothing and velvet. “No, wait, I have some brandy in here. You could stand a fingerswidth of that, I should think, just to calm your nerves and help you sleep. I’m dreadfully sorry you felt the need to present yourself in this way.” He sighed heavily. “I supposed I thought it was best not to speak of it at all. I find I get dreadfully tongue-tied, truthfully, when it comes to, well, these sorts of matters, but I realize now this was an error on my part.”

“Oh, you think I’m here for that,” she said in understanding. “You think I’ve come here to be bedded!” She let out a laugh, a high-pitched and uncontrolled laugh. She nearly doubled over, so great was her relief. It was simply the relief of her anxiety. Giving it mirth gave it a way to escape.

He drew back, and he blushed. The red stain traveled all the way down his neck, all the way down to that tantalizing triangle of bare skin.

She was struck dumb, staring at him there. “It’s because I’m looking at you, isn’t it? Of course you must think—Oh, God in heaven, this is a disaster.” She would have turned and fled, but her legs weren’t really working. She stood rooted to the spot, feeling shame rush all through her.

He swallowed, abashed.

She lifted a finger. “That brandy? Are you still offering that?”

“Certainly.” He stepped back, opening the door wider. “Come in.”

She staggered forward, nearly going sprawling.

He caught her.

She sagged into his arms, thinking of that time when he had been shot, when they’d slept in each other’s arms in that burned-out house.

He let out a hiss of a breath, swallowing again.

She watched his Adam’s apple bob and thought this man’s neck—her husband’s neck—might be the most intriguing of things to gaze upon in the wide world.

He set her on her feet.

She brushed at her skirts. “It’s about the dogs,” she said in a weary voice.

“Oh?” he said. He was walking across the room now, which was his sitting room, not the room that contained his bed. His back to her, he went over to a small cabinet, bent over, and came out with the brandy. He set that on top of the cabinet and then also brought out two glasses.

She came across the room, and now her limbs felt loose and warm, as if she'd finished taxing exercise. "It's about... well, it's about my maid. She is such a sweet girl, and I hate for her to suffer in any way at all, and I wish to help her, but I do not have the means or capability to do so. I must come to beg for your help, it seems. I'm ever so sorry to inconvenience you at all, you realize. And I don't wish you to refuse me, but it is well within your rights, of course. You are my husband. You are the head of the household, so you must do as you think is right. Only hear me out, if you don't mind?"

He poured the brandy. "Yes, of course, Mrs. Darcy." He held out a glass. "You could have spoken to me about this at some other time?"

"I know," she said. "But it's hard, you see. I am not well-versed in asking for favors, I'm afraid. Perhaps it's not to my credit." She accepted the brandy, grimacing.

"Oh," he said, giving her an understanding smile. "Well, I think we have this in common, madam. It may not be to my credit, either, but I do understand."

She began to explain, then, about Mr. Grayson's appearance and then Harmony's confession. He listened, nodding, throwing back his brandy and pouring himself more. Only when she was finished did she drink hers. It burned through her, warm and relaxing. She sighed. "So, you see, I feel we must do something, and I would like, if at all possible, if we could give this Mr. Grayson enough money to forget about our dogs and to stop terrorizing Harmony's family. I don't know if it's right to appease a man like that, but I can't bear the idea of it. Poor Harmony, blaming herself for it all. And poor Rex and Caesar and Regina and Cleo, and think of the life they were spared!"

"Indeed," he said. "It seems to me a perversion of the idea of dogs themselves, to use their natural desire to please their human masters to turn them to their own destruction. It's an ugly thing, in my opinion."

“Yes, just so!” She nodded. “I am so happy we’re in agreement. If it’s a lot of money, I am willing to go without. I don’t know what it is that I might need, but I shall happily forgo new dresses or any sort of luxury for any period of time at all. I know that’s not really making up for any of it. After all, you shouldn’t have had to take me on as your wife in the first place. I can’t say I’m even sure why you did it.”

He let out a rueful laugh. “Oh, the devil take me, Mrs. Darcy, don’t ask me that question in this moment.”

“I wasn’t! You have no reason to answer me anything. I want nothing from you, truly. I am sorry for what extent I am a burden on you.”

“I do not see you as a burden.” He sighed and poured himself more brandy. “I think it is you who are burdened with me. With a husband for whom you have no wifely affection.”

“I have a great deal of affection for you, sir!” she protested. “Oh, please believe I am happier than I ever expected to be. I love my life here and I love the dogs and I love Pemberley and we are easy with each other, and... it is no burden for me.”

He downed the brandy. “You don’t love me, though.”

Her mouth opened. No sound came out.

“Oh, apologies,” he said. “You are under no obligation. It is my wounded pride, what with the way you laughed. You laugh at me in such a way sometimes—”

“I wasn’t laughing at you,” she said.

“Laughing at the idea of going to bed with your husband, then.”

“Only because you have made it very clear you don’t wish it!”

“You do not wish it. You are terrified—”

“No, I was frightened of...” She gestured about at the room. “This.”

“Me.”

She winced. “No,” she said. But she had thought this over so many times that she was quite confused now. Hadn’t she decided, in fact, that she did not love him, that she must not love him? Hadn’t she decided that if she did love him, it would be apparent to her? “I don’t think that is necessary for love, anyway, is it? Aren’t they separate matters? It seems that way from the way it is discussed in various plays and books, I think.”

He eyed her. “But you don’t love me, and you never have. You married me as an expedient. You have found it pleasant, but not because of some growing passion between us.”

She was miserable. “I cannot say, I suppose. How does one know if one is in love?”

“One knows, madam,” he said gently.

“I suppose I am not, then,” she said in a small voice, and she could not look at him.

He let out a very noisy breath.

She cringed.

But then he was laughing, a great peal of laughter. She looked up to see that he had thrown his head back, and he was smiling. His shoulders shook.

“Now,” she said in that same small voice, “you are laughing at me.”

“Oh, indeed, no, I’m laughing at myself,” he said. He stepped closer to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. “We should have had this conversation a long time ago. Foolish to have avoided it, truly.” He let out another bout of laughter.

She was confused.

He let go of her and wandered across the room. He hurled himself down on a chair that was set up near the fire. “I feel ten times lighter.”

Hesitant, she came over to another chair that flanked his. She stood behind it, keeping the chair between them. “Do you?”

“Oh, quite,” he said. “You see, I had been going back and forth over it, watching you, trying to determine it, ‘Does she love me or doesn’t she?’ I don’t know why I didn’t ask you.”

“I have been thinking the same,” she said. “But then I determined it didn’t matter how you felt about me, not if I knew my own feelings for you.”

“Too true,” he said with a nod. “But this is better, because now we both know exactly where we stand and there’s no more anguish. It’s relieving.”

She nodded, but she didn’t feel relieved. She felt worse, actually. “I am not saying that my love for you could never grow. Doesn’t that happen all the time in marriages, after all? People have to be married for various practical reasons and they come to have deep feelings for each other?”

“Yes, just so,” he said, smiling at her. “I am happy to know that, also, I must say.” He thought about it. “I suppose, whatever the case, we’ll eventually have to...” He

grimaced. “No, I don’t want to think about that. We can absolutely wait for any sort of consummation. Just the thought of trying to force that on you turns my stomach.”

“I have said I’m not unwilling.”

He laughed again. “We are leaving this subject. It’s the brandy that made me speak of it at all, I daresay. Forget to think on that, if you please.”

She hunched in her shoulders.

“Please, be reassured, Mrs. Darcy,” he said.

But do you want it with me? was what she wanted to say, and why she wanted to ask that, she didn’t know. Do you love me? was what she wanted to say, because she still wasn’t clear on that.

This conversation indicated that he did, she thought. And if that was the case, then he had pursued her not because of his reputation and not because of being thought the sort of man who ruins a woman. And so, then, why had he said she was merely tolerable when he first set eyes on her?

She thought of something, something very obvious.

Maybe he didn’t find her physically appealing. Maybe he didn’t think she was pretty. Maybe he enjoyed her wit and the fact she liked to talk about books with him and the way she could fall in love with tiny puppies. Maybe he had high regard for her, but felt no stirring toward her.

That would explain why he didn’t want to bed her.

Yes, that must be it. It was the piece that made it all fit.

“Mrs. Darcy, I have no intention of demanding any conjugal duties from you. Stop making that face.”

“I realize that, sir,” she said, blushing. “You’ve made that very plain.”

“Good,” he said. “So, tomorrow, I am off to speak to Harmony’s father, and I shall get to the bottom of this Mr. Grayson business, one way or the other. I shall keep you apprised of it all. You are forbidden to feel as if you must ‘pay’ for this in any way. Those dogs are the children of Pemberley. They are part of the family, and they shall have whatever money in my coffers necessary to ensure their health and happiness. I adore them, too, and you know it.” He gave her a smile.

She couldn’t help but smile back. “I do know that, yes.”

“And then, I think it may be time for me to fetch Georgiana. We have had our honeymoon, such as it was, and in her letters she is eager to be here with you. She writes to me that she has wished to have a sister.”

“I should be happy to have your sister here, of course.”

“Excellent,” he said. “We are going to be happy together, Mrs. Darcy. We may not have some romantic story from a book, windswept yearning and storm clouds or the like, but we shall have more than what many couples have, I believe. I’m quite satisfied with that.”

“Yes,” she said faintly. “Yes, so am I.” She had thought she was satisfied before, but this entire conversation seemed to have robbed her of that satisfaction. She couldn’t make sense of why.

CHAPTER TEN

MR. DARCY HAD been here at Pemberley for nearly two months now, and he had spent most of his time in two pursuits.

One, looking at his wife. He liked watching her eat. She savored her food, slowly tasting it. He liked the expressions on her face when she tasted something she liked. Surprise, then enjoyment, then excitement as she asked for a second helping.

He liked it when she was reading and she came to a part of the book that made her furrow her brow in consternation. He daydreamed about smoothing his thumb over that furrow there, about touching her skin. He had been close enough to her on enough occasions to know that his own hand seemed impossibly huge next to her small and delicate features.

The thought of his clumsy hugeness against her pale grace seemed, well, like a kind of defilement in some way. He shouldn't even want it. Touching her would be a sin against nature and God and decency itself.

Why he wanted it with such a blazing fervor was certainly a blight on his soul.

He should not want it.

Sometimes, she'd be out in the gardens at Pemberley, strands of her long dark hair coming out from her bonnet. She'd go out in gloves and then get frustrated when the fabric clung to her hair, so she'd take the gloves off. With her teeth.

He liked watching that, her teeth at the finger of her gloves, the way her face would contort in a kind of fierceness as she tore them off. And then she would busily tuck her hair away, calling for pins from her maid, tossing her gloves onto a table.

He liked her fingers. They were small and pale and graceful, too. He remembered watching them on the keys of a piano. He'd asked her to play for him once, but she'd put him off with a guffaw, saying something about how she didn't want to damage either of their ears in that way.

Two, thinking about his wife. The thoughts were abominable. They got worse at night, when he lay in his bed. He was ashamed to say that he thought about her and touched himself. He didn't think about the shape of her then, not the curve of her waist or the swell of her bosom. He was afraid to think of such things. He thought about her fingers then or her smile or the way she gasped in delight when there was blackberry jam for the scones.

It was quite bad, because now, whenever there was blackberry jam, he would react in ways that made his trousers too tight. It was appalling, sitting next to her at teatime, aroused, watching her shut her eyes and let out little appreciative moans as her tiny pink tongue darted out to get a stray smear of it from her plump pink bottom lip.

Kissing her.

He never thought of that.

It crossed his mind, and he pushed it away.

He didn't think about having her, not really. He couldn't think about it. It felt like some awful trespass to consider it. Hadn't he done enough to this poor woman?

No, no, it was impossible to ask her to accommodate him in that way, all of his girth

and heft and his sweat and his clumsiness. She was like a work of art, a beautiful bit of perfection, and he was not permitted to sully her.

It was torture, that was what it was.

But the sweetest torture that he could have possibly devised for himself. He hated it. He never wanted it to end.

If it weren't for Georgiana's letters, maybe it never would have. But his sister wrote with increasing agitation about being banished from Pemberley, saying she had never heard of a honeymoon that lasted so long, and that she was lonely there in London, that she felt as if she had been left out of this part of her brother's life for far too long.

Things between himself and his younger sister were not exactly the best they'd ever been. The business in Ramsgate had changed things and then his being on laudanum had made things much worse. Abandoning her in London while he went off to Pemberley without her hadn't served to heal any rifts between them, he supposed.

He would go and collect her. They'd travel back together and they would have time to talk, just the two of them alone.

He could not keep putting it off.

He had not been putting it off in the hopes of some physical manifestation of a honeymoon, of course. He had no real sense of ever laying a finger on Elizabeth. He knew such a thing might have to occur at some point, for duty's sake. An heir must be sired, that sort of thing. But that kind of duty-bound behavior was sure to be wretched for them both. He would sully her, eventually, he supposed, as awful as it might be. He'd prefer to avoid that as long as possible, however.

No, he supposed he'd been putting off getting Georgiana simply because he was

enjoying staring at Elizabeth all the time. He liked watching Elizabeth with the dogs. He liked watching her licking jam off her lip. He liked being close to her. When his sister was here, it would be different, that was all.

Now, however, he was leaving.

The first thing to do was to find this Mr. Grayson and to get all that settled. He made a few inquiries the morning after his conversation with Elizabeth, and then the man presented himself at Pemberley, bold as brass.

He had a thick northern accent, but he dressed well. He talked like a man of the lower classes but he had the entitlement of a gentleman.

“Those be my dogs,” he said. “Stolen from me, they were. Is a gentleman like yourself in the habit of committing robbery?”

Mr. Darcy had only smiled at him, refusing to answer the question. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” said Mr. Grayson. “I hear word you be asking about after me, wanting to see me, and then I show up here and you pretend like you don’t know why.”

“I’m interceding on behalf of the Tavish family,” said Mr. Darcy. “They’re tenants of mine, and I understand you are the reason they can’t keep up with their rents to me. I wish to settle that problem.”

Mr. Grayson looked him over. “Oh.” There was a long pause. “But those dogs—”

“What dogs?” said Mr. Darcy.

“You know very well what dogs and don’t play me for a fool.”

“You can’t mean the little mutts that were abandoned on our grounds in a wooden box,” said Mr. Darcy. “If those were yours, sir, I suggest you watch your property more closely. Anyway, those dogs wouldn’t have been stolen. No one steals unweaned puppies. More than likely, you didn’t want the trouble and left them off somewhere to be someone else’s problem. Now, you wish to say that I’m a thief? And when I’m offering to settle a debt for one of my tenants? You might think to how you wish to proceed, sir. I may simply have you chased off my property with word to shoot you on sight if you ever come back.”

Mr. Grayson’s nostrils flared. “A man like you, all this property, can get away with shooting anyone he likes, I suppose.”

“It seems to me any man can quite get away with shooting someone. I was recently shot, after all,” said Mr. Darcy. “The men who did it are free as the wild summer wind. I assure you, none of them had property.”

Mr. Grayson sighed, bowing his head. “They owe me a great deal, the Tavishes. What with all the interest that’s accrued over these months and months—”

“They’ve been paying it off because they haven’t been giving my household the eggs and other foodstuffs that they agree to give as part of their agreement to work my land,” said Mr. Darcy. “So, no interest, not if they’ve been doing their part.”

“What did old Tavish say he owed me?”

“I haven’t actually spoken to him yet,” said Mr. Darcy. “I think you and I shall solve this. Do you want to give me a number or shall I estimate?”

Mr. Grayson folded his arms over his chest and spat out a ridiculous sum.

Mr. Darcy pretended to consider. Then he pulled out his purse and began to count out coin. “There. How’s that?”

“It’s not the full amount I just quoted!”

“But you’ll take it,” said Mr. Darcy. “And you’ll go. And you will never set foot on my land again. Right?” He gave Mr. Grayson a smile.

Mr. Grayson swept the money into his pocket, furious. “All I’m trying to do is better myself, you know? It isn’t fair that some men have so much and others have so little.”

“It isn’t fair,” agreed Mr. Darcy. “But it doesn’t give you the right to hurt other people to better yourself.”

“As if you don’t hurt others,” said Mr. Grayson. “Forcing people to give up the fruits of their labor just because you inherited the land.”

“That’s hurting them?” Mr. Darcy shrugged. “Is it remotely the same as extorting payment from them which they can’t pay and never erasing a debt? You really say being a landlord is the same as your behavior?”

Mr. Grayson didn’t respond. “Good day, sir. As you say, I shan’t set foot on your land again. I daresay we’ll never see each other.” He went off in a huff.

Mr. Darcy had given him quite a tidy sum of money, so he couldn’t understand why the man was so offended. He was like George Wickham, he thought. No matter what he got, he was never satisfied. Nothing was enough for men like that.

He told Elizabeth what had happened at dinner that evening, and then told her he’d be off in the morning to London to fetch Georgiana.

She was very grateful, effusive with her thank-yous, but he couldn't help but feel as if something had changed between them after that conversation in his bedchamber, and not exactly for the better. She seemed more subdued lately. When she looked at him, she often looked as if she was thinking worried thoughts. She hadn't seemed that way before.

But when he asked if she would like him to stay, she insisted he should go, that he must fetch his sister, and that there was no reason for any more delay.

So, he left.

He went on horseback, so as to make better time, since he was going on his own. He and Georgiana would take one of the carriages that was kept in London back with them. He anticipated a short visit, one in which he would simply collect Georgiana, stay a night or two, and then turn around and come right back.

However, upon arriving, Georgiana informed him that she wished to attend an opera which was opening in a week and a half, and he acquiesced to wait at least that long for a return trip. He sent a letter to his wife to this effect.

He missed her. Missed listening to her, being near her, looking at her.

He had sort of gotten trapped into marrying her by circumstance, he supposed, but he considered himself the luckiest man on earth to have somehow secured her, as if he'd tricked fate into getting to have her after all.

Mr. Darcy loved Elizabeth, and he didn't care if she never returned that love.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DAY THAT Elizabeth received the letter from Mr. Darcy was the day that Mr. George Wickham turned up in Pemberley.

She was surprised to see him, because she'd had news from home that the regiment—along with Mr. Wickham—had gone to Brighton, and that Lydia had gone along with them, a guest of Colonel and Mrs. Forrester. This news had been mixed in with information about Jane's impending nuptials, which were going to be soon.

Elizabeth had hoped to be able to attend her sister's wedding, but now it looked as if it would not be possible, for there was no time for preparation, not with her husband gone for another week and a half in London. She would have written to him to ask, but she was still not entirely comfortable with asking him for things. It seemed quite a lot of expense and to-do for her to travel back to Hertfordshire.

Instead, she sent a letter back to Jane offering her sincerest congratulations and sending all her regrets. She cried a bit, doing her best to make sure the tears did not land on the letter and smudge the ink.

So, she'd thought mostly of this, not of the news of Brighton or the regiment. But when she saw Mr. Wickham walking with his father outside the stables, there was no mistaking who it was, and no mistaking he was not, in fact, in Brighton.

He even raised his hand to give her a little wave, smiling at her with that smile of his that she used to think was so winning and charming.

Elizabeth had not been thinking overmuch about Mr. George Wickham. She'd understood, from the conversation she'd had with her husband about him that it was best if she didn't bring him up anymore, and she also knew that her husband was somewhat threatened by whatever had passed between herself and Mr. Wickham, though it was precious little, in the end.

However, she was still confused by Wickham's behavior. Why had Mr. Wickham lied to her? Why had he led her to believe that Mr. Darcy's character was so black and corrupt? She wanted answers, and she had not gotten them.

She spoke to Harmony about it later. They were not having formal dinners since Mr. Darcy was away, but Elizabeth did still go down for dinner. She didn't change or anything like that, however. Still, Harmony was wont to come to help her freshen up before the evening meal, sometimes even going so far as to rebraid Elizabeth's hair and pin it back up.

That was what was happening as Elizabeth casually brought the subject up. "I saw Mr. George Wickham with his father this morning."

"Oh, yes, I heard he was here," said Harmony. "I was not aware you knew him, ma'am."

"Yes, I made his acquaintance in Hertfordshire," said Elizabeth.

"Truly? How interesting."

"He was part of the regiment who was stationed there," said Elizabeth. "I know where the regiment is currently stationed, and so it's odd to me that he's here."

"Yes, likely he just ran off from whatever he was doing, I suppose," said Harmony. "He's not one for sticking with things, you know. He changed what he was studying

at university at least seven times, or so I hear. Once, when he was home for the winter holidays, he was down in the kitchens, and I didn't work here yet, because I was too young, but I was here, because my older sister was a scullery maid before she got married. I was tagging along with her that day. Mrs. Reynolds let me so long as I didn't get into anything. Anyway, I was listening in, even though I wasn't really part of the conversation, and he said that it was how he was going to stay in school forever, because every time he changed what he was studying, he had to start over from the beginning and it tacked more and more years on. Everyone laughed, and so did he."

"He was taking advantage of the charity he was being given?" said Elizabeth, who had to admit that this didn't settle well with what she had thought about him. Perhaps Mr. Wickham was only made of trickery. Perhaps all he did was lie.

"Yes, ma'am," said Harmony. "But it didn't seem to work, I don't think. He left after the normal amount of years and was certified to be a lawyer, I understand."

"But how? If he didn't complete the studies?"

"I don't know," said Harmony.

"Could the late Mr. Darcy have interfered?" said Elizabeth. "Fixed it for him?"

"I don't know about that," said Harmony.

"Did he do such things for any other servants?" said Elizabeth. "Why Mr. Wickham?"

"I think because of how much he valued the steward, the elder Mr. Wickham," said Harmony.

Elizabeth nodded slowly. "So, you don't know why the younger Mr. Wickham is back now?"

"I don't, ma'am," said Harmony. "Should I find out?"

"Oh, no," said Elizabeth, shaking her head. "No, no, don't worry about that."

And then the conversation ended, and Elizabeth went down to the dining room to dine by herself with a book, and she went to sleep early and got up in the morning to take the dogs out into the gardens.

Then, there he was, meeting her in the paths that cut into the gardens, kneeling down to pet the dogs, who all seemed to like him. It was easy to like him, wasn't it?

"I hear you're asking all about me," he said, on his knees, scratching Regina under her chin, looking up at her, grinning easily. "Curious, Mrs. Darcy?"

"Mr. Wickham, how good to see you again," she said. "Did you come from my sister in Brighton?"

"Oh, yes, I did," he said, getting to his feet. "She is in good health. Having the time of her life there, I think, with Mrs. Forster. They giggle rather all the time and drink far too much wine. And look at you, somehow married to Mr. Darcy. I never would have guessed that."

What are you doing here? she wanted to say. Why did you lie to me? What is the truth about you and Mr. Darcy? Why didn't you wish to be the parson here? Instead, she only inclined her head. "Well, so good to see you, sir. I hope you have a pleasant morning." And then she made to walk around him.

He stepped into her path. "Wait. You're not simply going to run away, are you?"

“It’s not running away to continue the walk I have been planning to go on, is it? I walk in these gardens daily, in fact.”

He surveyed her. “Well, you two talked about me. Odd, that. I wouldn’t have thought he cared.” He stepped out of her path, gesturing for her to walk. “Go ahead. I’m sure his side of it makes me sound like some kind of devil.”

“You have some other side of it?” She looked him over.

He cringed. “I don’t know. Maybe not.”

She walked past him.

He caught up with her, clearing his throat. “All right, here it is, you didn’t like him. Deny that.”

She glanced at him. “I suppose I didn’t, but you lied about him.”

“I...” He was chagrined. “All right, I left things out of the story I told you.”

“That he’d given you a reciprocal financial amount of money in lieu of the living you were promised, for instance?” Elizabeth raised her eyebrows.

He nodded. “Like that, indeed, definitely.” He shrugged at her, looking helpless.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” He made a face. “Everyone likes him. No one ever doesn’t like him. It was such a novelty. I wanted to convince you that you were right not to like him, I suppose.”

“Why?”

He lifted a shoulder. “Well, I suppose it made me look better, too. Not telling you how I then gambled away all that money and ruined myself and turned myself into a laughingstock. I wanted you to think well of me. I was rather dazzled by you, I have to say.”

She stopped short, lips parting.

“Sorry, am I not meant to say that?” He spread his hands. “You knew. We both felt it. Obviously, this has happened, which...” He laughed. “If I wished to make you not like him, I failed, didn’t I? You married him, for the sake of all that’s holy. And it doesn’t matter how I felt about you, then. You’re his now. Stop looking so offended, truly, Mrs. Darcy. I am no threat to you, and I never have been.”

She started walking again.

“You’re angry with me for some reason,” he said, catching up to her.

“For some reason,” she repeated, shaking her head.

“Not denying you’re angry, I see.” He was amused.

“You lied to me.”

“No,” he said.

She glared at him.

“All right, sort of, maybe, in a way...” He turned away, groaning. “Yes, all right, lied. Yes. I did. I apologize.”

“Do you lie often?” she said.

“No,” he said with a chuckle.

“You’d say that regardless,” she said. “If you were a liar, you’d hardly admit it. Liars aren’t known for being truthful, after all.”

He laughed. “I always enjoyed how clever you were, I must say. And you look positively stunning, you know. Pemberley agrees with you.”

She shook her head at him. “I don’t think you should... be here.”

“Am I bothering you? Tell me how to alter my behavior, and I’ll be happy to oblige.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just the principle of the thing, I suppose. My husband would not like this, and I know it.”

“Oh, of course not. That’s just like him. He’s married you. You’re his wife. And I, of course, am not allowed to walk near his things.”

“I’m not a thing.”

“You’re his property, and I should keep my grubby hands to myself.”

“You most certainly should not touch me.”

“It was a figure of speech!”

“Was it?” She gave him a pointed look.

“Do you dislike me now? We had a lot of fun together, didn’t we? Before? We can

have fun now.”

“Why are you here?” she said, finally, since the point in time for politeness had long passed. “Did you desert the regiment?”

“Of course not,” he said. “Do I seem like a deserter to you?”

She clucked her tongue.

He laughed. “Oh, well, I see, then. You have got quite an impression of me. He probably told you about the thing in Ramsgate, then.”

“No,” she said. “He did not. What?”

“It all got misinterpreted,” he said. “Really, Miss Darcy was only mistaken. I would never... of course he thought...”

She stopped walking again, folding her arms over her chest. She simply eyed him, blinking, waiting.

He sighed. “All right, I am a servant here, and yet I am above the other servants in certain ways. It’s a strange sort of position to be in, you see? And the only person who really understood it to any degree was Mrs. Younge, who was Miss Darcy’s governess. We became quite close. She was a widow, and she and I... look, the point is, I ended up showing up on one of their holidays—Mrs. Younge and Georgiana were together at Ramsgate. Miss Darcy saw things she shouldn’t have seen, and she said, ‘Are you and Mrs. Younge going to get married?’ and I said, jokingly, ‘No, no, Georgiana, I’m whisking you off to Scotland in the morning.’ And so, she sent some letter off to Fitzwilliam, and he wouldn’t listen to reason—to his mind, you see, if I elope with his baby sister, it’s some way for me to get funds, and since I’m so terrible with money anyway—”

“Wait, what?” She shook her head, thoroughly confused. “What are you even saying?”

“He thinks I was trying to sneak her off and secretly marry her. Now, I ask you, Mrs. Darcy, if you were planning to secret someone off to Scotland off all places, would the place you take her to first be Ramsgate? I can’t think of a part of the country much further from Gretna Green, truly. So, it entirely makes sense, doesn’t it? Definitely a plan I made, of course. I seduced Mrs. Younge and she was in on it—because Darcy sacked her, you know, right after this, blaming Mrs. Younge for it also. Because as we all know, after you seduce a woman, she’s very keen on helping you abduct a fifteen-year-old girl.” Mr. Wickham grew bitingly more sarcastic as he went on.

Elizabeth’s jaw worked.

Mr. Wickham sighed. “Never mind. You’re right, I shouldn’t talk to you. You’re on his side. He hates me. Thinks me capable of nearly anything. And you’re in love with him now, obviously. This is the world we live in.” He threw up his hands, turned on his heel and walked off down the garden path.

Elizabeth gazed after him, reeling.

What was he even talking about?

CHAPTER TWELVE

ELIZABETH PACED IN her bedroom. “You heard what he said, didn’t you, Harmony?”

“I didn’t, no. I wasn’t listening, ma’am. That was your private conversation, and—”
The girl broke off as Elizabeth stopped pacing and turned her gaze onto Harmony.
“Oh, all right, I suppose I sort of heard.”

“And? What do you know about Ramsgate?”

“Nothing,” said Harmony.

Elizabeth put her hands on her hips.

Harmony wrinkled up her nose. “They came back here afterwards and he was angry and she cried a lot.”

“Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy, you mean?”

“Oh, yes, apologies,” Harmony said. “Mrs. Younge did not come back, conspicuously. We heard that she had been let go. And since then, it seems she runs a boarding house in London, which seems to indicate it would be impossible for her to get another governess job.”

“So, she did something awful, then?” said Elizabeth.

Harmony twisted her fingers together.

“Did she not seem like the type to do something awful?” said Elizabeth.

“Georgie Wickham is a schemer and everyone says so,” said Harmony.

“So, you’re saying he’s lying to me now.” Elizabeth resumed pacing. “Why not? After all, he lied to me before, and he admitted it was just to make himself look good. So, this, now, why not?”

“Why not, indeed?” said Harmony.

“It’s only that it is ludicrous to take someone to Ramsgate if one is planning on eloping to Scotland,” said Elizabeth. “Why, even if one were in London, it makes no sense to travel all the way down there first. And to think that a governess would assist in such a thing when she would lose everything afterwards? And what would she gain?”

“Well, some of the dowry, maybe?” said Harmony.

Elizabeth sat down in the chair that was in front of her writing desk. “What sort of dowry does Miss Darcy have?”

“I think it’s quite a lot,” said Harmony. “And maybe Mr. Wickham said he’d keep Mrs. Younge on, that they’d still be entangled, and he would only marry Miss Darcy in name, for the money, but never touch her. And then—”

“You’ve thought this through,” said Elizabeth.

“I suppose there’s been a lot of talk,” said Harmony.

“Would you have thought it of her?”

“Of Miss Darcy?”

“Of Mrs. Younge.”

“Oh,” said Harmony with a sigh. She shook her head. “At the time, no. She seemed very proper. But she was always sneaking about with Mr. Wickham. There can be no doubt she was being improper with him. Even so, she seemed to be quite concerned with Miss Darcy. It seems unlikely she would do anything to deliberately harm her.”

“So, you’re saying his version of events could be true, then.”

“I suppose anything could be true,” said Harmony. “Still, I would stay clear of him, ma’am.”

“Yes, that’s sound advice, no doubt,” said Elizabeth. “I should write to Mr. Darcy, I suppose, and tell him that I’ve seen him. If he comes home and I’ve said nothing, he’ll think I am keeping it from him.”

“Just so, ma’am,” said Harmony.

Elizabeth nodded. She turned around at her desk and got out a sheet of paper.

“Harmony?”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I shall set this down and read it aloud and you will tell me what you think of what I have written, yes?”

“Of course.”

Two hours later, there were crumpled up letters all over the floor from all the aborted attempts to write the letter. Why was it so hard to write to Mr. Darcy about Mr. Wickham? She'd done nothing wrong.

At any rate, the letter was done now. She would send it off on the morrow.

MR. DARCY GOT the letter from his wife the day of the opera. He read it.

Balled it up in one fist.

Smoothed it back out, his heart pounding, and reread it. Dash everything. Wickham must have heard the news that Georgiana was set to come back to Pemberley and rushed back there to be there when she arrived. That blackguard.

It was no secret that Georgiana had looked up to Mr. Wickham when she was younger. As an adolescent girl, she'd even had some kind of girlish crush on him, at least this was what she'd told him. When he'd begun showing her actual attention, at first she was flattered and excited, but then it began to frighten her.

She didn't like the fact that she must keep things secret from everyone, she said. That was why Georgiana had written her brother the letter from Ramsgate in the first place. She didn't like what Mr. Wickham had been hinting at, because he seemed to think that they were going to get married.

When it came right down to it, his younger sister had not truly wanted to be tied down to someone like Mr. Wickham. Whether he would have been able to convince her to go through with it or not, Mr. Darcy wasn't certain.

Georgiana said no. Of course I wouldn't have married him! The letter I sent must be proof, Fitz, and you are beastly to be so cruel to me about it, even now.

He didn't mean to be cruel. He didn't blame her. She was a victim in all of it, far too young to know how to guard herself against a man like Wickham.

It was only that she had never really seemed sorry about any of it, he supposed. She'd only been angry. When Darcy had arrived in Ramsgate only a day after receiving her letter (for he'd been roused to immediate action when he read it), she had been appalled that he'd come there.

I didn't mean for you to ruin everything like this, she had sobbed, beating her tiny fists against his chest. Now there is no more holiday at all and no more fun.

Apparently, his sister thought she could write him a letter that indicated that a grown man was going to spirit his very young sister off, marry her, steal her fortune, and then his sister expected that he would simply take this under advisement and do nothing.

Oh, I don't know if he was even serious, she had wailed. He says he was joking. Maybe he was joking, Fitz. Now he hates me.

Perhaps that was what rankled the most. She still cared about the blackguard. She wanted him to like her, after he was trying to take advantage of her.

What sort of man was Mr. Wickham that he could make people behave in that manner? It didn't even make sense to Mr. Darcy.

Now, the letter from Mrs. Darcy, it was even more troubling. It was so stiff and formal that it read as if someone besides Elizabeth had written it. All the words seemed carefully chosen. She happened upon him on the grounds, she wrote, and "he insisted on speaking to me" though she did not encourage him. He had told her things, but she was "well aware that he is a liar" so Mr. Darcy should not worry that she was believing whatever he said wholesale.

He wasn't worried that his wife was going to take up with Mr. Wickham.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Some part of him couldn't help but be horrified at the prospect, and if he thought of it, his whole body shivered in a sort of terrible shock, but he didn't think she'd do anything untoward. His wife was not the sort of woman who would do anything dishonorable, and he trusted her.

However, it would be better if he could get back there sooner rather than later. It was only that he wasn't sure how Georgiana would feel about it.

At the opera that night, he brought it up to her.

"What is he doing at Pemberley?" said Georgiana. "Why would he go there? He would know he wouldn't be welcome."

"He's apprised of my movements somehow, I suppose," said Mr. Darcy. "He knew I wouldn't be there."

"But who would he wish to see?" said Georgiana.

"You," said Mr. Darcy. "He wishes to be there when you arrive."

"No," said Georgiana, shaking her head, dismissing this utterly.

"But Georgiana, he clearly wishes—"

"No, he does not," said Georgiana. "Depend upon it, Fitz, I am certain that he would not go to that trouble for me. Whatever it was with me, he is passed it. So, who does he wish to see?"

"His father is our steward."

“Oh, they hate each other,” muttered Georgiana.

He tilted his head to one side. “All family has friction, but all family is—”

“No, I know for a fact that the elder Wickham told Georgie that he was dead to him and that if he came back, he would not be staying in the elder Wickham’s lodgings.”

Mr. Darcy drew back, blinking. “Really.” He sighed heavily.

“Really, and don’t think they’ve just patched things up, because it was not the sort of thing that’s easily mended, if you know what I mean.”

He groaned softly. “If it’s not about you, then he’s come to see Mrs. Darcy.”

“He knows your new wife?”

“I didn’t mention that?”

“Fitz, how does he know her?”

“I think she fancied him at one point. He paid attention to her and then I think he sort of ignored her, and I think—”

“Oh, we must go, then.” Georgiana got to her feet in their box at the opera.

He peered up at her. “Right now? The opera hasn’t even started.”

Georgiana hesitated. “We likely couldn’t prepare and leave tonight, I suppose.”

“No,” he said.

She sat down. “Well, in the morning, then. He is on a mission to cuckold you, undoubtedly, Fitz, and you—”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Georgiana, don’t say ‘cuckold.’ You shouldn’t even know about such things.”

Georgiana gestured all about her. “It’s the plot of every single play and opera I’ve ever seen.”

He gave her a withering look.

“All right, well, not every one, but... anyway, I’m sixteen years old, Fitz. I know about cuckolding.”

“I sincerely hope you do not,” he muttered. “I daresay we should have more faith in the new Mrs. Darcy than that, anyway.”

Georgiana snorted. “Yes, of course, you think that.”

“What?” he said.

“Well, look at you, Fitz, and then look at him.” She rolled her eyes. “There’s a reason I’m so conflicted about him, after all.” Then she sighed, morose, and her lower lip started to tremble.

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the way I look,” said Mr. Darcy, affronted.

“Oh, stop thinking about yourself,” said Georgiana, who was now on the verge of tears. “Comfort me, for goodness sake, Fitzwilliam.” She wiped at her tears.

“Ought we leave?” he said softly, gently putting a hand on her shoulder. “This is

hardly a proper display in public.”

Georgiana sniffed hard and composed herself. “I’m not going to let George Wickham ruin this opera for me. I’ve waited too long to watch it.”

“Excellent,” said Mr. Darcy, but now his head was swimming. He knew his wife didn’t want to be touched by him, sullied by him. For some reason, he hadn’t given much thought to the idea that she might be quite willing to be sullied by some other man.

He had known she fancied Mr. Wickham, but the idea that she might have some fascination with him that was physical in nature, hadn’t occurred to him. It had hitherto seemed ludicrous. She was not that way. Women were not that way.

Except, his sister was correct. It was the plot of many, many plays and operas. The playwrights had not plucked the idea from thin air but had observed it in the real world. Women were, sometimes, that way.

He didn’t like that idea, he found.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ELIZABETH LOWERED HER book. “I can’t think what you hope to gain by this, Mr. Wickham.”

“Gain?” He nodded at the chair next to her. “May I sit with you?”

She was out in the gardens, sitting at a table with three chairs in the afternoon sun, while Harmony threw a stick for the dogs. She glanced at the empty chair. “What if I say no?”

“I’ll stand.”

She sighed, closing her book and setting it down on the table. “Fine, sit down. I want to understand everything, then, Mr. Wickham. I shall ask you questions, and you will answer them truthfully. As you say, you have nothing to gain from me, not now, so there is no reason for you to lie.

“Is that exactly what I said?” He sat down.

“What do you have to gain, then?”

“I don’t wish to gain anything.” He stared out over the fields of Pemberley, green in the summer, the afternoon sun beating down over everything.

“So, why are you speaking to me?”

He clutched his chest. "You wound me."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Mr. Wickham."

"I thought we were friends, Mrs. Darcy. Haven't we always been friends? Hasn't that been all we could ever have been, no matter how we felt about it?"

She shook her head. "No, I won't hear that. I won't hear you pretending that you were dazzled by me."

"But I was. I had a fancy for you. I carried quite a torch for some time there."

"You did not."

He let out a laugh. "Are we truly arguing about this? Who would know about this, madam, me or you?"

"You might have liked to pretend it, but then you quickly stopped pretending it and lost interest and disappeared. And then, from what I heard, you were connected to that Miss King."

"That didn't work out," he said. "But I certainly wasn't dazzled by her."

"Dazzled by her dowry, though."

"Well, here we are, madam, and it seems quite a thing to ridicule, coming from you." He gestured at the vast grounds surrounding him.

"That's not why I married him."

"I suppose you fell madly in love with him." Mr. Wickham was sardonic.

“You must have heard the rumors,” she said. “So, you know how it was for me.”

“You were forced into this dreadful marriage with a wealthy man,” he said, still sardonic. “What a hardship, Mrs. Darcy!”

“All right, think what you will,” she said, “but I do care for him now, and he is a very good man, and I don’t think you’re a particularly good man, not in the end.”

Mr. Wickham shook his head, laughing under his breath. “What has he done that’s been so very good that hasn’t involved use of his massive fortune, hmm? Ask my Amelia Younge if she thinks he’s such a good man without her position, would you?”

“Your Amelia Younge? So, you were dazzled by me, were you? How long after your interlude with—”

“Don’t do that,” said Mr. Wickham. “You and I are the only people who know what it was like between us. It wasn’t like anything I’ve ever felt before with anyone. And I couldn’t... what was I supposed to do? Ask for your hand in marriage? Where would we live, Mrs. Darcy? How would I provide for us? I pulled away because it seemed the kindest thing for us both.” He was quiet now, serious, regretful.

She gazed at him, her heart beating too fast. Why was she even a little bit moved by that? Why did it seem to tug at her in some way? He was probably just making it up to make her think he cared.

“I cared about Miss Younge, but we had no future, and she and I both knew it,” he said. “But whatever I felt with her, it was nothing like what I felt for you.” His voice dropped in pitch. “Elizabeth, there isn’t a woman like you in the whole of this country.”

“Stop that.” Her voice wasn’t strong.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, anyway,” he said. “If I couldn’t have you then, I most certainly can’t have you now.”

“No, and what’s more, I don’t want you now,” she said fiercely.

“Good.” He gave her little nod. “Good. It was ridiculous to think you wouldn’t like him, wasn’t it? Everyone likes him.” He slumped in his chair. “Everyone likes him. No one ever likes me.”

“Well, I can’t say that’s not at least somewhat your own fault, though.”

He shrugged, slumping down further. “Perhaps. I have done some very stupid things in my life, Mrs. Darcy, but I was young and idiotic, and I was running around with boys who were not like me. They had rich fathers and titles and lands and all sorts of reasons that they would see no consequences for the things they did. I let them convince me that taking risks was the way I proved to them that I was a man. It was foolish. I see that now. But I simply haven’t figured out where it is that I fit. Too qualified, too refined to be a servant here, you see? But not a gentleman, not really.”

“Yes, you’re so very put upon, aren’t you?” she said darkly. “I suppose you want me to feel sorry for you.”

“In truth, I do not,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I think I only wanted to be near you. When you love someone, you want that—”

“You don’t love me.”

“Right,” he said. “I shouldn’t say that.”

She shook her head, rather appalled at him. How dare he? She thought about that last conversation with him, before she’d left for London to see the Gardiners, before

she'd gotten into Mr. Darcy's carriage and her life had turned inside out, when she'd thought him the model of amiable and pleasing. Such a man, she'd thought. He wouldn't have said anything like this then. Why now? "I think you must leave me," she said.

"Does it tempt you, then?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "Do I tempt you?"

She got up from the table, picking up her book. "You are a dreadful sort of person, actually, aren't you, Mr. Wickham? I thought you something other than you are. You were all politeness before, all good-naturedness, and now I realize you're simply awful."

"Awful? Why? Because I am finally being honest with you?"

"You could have been honest some other time, I think. Before I was married to another man."

"Yes, I suppose," he said. "After all, I didn't think we'd have a future. I thought I would marry elsewhere and you would marry elsewhere. I was resigned to it. But not him. I can't be resigned to you with him."

"What is so very wrong with Mr. Darcy?" she said.

"I've told you about the way he treats me," he said.

She looked him up and down, having a realization about that story from yesterday, about Ramsgate. The particulars differed from the story about his inheritance, true. But it was the same story. It was a story about how he'd done nothing wrong and Mr. Darcy had wronged him. She laughed ruefully. "You know what I think it is, Mr. Wickham?"

He folded his arms over his chest. "I suppose you're going to tell me."

"I think he's not so easily charmed, that's all," said Elizabeth. "The rest of us, we're all eating out of your hand, with your falsehoods and pity stories. And he simply doesn't like you. You can't bear that, even if you don't deserve to be liked."

"Oh, well, then!" Mr. Wickham drew back. "Please, tell me exactly how you feel about me, madam, and spare no details nor any thought for my feelings."

She crushed her book to her chest, turned her back on him, and walked off.

"Mrs. Darcy!" he called after her.

She didn't turn around. She whistled and the dogs all came for her, running across the grounds in delight for their mistress. Harmony hurried after them, gathering up her skirts.

"Let's never even speak of Mr. Wickham again, Harmony," said Elizabeth. "He is beneath us."

"All right, ma'am," said Harmony, breathless and smiling. She looked over her shoulder.

"Don't look at him," said Elizabeth.

"Sorry," said Harmony, turning back around.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“OH,” SAID MISS Darcy, spinning round in the middle of the entrance of Pemberley, “I’m so relieved. Everything is precisely the same.” She stopped moving and fixed Elizabeth with a wide smile. “Here I was, frightened that you would change everything, but you’ve done nothing of the sort.”

“Well, there was no need for improvement,” said Elizabeth with a little shrug.

Miss Darcy and her brother had just recently arrived from London. There had been no letter preceding their arrival, so no one had been ready to receive them, but they were here nonetheless.

“I see,” said Miss Darcy. She came for Elizabeth and seized both of her hands. “I don’t entirely agree, but it is reassuring. If you want to know what I would do if I could redecorate, I am happy to tell you. But you don’t have to listen to anything I say, of course. I suppose you have to tolerate it, though. Listen in that sense, but not in any other sense. Am I talking too much?” She glanced over her shoulder at her brother. “He says I talk too much, and usually when I meet people, I have such a worry over it that I say nothing at all. And then it comes out that everyone thinks I’m shy or even arrogant. I am neither of these things.” She considered. “Well, maybe arrogant, only a little, but deservedly so, really.” She squeezed Elizabeth’s fingers. “We’re sisters.”

Elizabeth licked her lips, rather taken aback, for it was true that during their last meeting, Miss Darcy had said very little.

“Let go of her, Georgiana,” said Mr. Darcy, who seemed preoccupied as he swept into the house, going back one of the hallways. “You’ll scare her, I think.”

“This,” said Miss Darcy, pointedly not letting go of Elizabeth. “This is exactly the sort of thing you do. You’re very dismissive and critical of me, Fitz!”

“Mmm,” said Mr. Darcy, disappearing into the house.

Miss Darcy sighed. “I can call you Elizabeth, right? Or do you like nicknames? I adore nicknames, myself, and I think everyone should have a shortened version of their name. I’m partial to Gigi, if you’d like. I think it fits the effervescent nature of my very soul. You may call me that, or Georgiana, if you wish.”

“Well,” Elizabeth ventured, “I am sometimes called Lizzy, by my family.”

“And we are family now,” said Georgiana, squeezing her fingers. “All right, let’s go to the sitting room.” She let go of Elizabeth’s hands, raising her voice. “Are there any lemon squares made up? I should adore some lemon squares, really and truly.” Without waiting for a response to that, she made her way to the sitting room.

Elizabeth looked into the wake of her husband and then followed Georgiana to another part of the house.

Inside the sitting room, Georgiana flung herself down on a couch and picked up her legs. She tucked them under her skirt and perched there. “He’s here somewhere, isn’t he? I think Fitz is going to look for him. I don’t know if I want to talk to him. You must tell me everything that passed between him and you, if you would. Don’t worry. I shall never breathe a word of it to my brother. It is all safe with me. I know exactly how he is, you see? I would not blame you, I swear it on the soul of my departed mother and father.”

Elizabeth was standing up in the middle of the room. “I’m ever so sorry, Miss Darcy—Gigi—but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Georgie Wickham, of course!” Georgiana gestured at the couch opposite her. “Oh, do sit down, Lizzy. We have ever so much talking to do. I hope there are lemon tarts, though. It’ll be better with lemon tarts. Everything always is.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. She hesitated for a moment, and then, unable to help herself, she sat down and began to speak furtively. “What really happened at Ramsgate? I don’t understand anything. You can’t trust his version, of course. He’s such a liar.”

“Oh, Lord,” said Georgiana, shaking her head. “Well, it’s a long story, really. And who knows, because he’s so changeable. One minute, he’s one way, and the next, he says, ‘Oh, I was only jesting.’” She rolled her eyes.

Elizabeth nodded slowly. “I see.”

“Here is the truth of it, Lizzy,” said Georgiana, sitting up very straight and speaking in a very grave voice. “I used to be in love with him.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows.

“However, I suppose I was only ten years old. Too young to understand love, not truly. But I thought the sun rose and set in him. When he would come home, he would let me follow him around and he would help me climb trees and he would play games with me, and he would pretend to be the husband and I would pretend to be the wife, and he let me sit on his lap and—”

“Oh, heavens!” said Elizabeth.

“Well, it wasn’t like that.” Georgiana dismissed this. Then, she furrowed her brow. “I don’t think it was. Oh, Lord protect us, was he...?” She shook her head, deciding. “No, it couldn’t have been. Anyway, so when I was fifteen, I still felt as if I, you know, sort of fancied him. But not really. Just pretend. I can’t marry the son of the steward, you know. That’s preposterous. I wouldn’t do that. I would never do that.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “I see.”

“But he started talking about it,” she said. “And I think he was serious. Except, I don’t know, because he said he wasn’t, and then when I thought about it, I couldn’t see how he could have been serious, because he would have known I would never marry him. And furthermore, I knew that Mrs. Younge was in love with him—”

“What happened with Mrs. Younge?”

Georgiana raised her eyebrows. “Well, she shouldn’t have gotten all tangled up with Mr. Wickham, I suppose. She defended him. She told me I was mistaken, that Mr. Wickham didn’t mean it, that he couldn’t have meant it. But, well, he would say anything to her, wouldn’t he, if it meant that she thought well of him?”

“Yes, this is exactly what I’m saying. There’s no supposition that what comes out of his mouth is the truth,” said Elizabeth. “I think he was testing it. If you would have married him, he’d have gone through with it, but if you rejected it, he could pretend he never meant it.”

“Yes!” Georgiana sighed heavily. “That is exactly the way it is with him. Now, tell me, did he ask you to marry him?”

“What? No, of course not,” said Elizabeth.

“But the reason he’s here is you,” said Georgiana.

“Me?” said Elizabeth.

“Well, why else would he be here?” said Georgiana.

At this moment, the door opened and a servant came in.

“Yes?” said Georgiana. “What is it, Nan?”

“I’m afraid, Miss Darcy, ma’am, there are no lemon tarts.”

“Oh,” said Georgiana, frowning. “None at all?”

“Cook is going to make some, right away, but they won’t be ready for some time. There are, however, some of the little peanut butter biscuits you are partial to.”

“Oh, that will be just fine then,” said Georgiana. “Will you bring those in? And tea? Or what about chocolate?” She turned to Elizabeth. “You like to drink chocolate, don’t you?”

“Well, usually in the morning, I suppose,” said Elizabeth.

“It’s good in the afternoon, too,” said Georgiana.

Elizabeth laughed.

“Truly, I suppose anything that’s good in the morning is also good in the afternoon, but there are a number of things we only eat in the morning for whatever reason. What’s more, it’s not the same in other countries, either. They have different foods for breaking one’s fast. It’s all simply arbitrary, and that’s the real truth of it. So, if I want chocolate, I shall have it.”

“Very good, ma’am,” said the servant. “I’ll see to that for you.”

“Thanks ever so!” said Georgiana sunnily, sighing as she relaxed into the couch. “What were we talking about?”

“I can’t remember,” lied Elizabeth.

“Oh, yes, he’s here because of you,” said Georgiana. “Mr. Wickham is trying to cuckold my brother.”

“Heavens!” said Elizabeth, quite shocked.

“It’s Mr. Wickham’s villainy,” said Georgiana. “It’s only that he is charming, isn’t he? If you were charmed, Lizzy, it would not be your fault.”

“I am not!” said Elizabeth, horrified. “To accuse me—”

“No, it’s him I accuse,” said Georgiana.

“Well, he could do his worst, and I would be impervious,” said Elizabeth.

“Because you’re in love with my brother?”

“I...” Elizabeth squirmed. “Indeed.” She nodded, deciding there was no need to get into all of that.

“Except you two don’t seem very in love. He’s been gone weeks and he came in, and he barely looked at you, you barely looked at him...? I don’t know, but I simply don’t see it. Everyone knows you were practically forced to marry each other.”

“No one forced your brother,” said Elizabeth.

Georgiana shrugged.

Elizabeth's face fell. "So, you think he was concerned that it would reflect badly on his reputation if he let me be ruined?"

"My brother is a very proper sort of person, you see," said Georgiana. "He has these notions about what's right and wrong, and he must do the right thing. So, it's like being forced. Sort of by God, in a way."

"Oh, wondrous," muttered Elizabeth. "God the matchmaker."

"Well, you shouldn't hold this against him, though. It's one of his more admirable qualities, in the end. He doesn't have very many of those, however, I'm afraid."

"On the contrary," objected Elizabeth. "Your brother has a number of very admirable qualities. He's really a very good man, a very, very good man." She sighed.

"Oh, then," said Georgiana. "Maybe you are in love with him. Well, that's lovely, then. I think everything is going to work out, after all."

The door to the sitting room opened and a servant wheeled in a tray with biscuits and a chocolate pot.

"Marvelous," said Georgiana, sighing. "I wish it was lemon tarts, of course, but this is just fine as a replacement. Do have some chocolate, Lizzy."

"Thank you, Miss Darcy."

"Gigi."

"Gigi," repeated Elizabeth.

“YOU KNOW YOU’RE not welcome here.” Mr. Darcy was angry but he strove to sound bored.

“You came back awfully quickly, didn’t you?” Wickham was lounging against the side of the stables, his jacket flung over one shoulder. He stood up straight, putting one arm back into his jacket. “You needn’t have worried. You got to her, and she likes you better than me. So, if you’re keeping score—”

“Score? What are you on about? Who likes me better than you?” Mr. Darcy was privately of the opinion that no one liked him better than Mr. Wickham, not even his younger sister.

“You win,” said Wickham, shrugging insouciantly. “I suppose you’ve come here to boot me out of here, and you needn’t bother, because I’m going. I’m going back to the regiment in Brighton.”

“Will they take you back?”

“I’ve got the whole journey back to think of a good excuse for why I left.” Wickham adjusted his cravat.

“Well, good, then. Go.” Darcy folded his arms over his chest. “And don’t come back, either. I hear your father doesn’t even want to see you.”

“Yes, see? He likes you better than me, too.”

“Oh, he does not.” Darcy glared at him.

“He does. He told me to steer clear of him, that I’m no son of his, a lot of very hurtful things, frankly. I don’t deserve it. I really haven’t done anything all that wrong, you know. I’m not... I’m not exactly a scheming sort of person, you know? I don’t think

it through and then it all gets away from me, that's all."

Darcy could believe this.

"I never meant to marry your sister, you know. Not really. I never thought that would actually happen. You have to believe me. It was not some plan. And you should really give Amelia back her job, and—"

"Mrs. Younge agreed that her behavior with you was less than proper, and that she wanted to quit the entire governess profession," said Mr. Darcy. "I think she expected things from you. You're the one who disappointed her."

"Whereas you never disappoint anyone, because you're so steady and you do exactly what you promise." Wickham's voice went mocking.

"You should try it sometime," Mr. Darcy said dryly.

"All right, I shall. Thank you ever so much for that very wise bit of advice. How have I managed without you all these years? Now, I shall simply turn my life around." Bitingly sarcastic, he sauntered off.

Mr. Darcy uncrossed his arms. He turned to watch Wickham go. "Georgie?"

Mr. Wickham kept walking.

"Who likes me better than you? Mrs. Reynolds?"

Mr. Wickham let out a long, long laugh and turned back around. "Really? You know who."

Mr. Darcy furrowed his brow. "So, Gigi was right, then? You are trying to cuckold

me.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous. From the looks of the way she blushes at compliments, she’s as virginal as if she’d never been touched. For all I know, you’re just poking her while you’re both entirely clothed or—”

“Stop it.” His voice was a growl.

“It would be impossible,” said Mr. Wickham. “You have poisoned her against me. Thank you for that.”

“You’re insulted that my wife isn’t interested in you? Of all the entitled and mad sort of things to say—”

“Shut up. Let me go. I’m trying to go. I just want the last word and to walk off. Is that so hard? Really, can you give me nothing?”

Mr. Darcy sputtered.

Mr. Wickham turned back around, hands clenched in fists, and walked off.

Mr. Darcy folded his arms back over his chest. “Well, good riddance,” he muttered under his breath.

Last word, his foot.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ELIZABETH WAS STUNNED when there was a knock at her door that evening. She was already dressed for bed, had been, in fact, reading while lying down under the covers. She got up, called out, “Just a moment,” and put on a wrapper over her nightdress.

The dogs were all in the room with her. They slept here. They were supposed to sleep on the floor, but sometimes they crawled into bed with her, and she only made half-hearted attempts to shoo them out.

She opened the door, the dogs flowing all around her, curious as to who might be there, on high alert. They weren’t barking, not yet, but they might if it was a threat.

Mr. Darcy was there.

She was stunned. “Oh, sir, you’re here. I’m sorry, I was reading in bed.”

The dogs were mollified. They trotted off to lay down here and there near the fireplace.

“Yes, I don’t need to bother if you’d rather talk another time.”

“I don’t mind, I suppose,” she said. “Is there something we should talk of?”

“I think so,” he said, nodding.

“It’s not about Mr. Wickham, is it, because I don’t know what sort of things you’re thinking, but he is really nothing but wretched in the end, so I wish to reassure you that there is no need for concern there.”

“It’s not about him exactly,” said Mr. Darcy with a sigh. “It’s sort of related, though.”

“Oh.” She furrowed her brow.

“It’s not vital to speak now,” he said. “I could wait, of course. But it is something private between the two of us, so it can’t be discussed at tea or dinner or something.”

Her lips parted. “Now, I’m quite curious. You’d best come in.”

He chuckled ruefully, rubbing at his forehead. “I’m a bit nervous. I think I’d rather get it all over with, to be honest. I appreciate your letting me in.”

She opened the door wider.

He stepped inside.

She shut the door.

There were chairs set up near her fireplace. She gestured to him. “Shall we sit?”

“Yes, thank you.” He went over and sat down. Cleo came over and nudged his hand with one nose. Absently, he obliged her, scratching her head affectionately.

She sat down opposite him.

The fireplace was empty, of course. It was summer, too warm for fires. The night breeze was fluttering in through her open windows, in fact. In the distance, she could

hear the sounds of the nighttime in the countryside, insects chirping and night birds and that same breeze, in the tree branches.

She listened to all of that because Mr. Darcy wasn't talking. She waited, expectant.

He was silent.

"Sir?" she said finally.

"Yes, I'm sorry. It's hard to know where to begin with it."

"You said it was sort of about Mr. Wickham?"

"Well, yes, I suppose. Mr. Wickham, he fancied you."

"I don't know that he ever did! I don't know that he fancies anyone except himself," she said, grimacing.

"Granted," he said, inclining his head. "But, erm, you fancied him—"

"Mr. Darcy—"

"At one point," he said. "I think you did. You admitted as much, did you not? Perhaps it was never more than a shallow sort of interest, but it was there. It was something."

"I fail to see why this is relevant. We are married, sir, and I assure you, I dislike him a great deal at this juncture."

He eyed her. "You're protesting that rather a lot. And I would like to say, anyone but him, madam, really. I can be longsuffering about this, but not him. I can't abide him,

and—”

“What are you talking about?” She was very thoroughly confused.

“Right, yes.” He cleared his throat. “So, while I was in London, I was having a conversation with my sister, and I had a realization I hadn’t had before. Really, I was being a dolt not to have realized it, but... I don’t know. I had formed this faulty impression of you, Mrs. Darcy, rather thinking of you like this precious work of art, a beautiful statue, and that any sort of carnality would have sullied you.”

She squirmed. Why did the thought of being sullied make her feel as if her clothes were all too heavy? “What?”

“Well, I realized you do not love me, but that doesn’t preclude the idea of your loving someone else. And I also realized, I don’t think that I want to keep you from loving someone else. It seems awful. It would be one thing if you’d come into this marriage of your own free will. But you were coerced into it, and it was all my fault. If I had never insisted that you take the carriage with me—”

“Mr. Darcy, I have tried to explain that I can find very little to complain about within our marriage,” she said. “I don’t find it some kind of punishment, not at all.”

“That’s kind of you,” he said, with a smile. “But I don’t think either of us should be resigned to a life with no chance of romantic love. Which is why I think, eventually, you should be free to take a lover if you wish.”

She sprang up from the chair. “What?”

The dogs were startled, looking up at her, worried.

He looked up at her, too. “Well, I shall be free to do so, obviously. Men always are.

And you will, by the nature of it, likely have to be more discreet than me, but I shall turn a blind eye, even though... if I can be honest, the idea doesn't fill me with joy, exactly. However, it's... if I truly care about you, Mrs. Darcy, I can't be selfish with you. I want you to be happy. Really happy."

She was aghast. "You... you're not... I would never do such a thing!"

He blinked at her. "No?"

She sat back down. The dogs relaxed. "You can't be serious. That's abominable, sir. I am offended by the very idea."

"Well..." He cleared his throat. "Mrs. Darcy, you're very innocent, and you may feel differently when you've... Obviously, there are things that must be taken care of first. I won't have any aspersions cast on the heir to Pemberley, so I think there must be two children first, my children, obviously, and then... well, after that, I don't know. It sounds complicated, but we'll work it out. You'll try your best not to have other men's children, clearly, but sometimes things happen."

She gaped at him.

"I understand," he said. "You're very young, and you didn't grow up amongst the same sort of people that I grew up amongst. It is different in the country, when one lives in the country all the time. But amongst the ton, affairs are commonplace. I had hoped to have a different sort of marriage, it's true, but this is what we have to work with."

"I don't wish to have affairs," she said in a very tiny voice.

"You say that now, but you might change your mind. It will be a long, long lonely marriage for the both of us, I think. And you are not getting younger, so it might be a

good idea to move forward with it. Within four or five years, we should have two children, and then we shall look into how to make it all work. I have other properties. We can live separately. You can meet someone—”

“No,” she said faintly. The more she protested, it seemed, the less he seemed to hear her.

“Well, let’s leave that for now, then. The important thing is that we should likely consummate our marriage.” He looked into the fireplace as he said it. “I know I said you wouldn’t have to worry about it with me, and I am not looking forward to it—”

“No? Not at all?” she whispered. Am I really that hideous?

His gaze snapped back to hers. “All right, yes, that’s not entirely true. But I think the worries are currently overriding any, um... well, never mind. I wish to assure you that I shall be gentle and that we can take it at whatever pace is comfortable. It doesn’t have to be anything more than a sort of businesslike transaction, really.”

“Businesslike?” she echoed.

“Well, it’s about an heir. I need one. You can give me one. I’ve got to get one on you. It’s simply about that. If you wish to push it back, we can discuss when we’d like to do it, but I don’t think we should delay for too much longer.”

“When do you wish to do it?”

“Oh, I’d rather get it over with as soon as possible,” he said with a nod.

She hunched up her shoulders. “Fine. How about now?”

His eyebrows shot up. “Now?”

“Yes, no time like the present, I suppose. I’ll extinguish the lamp so that you don’t even have to look at me.”

“I don’t mind looking at you.”

“Don’t you? Since I’m barely tolerable.” She was out of her chair now. She went over to the door and opened it, calling for the dogs.

They came, curious.

“Out,” she said to them sternly.

The dogs hesitated.

“Off with you,” she said. She put the dogs out at night sometimes when they were restless—they would go to seek servants or to curl up in the kitchens. They had run of the house. It was no hardship for them.

The dogs ambled out of the room, giving her reproachful looks.

She shut the door behind them.

“Well,” said Mr. Darcy. “You’ve put the dogs out. You’re serious.”

“Can’t take it back now,” she said sharply. “You’ll have to endure the fact of your barely-tolerable wife, I suppose.”

“You are harping on that word again? Truly? I thought I explained—”

“Yes, you did. It’s fine.” She went over and turned the lamp down, down, down.

“Mrs. Darcy, you don’t seem quite pleased about this.” He was on his feet now. “I didn’t mean... we really don’t have to—”

“If you’re not pleased about it, I’m not forcing you,” she said tartly. “You never have to, of course. But if you truly want to get it over with, then let’s do that.”

“A-all right.” His voice was soft. It wavered a little.

She stripped off her outer layer and her nightdress all at once. She was only in unstructured, loose clothing. With it gone, she was entirely bare. But it was dark. He couldn’t really see her. She lay down on top of her bed. “All right. I’m ready.”

“Mrs. Darcy...” He was moving through the darkness. “May I call you Elizabeth, then?”

“I don’t know. It is meant to be businesslike, isn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed. Apologies.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, please call me Elizabeth.” Her voice was too high-pitched.

He sat down at the edge of the bed. “Oh, you’re... not wearing...” He sucked in a breath. “You’re beautiful.”

“Don’t!” That hurt. She flung an arm over her breasts, crossed her leg to hide herself. She fought tears.

“All right,” he said. “Apologies.”

It was quiet.

He put a hand on her ankle. “Elizabeth? I may need to confess something.”

She thought they were getting it over with. “What?” she said, more than a little tersely.

“I’ve not exactly done this before.”

She was startled. “No?”

“I’ve done things, just not this. I’ve always been a bit shy, I’m afraid. And now I’m quite nervous, and I feel as if you’re angry with me, and I don’t wish to sully you, but I feel it’s all I’ll be able to do, and I...” He groaned. “Say the word, and I leave.”

If he left her here, naked on this bed, rejected, she would never recover from that, and she knew that, somehow. “Stay,” she murmured. A long pause. “I’ve never done it either. Obviously.”

He laughed softly.

“We’ll muddle through it,” she said. “I think you need to take off your clothes.”

He laughed harder. “All right. Yes, I do know that much.”

She smiled in the darkness, and the smile made it easier.

There was no sound except the whisper of his clothes against his skin.

She watched. Maybe she shouldn’t have, but she couldn’t stop herself. Without the light from the lamp, he was illuminated only in the moonlight through the open windows, which meant his muscles glimmered in a sort of silvery way, and the rest of him was purplish-blue shadows. He was intriguing, all angles and fine dark hair. The

hair was on his chest, around his small nipples, trailing down the center of him, over his belly button, all the way down to... to that, which was stiff. The moonlight illuminated it, and it was accented in the silvery glow, too. She looked up at him and he seemed sort of unreal in his nudity. He was beautiful.

He stirred her in some way, some deep way, some way that twitched a bit between her thighs. She wanted to put her hands on him, to trace the fine, dark hair on his chest and belly.

He noticed her looking at him and he ducked down his head, laughing, bashful.

“You, um...” he breathed, one finger coming down to trace the outline of her clavicle. “You’re glowing in the light of the moon. You’re like some fairy creature, something impossible, something I’m not meant to touch.”

“Touch me,” she said. “I should like to touch you. So, let’s touch.”

He climbed onto the bed with her.

He touched her.

She ran her fingers through the hair on his body.

He shut his eyes and let out hissing breaths.

She put her hand there, on that part of him. She didn’t know why she felt so bold. Maybe it was the darkness. Maybe it was the moonlight.

He moaned, panting, and then wrenched her hand away. “Wait,” he gasped.

He kissed her.

They'd not done that before, and she hadn't realized it would be like that. It was wet, for one thing, and his tongue was twined with her tongue, and it seemed obscene somehow. But the sheer goodness of it made it too delightful for her to care.

She moaned, deep in her throat.

He touched one of her breasts.

She let out a cry, into his mouth, and he swallowed it.

She writhed, under him, into him, and somehow in the course of the writhing, she rubbed into him in a certain sort of way. It was her—she didn't know what to call it, all she seemed to think of were words she could never say out loud—against his part, the stiff part.

It was really the corresponding place on her body, truly. His part jutted out there, and she had something there, too, something smaller, something frightfully sensitive, and she was growing very slippery there. It was as wet as the kissing was wet, a sloppy and obscene kind of wetness that was nevertheless good.

She rubbed into him—the sensitive part of her against his stiffness.

He gasped and tried to rearrange himself, tried to push his stiff part lower, tried to stab into her, into the slippery folds of her.

But she stopped him.

It was the moonlight, perhaps, that made her bold, but she wanted this, because it felt so, so good, better than the taste of fresh blackberry jam and better than the feel of the morning sun under her bonnet and better than the feeling of removing her stays at the end of a long day.

So very good.

She seized his stiffness and held it up where she liked it. There, right there, and then she worked her hips into his stiff part.

He moaned. “Oh, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, I’m not... I won’t last. You can’t keep doing that.”

“But please?” she managed. “Oh, please, it’s so nice.”

He threw back his head, and let out noisy, harsh breaths, and she found herself echoing him, because whatever this was, this sensitive part on her body, this obscene and slippery part, the more she rubbed at it, the nicer it felt, the more sensitive it got.

She felt as if she was being pushed slowly up a hill, inch by inch, closer and closer to a bright summit in the clouds. Every inch closer was an inch of incrementally better bliss.

She let out something like a sob. “Please, oh, please,” she said, again and again and again.

And then it was as if she reached the top and she was pushed right off the edge of a cliff and she had never felt anything quite so good, and it was the best pleasure she’d ever felt, and he was working his stiff part against her, even though she’d stopped wriggling her hips, and he grunted, and then everything was, well, very wet and very obscenely slippery, and she was in some kind of world of pleasure that she hadn’t known existed, and her whole pelvis was twitching and convulsing, and—those noises she was making? Those were likely embarrassing. She should stop that.

He was kissing her.

She wound her arms around his neck. She was still making the noises.

“Well, I think you...?” His mouth hovered over hers. “Did you make yourself...?”

“Is there a word for that?” She was exultant. “It’s lovely.”

He laughed. “Lots of words, none of which are at all polite to say.”

She laughed too.

“Next time, I should likely try to make it inside you.” He kissed her again and flopped over next to her on the bed.

“Oh, we did it wrong,” she whispered.

“It’s my fault,” he said. “I’ll get better. I didn’t think you’d... those noises you were making were...”

“Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be. I like them very much. Please, make them as much as you’d like.”

She giggled.

“Just...” He groaned, nuzzling her neck, pulling her against his long, firm body.

“Rest for a moment?”

She snuggled into him.

Lying there, she tried to think of what else to say to him, but then she realized his breath had gone even and that he had fallen asleep.

She wasn't sure what to think. She could not possibly fall asleep, she didn't think. She was too confused about what had happened. Why had she been so bold? Why had she stopped him from doing whatever he'd wanted to do? Why had she chased that sweet release she'd had with such abandon?

She gazed at the window, watching clouds drift over the moon, feeling as if she'd done everything wrong. She gazed and she thought and time passed.

And then he stirred next to her and she turned to him.

His lips found hers. She wondered if he was even aware he'd been asleep. He kissed her and she clung to him and he rolled her under him, and he reached between them. He was stiff again, though he'd gone soft in the wake of whatever had happened before. But now, he was stiff again, and he was doing that thing where he was poking and stabbing around, and she knew where he was supposed to go, she supposed, so she angled her hips until—

She gasped at the sensation.

He let out a noise of very deep pleasure.

She cringed. It hurt. He was too big, and there was no way—

Well, he was sliding in and out and this was transferring some of the slipperiness inside and that was making it better, she supposed. Still, she didn't feel as if she could quite breathe. She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her hands into fists and lay very, very still.

“Elizabeth?” His voice was soft.

“Mmm?” She didn't open her eyes.

“Am I hurting you?”

“Not much,” she said.

“Dash it all,” he panted, and then he pulled free, entirely free, and tossed himself down next to her again.

She opened her eyes. “What are you doing?”

He only shook his head.

She sat up. “You have to finish it. We have to do it. We haven’t actually done it yet.”

“It... hurting you...” He sighed.

She realized he was soft again. “Oh,” she said, lying back down next to him.

“No, it’s all right,” he said. He yawned. “I’m very tired, I find.” He pulled her into his arms again. “I think I could go right back to sleep.”

She could not sleep at all, she didn’t think, but she said, “Yes, I am tired also.”

“May I stay?” He yawned again. “If you’d like me to go back to my room, I can. I admit this isn’t entirely businesslike, holding you, but... oh, Elizabeth, your skin is so soft and warm and I...” He kissed her again.

She molded herself against him, awash in the sensation of their bare skin touching in so many places. His skin was soft and warm, too, and she liked being close like this, tangled together in her bed. She wasn’t sure that she’d ever felt something quite so pleasant in all her life.

“Stay, stay, please stay,” she breathed.

He kissed her temple. “Good, then.” He yawned once more, and then he was asleep again, nearly immediately.

How did he do that?

She wriggled around a little, getting comfortable, thinking to herself that she would be awake half the night worrying and turning the events over and over again.

However, she wasn’t. She fell asleep almost immediately, snug and safe in the circle of her husband’s arms.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

IT WAS MORNING, and Mr. Darcy was naked and waking in the bed of his very beautiful, similarly undressed wife, who was pressed into him in all the best places, and he was frightened to move, frightened to stir, frightened to ruin the absolute perfection of this moment.

Lying like this, holding her, he could pretend it was different, that they were in love—well, that she was in love with him, because he was gone for her, utterly gone.

He could pretend that their consummation hadn't been some kind of ridiculous disaster, that he hadn't spent outside of her like an overeager adolescent, and that he hadn't lost his erection at the thought of causing her discomfort.

Though, of course, this was truthfully what had given him pause all along. Sullyng her, using her, making her into a receptacle for his pleasure, he found that deeply uncomfortable. He had resolved that he would have to do it, that it was just part of the entire act. It hurt women, at least the first time, and he thought he'd be able to marshal his will to get through it, anyway.

But then it hadn't been that way. Her pleasure, watching her have pleasure, it had been a revelation. Nothing in the earth or sea or sky had ever aroused him so. Her husky little voice as she worked her body against him, saying please over and over again, and the way she was so obviously enjoying herself? It was like watching her eat but ten thousand times better. He liked pleasing her. All he wanted to do was please her.

He hadn't been sure that she would enjoy it at all. He'd heard conflicting bits of information about the way women experienced the act itself. Some men seemed to think that women were lustier than men. After all, women were closer to the natural order of things, with their monthly cycles and their overt figures—curved for the precise purpose of inciting lust, to the way of thinking of these men.

However, Mr. Darcy wasn't entirely sure that this line of thinking held up. For one thing, women didn't seem to engage in it as much as men. Now, this could be because they were prevented from doing so, he supposed, by social strictures and rules that bound women that didn't bind men. On the other hand, even when they weren't, even when there were wealthy widows, you didn't see young men doing a brisk trade in selling their favors to those widows, did you?

No, only men paid for it.

This, to him, seemed to indicate that men's appetite for the act was stronger.

On the other hand, he supposed widows usually didn't need to pay, because there were young men lined up to service them for free.

However, this only proved his point, didn't it?

He had thought, always thought, that men were simply more interested in it than women, indeed, that men enjoyed it more than women. But, well, the way his wife had fallen apart underneath him last night, the way she'd gasped as those tremors went through her, he'd had to revise that entire notion. She'd enjoyed that. And what was more, he wasn't sure it didn't feel better to her than his own release felt.

He wished he'd had more to do with it, however. He hadn't had any notion of what to do or how to bring that about. She'd done it herself, really. If he'd introduced her to such pleasure, then maybe she might fall in love with him. But as it stood, he doubted

she was very impressed with his performance.

Now, she stirred, sighing against him. She was impossibly pretty as she blinked away her sleep and recognized him there, with her. She smiled at him, a brilliant sort of smile that made him think she was happy to see him.

“Good morning, Mrs. Darcy,” he whispered.

“Good morning, Mr. Darcy,” she said, still smiling at him. She reached up to brush her fingertips over his chest.

He liked that. He shut his eyes and let her.

She kept tracing little patterns on his body.

He rolled onto his back, and she perched over him, using both hands now, making little noises as she brushed his chest hair this way and that. It almost tickled, but it was shockingly pleasurable. His breath hitched, and the sensation traveled to the root of his groin. He swelled and lengthened there. He began to debate whether he was going to attempt to use that on her again.

If he was, he thought, he wished to give her pleasure first, in case it hurt her again.

“Apologies,” she breathed. “I find your body quite curious, I suppose. It fascinates me.”

“Never apologize for that,” he said in a guttural voice. “May I touch you?”

“Mmm,” she said. “If you want to.”

“I asked because I want to.” He nudged her back to lie on her back so that he could

settle over her. He tugged away the blankets so that he could look at the expanse of her pale skin, at her breasts and belly and the shock of dark hair between her thighs. He brushed the back of his knuckles this way and that, making her nipples stand at attention.

She let out little noises—first just gasps and huffs of air, but then they began to deepen into moans.

He liked the moans, and he let them guide him. He followed the moans and let his fingers linger in places that made her moan. She lay there, eyes closed, lips parted, too beautiful for words, and he wrung moan after moan from her lips.

When he finally got the nerve up to touch her between her thighs, she was under the spell of the moans, he thought, and she let her legs fall open and gave him easy access. They progressed in the same way, his fingers questing and her moans doing the communicating. Except, when he touched the little slippery nub in the front of her sex, she didn't simply moan, but cried out in obvious pleasure.

So, he settled there. He ventured down to her opening but she went quiet then, no moans or even gasps, so he went back up to the nub. It had a name, he knew. What was it?

Now his fingers were slippery with the wetness from her opening and that made it easier to glide up and down over the nub or to brush it side to side—

Clitoris, that was it. It was Latin, he thought. Maybe? It sounded Latin.

However, he was distracted from his thoughts on etymology by discovering that she liked it when he made circles around it, very much liked it, and he did that again and again as she made the most delicious of sounds and the hardness between his own thighs pulsed in sympathetic arousal, and then she went tense for a moment before

dissolving into tremors and tremulous sounds and he jerked between his thighs.

He was painfully aroused. He wouldn't last, he didn't think, and so he covered her body with his own and kissed her throat as she writhed beneath him, and then—

Blazes, being sheathed in her was like a one-way carriage ride off to the bright center of the ancient world. He rutted into her with abandon, untethered, hardly himself, making some kind of noise that was tremulous on his own end, rather embarrassing, and he resolved not to think of that and not that he might be hurting her, because he was close, very close, and the more quickly he accomplished this, the easier for them both.

But she was sighing under him, running her hands over his shoulders, gasping as if she was not, in fact, in pain.

Could she... like that?

He crested at the mere thought of it, of some kind of mutual pleasure, finding it together, something perfect and sweet and wondrous, a joining of two into one. The world went white-hot and blinding, and then he was spilling into her, shuddering with the goodness of it.

In the wake of it, he lay half on her body and half off of it, frightened of crushing her with his weight.

She hummed, drawing figure-eights on his bicep.

He didn't want to move. He was still lodged in her body. He reasoned that she wouldn't be humming if it hurt. But he didn't know if he wanted to ask. He was a selfish, horrid creature, that was the truth of it, and it felt too nice to know the truth. He wanted to stay here, possibly forever, but barring that, he wanted to be given

permission to come back, to prod his way into her sweet, snug, wet heat and...

Oh, this was dreadful.

She didn't even like him.

He had not come here last night with the intention of doing this with her. It was perhaps a testament to his own worsen nature that he'd acquiesced to it so easily. It was only that he had sensed that if he left her, left her bare and beautiful body laid out for him like a feast, and went back to his own bed, alone, it would have destroyed him in some way. He had needed to accept her offering in some primal way.

Now, it had happened, but he worried it had only made things frightfully complicated.

"Well," she said finally. "I was worried we wouldn't manage it, but it went just fine, didn't it?"

He pushed up onto his arms, peering down at her. "Did it hurt?"

"No," she said. "No, I liked it." She touched his chest again. "I like us connected."

He kissed her.

She kissed back, sighing, and that was when he wondered how dreadful his mouth must taste in the morning after sleep. Carefully, he ended the kiss, wincing in embarrassment. "I'm so very sorry."

"For what?" She was puzzled.

"Oh, everything, I suppose," he said.

“I have no complaints about anything that’s happened this morning,” she said, giving him a mischievous little smile. “If I’d known it was going to be like this, I daresay I wouldn’t have let you dally over it for so long. I would have demanded you be my right and proper husband, I think.” She stretched her arms over her head and yawned, and she was so fetching and adorable that he felt his heart squeeze painfully.

He slipped out of her now, and she made a noise of disappointment, which he found gratifying. He carefully lay down next to her.

She rolled onto her side. “You must have thought it was different than it is?”

He furrowed his brow. “I don’t know. I suppose. But why do you say that?”

“Oh, because you kept acting as though it was something terrible you were going to subject me to.” She considered. “You know, my mother sort of acted the same way, but I thought she was just being mean-spirited. My mother holds grudges.”

He laughed. “I hadn’t noticed that about your mother.”

Elizabeth buried her face in his shoulder. “Oh, let’s never speak of her again when we’re not wearing clothes. It’s exceedingly bad.”

He rubbed her back, chuckling. “I did think it would be different. I didn’t expect it would be so pleasurable for you. I had this impression that it wasn’t that way for women.”

She lifted her head. “Oh.”

“Well, what’s that reaction?” He gave her a smile. “It’s a good thing, and now that I know how to—”

“Maybe I’m not supposed to like it,” she said.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I think it’s good that you like it.”

She furrowed her brow, worried.

He reached up and used his thumb to smooth out that furrow in her brow, the way he’d daydreamed of doing it. He let out a sigh.

Her expression softened. “The way you’re looking at me, Mr. Darcy.”

“Apologies,” he said, letting his fingers fall.

“It’s only... you don’t think me awfully plain, do you? Regardless of that comment about my being barely tolerable. That’s not at all why you didn’t wish to take me to bed.”

“What?” He sat up. “You thought that? Elizabeth, I stare at you constantly because you’re exceptionally, heart-stoppingly beautiful.”

Her jaw worked, and she let out a tiny noise in the back of her throat.

“You haven’t noticed my staring?”

She shook her head.

Of course not. She didn’t notice him. She never really had. Here she was, and he’d had her in every imaginable way, been inside her body, left his seed inside her, claimed her...

And she wasn’t his, not even now.

Maybe that was all right.

Maybe possessing her would ruin her in some way. He searched her gaze, feeling his heart full to bursting with his love for her. He wanted to worship her. He hoped it took a very long time to get her with child, so he would have every excuse to keep doing this with her.

“So, you were hesitant, then, just because of thinking I wouldn’t like it?” she said.

“It seems so invasive is all,” he said. “Are you certain I didn’t hurt you this morning?”

“I didn’t mind it,” she said. “I promise. I want you to do it again. I like us connected.” She twined her fingers with his.

So, then, it had hurt? He gazed down at her.

She smiled at him, her eyes bright, and he thought of that time she’d appeared in the breakfast parlor at Netherfield, cheeks high with pink color, skirts muddy, inquiring breathlessly after her sister.

He’d wanted her in his bed then, if he was honest with himself.

Well, he thought, if it does hurt her, maybe it’s a balance, somehow. Maybe if I please her enough beforehand, then I can earn taking my own pleasure?

He needed to talk to someone about this. He needed advice.

“I THINK I need advice,” said Elizabeth in a small voice. She was outside, watching the dogs on the lawn. “But I think I need to speak to a married woman.”

Harmony shifted on her feet. “Oh, yes, I saw him leaving your bedroom this morning. Was that the first time?”

Elizabeth glanced at her maid. “I can’t talk to you about this.”

“Well...” Harmony looked around as if she thought someone was listening, although no one was. “I know you’re not supposed to do things like that before you’re married, but everyone does.”

Elizabeth turned to her, eyes wide. “No, they do not.”

Harmony hunched up her shoulders.

It was quiet.

Elizabeth took Harmony by the arm and dragged her over to a wrought-iron bench. She pulled the maid down next to her. “Maybe it’s different amongst the lower classes. I’ve often thought it must be so.”

“Yes, must be that,” said Harmony with a little nod.

“So, that means, you...? What?” said Elizabeth.

“I don’t know,” said Harmony. “I had a sweetheart once. And we were going to get married. But he decided to go to France and fight Napoleon, and...” She shook her head.

“He died?”

“Well, I was sad about it for a time,” said Harmony. “But I often had this feeling that he left just to escape me, you know? As if I were this lodestone around his neck,

pulling him down. When we first met, he was just at me about it, all the time, trying to get me to give in. And I resisted and resisted and resisted until... I guess he wore me down. Then it was all awful. I was terrified he was going to get me with child, and he acted as if he hadn't even thought about that possibility. Of course, to get me to agree, he had promised to marry me, but then once it was done, I think he wished he hadn't said it." She shrugged.

"That sounds rather horrible," said Elizabeth, who was thinking it was actually the sort of cliché that she'd heard bandied about her whole life. Exactly the reason not to allow men liberties.

"It's entirely as they always say, I suppose," said Harmony with a shrug. "It's the way men are. They're obsessed with it."

Elizabeth let out a long, slow breath, and her heart started pounding.

"Except he isn't?" said Harmony, in a furious whisper. "He never touched you before now, did he?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, and the excuses he has about it... well, you should have heard him working himself up to it last night. Just business, he said, to make an heir, and then..." She leaned back into the bench and looked up at the sky.

Well, nothing about it had been businesslike, nothing at all. She was in love with him now, and she understood why people talked about being pierced by Cupid's arrow, because it hurt. It was an open wound, this love.

"Why not until now?"

"I thought he wasn't attracted to me," said Elizabeth.

“Oh, I would have thought the same,” said Harmony. “Why, it’s been months. It’s not regular to behave that way.”

“Well, he told me he never did it before,” said Elizabeth softly. She glanced at the maid. “You understand that you can never repeat this?”

“Of course,” said Harmony.

“Anyway, so I don’t think he knew what it was going to be like, and I think he was of the impression it was going to be very horrible for me,” said Elizabeth. She looked up at Harmony. “Did you think it was horrible?”

“What? No, of course not,” said Harmony.

“So...” Elizabeth let out a breath. “Women like it? Most women like it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Harmony, thinking about it. “I don’t know about most women. I think there are lots of women who don’t, in fact. Well, I used to work for a laundress, and there were ever so many of us just washing sheets and linens and all manner of things all day, and lots of those women would complain about how their husbands won’t let them be, how annoyed they are about all the attentions, that they’re too tired after a long day and they don’t want to have any more children and...?”

“Right,” said Elizabeth.

“But I liked it,” said Harmony. “I mean, I think he liked it more than me, to be honest.” She shook her head. “That’s why it was maddening, really, quite maddening, because I think, before it happened, I wasn’t that interested in him, and then afterwards, I felt, I don’t know...” She sighed. “Connected to him, I suppose.”

“Yes,” said Elizabeth in a tattered voice. It had hurt less that morning, much less than the night before, but it had still hurt, and yet, she had liked it. But it was that feeling, of him within her, their bodies tied together... It was powerful.

“But he didn’t seem to feel it at all,” said Harmony with a sigh. “Maybe this is why you should wait until after you’re married. This way, he’s made a real commitment to it all upfront, I suppose. Maybe it would be different.”

“Did it hurt?” Elizabeth said.

“Oh, it doesn’t the next time,” said Harmony.

“No, the second time, it did,” said Elizabeth.

“No, I mean, the next incident... give it a few days to heal,” said Harmony. She gave her mistress a knowing smile. “So, he was really at you then?”

Elizabeth felt herself blushing. “I should never have told you anything.”

Harmony giggled.

“One more thing, and then I wish to leave this subject forever,” said Elizabeth. “Do you think... a woman could be wrong in some way?”

“Wrong?”

“Could a woman have a... a part that isn’t supposed to be there?”

“What are you talking about?” Harmony blinked at her.

“Well, the act of it, it’s his body inside yours, of course, so...” That’s the part I’m

supposed to like, not the strange little part on the top of me that feels so sensitive.
“Women’s pleasure, it’s not like men’s.”

“No,” said Harmony.

“So, if it were like men’s, if a woman had a part like a man, then...”

“What are you saying, Mrs. Darcy? I have seen you naked. There is nothing wrong with you.”

“Not me,” said Elizabeth, shaking her head, knowing that Harmony had certainly never inspected that part of her body in detail.

“All right, then you’re asking because...?”

“I don’t know. Never mind. Women don’t have... if a woman sort of had a...” She lowered her voice. “Sorry to be vulgar, but something like a little prick, that would be wrong.”

“I’ve heard of such things, actually,” said Harmony softly. “People with both kinds of sexual organs. I think it happens.”

Elizabeth drew in a breath.

“But you don’t have anything like that.”

“I said it’s not about me,” said Elizabeth.

“All right, just... if your husband was at you more than once, I’m sure he thought everything was just exactly regular,” said Harmony. “I can assure you, ma’am, that—”

“All right, all right,” said Elizabeth, shaking her head. “Let’s leave it.”

“You promise you’re not worrying about that?” said Harmony.

“I promise,” said Elizabeth with a smile. Except, of course, she was. Why had that happened to her? Why had she found such pleasure from having that part of her body stroked?

No matter what Harmony said, she wasn’t sure that something wasn’t very wrong with her. Maybe she should have disliked her union with her husband, because she had felt it was uncomfortable that first time. Maybe it was supposed to be something she endured. It was the only reason he’d been so hesitant about doing it, anyway, she thought.

So, the fact she had liked it, it was...

Well, something must be wrong with her.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MR. DARCY DID not visit his wife again that evening, and she certainly didn't come to him. At dinner, he told both Elizabeth and Georgiana that he was planning to leave early in the morning to head down to Staffordshire, where he knew that Alex Fitzwilliam, the Viscount of Banvolk, was staying, at the house of a mutual friend of theirs.

He'd usually turn to Richard in times like these, but Richard was back in France at the moment. So, his elder brother would have to do. It was going to be a wretched sort of conversation, Darcy imagined, but at the very least, he and Alex were cut from the same sort of cloth. Richard was different, less formal, less careworn. Darcy and Alex both knew what it meant to have the pressures of being an heir and firstborn son on their heads.

Georgiana had not been pleased. "But we just got here, Fitz," she'd said. "And besides, I want to see Alex, too. You must take me along with you."

He'd denied her that and she had gotten sulky.

"You always treat me like a child," she'd snapped.

"You are a child," he'd rejoined, and then Georgiana had gone lethally silent for the rest of the evening.

His wife had been quiet, too, though, and he'd wanted to speak to her. However, they'd all gone to the sitting room afterward, and Georgiana had started playing the

piano very loudly, too loudly for any conversation. He didn't think she was trying to impede their talking, only that she wanted him to understand that she was displeased with him.

He wanted to reassure Elizabeth that he was simply going away for advice, that if he'd had his way, he would have spent every single night with her until her belly swelled with his child.

He felt strangely gratified at that thought, a feeling that wasn't exactly arousal, but might be arousal's cousin, something quite nice.

She had mistakenly thought he wasn't attracted to her, and he wanted to reassure her this was not the case, never the case. It was true, he supposed, that he had not thought she was beautiful that first night, but he didn't understand why, in retrospect. Even the following gathering, at Sir William's, he'd found her pretty.

Maybe he would blame the dimly lit public ball if she asked again.

Maybe that was the truth of it. He hadn't really gotten a good look at her. He'd been anxious and uncomfortable that night, anyway, not inclined to find anything or anyone pleasant.

But there was no time to talk.

If he'd gone to her bedchamber, they would have ended up together in that way again, because he wouldn't have been able to stop himself, and he really needed his rest for the journey ahead of him.

So, no talking, and he was off before the dawn.

Alex wasn't expecting him, but he didn't seem to mind at all when Darcy arrived in

the midday. Darcy came in to speak to their mutual friend. Everyone was at cards, and Darcy declined, asking if Alex would mind going on a walk with him.

His cousin agreed and they went off together into the sunlight of the summer afternoon.

“You’re very agitated,” observed Alex. “You’ve come to ask for money or something, haven’t you?”

“No!” Darcy shook his head. “How could you say such a thing? I am not hurting for money, Alex.”

“Well, what is it, then? You want something, Fitzwilliam.”

“Advice is all, I suppose,” he said with a sigh.

“Advice from me about what?”

“Women,” said Darcy.

Alex stopped walking. “You married that chit of a girl and it turns out she was trying to trap you, then? What? Is she sending money to another man or something?”

“No!” Darcy folded his arms over his chest. “Why don’t you let me speak?”

Alex shrugged. He started walking again. “Is it about your wife?”

“Sort of,” said Mr. Darcy. “You’ve... with virgins?”

“Oh, it’s about sex.” Alex stopped walking again. “You’ve been married to her for months.”

“I know, but... it’s complicated. So, it’s only recently that—”

“Really? That long?” Alex shook his head slowly. “Did she bleed a lot?”

“No, not at all,” said Mr. Darcy, who hadn’t worried about that before, but perhaps he should have.

“Well, they don’t always.” Alex waved this away. “It’s always been known, even in the days when they displayed the blooded sheets. Some women do; others don’t.” He shrugged. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, I guess I’m just wondering if it’s always unpleasant for women, I think.”

“So, you were terrible at it, I see. I told you, you should have been getting some practice in, but you didn’t want to bed actresses. Thing is, an actress can give you quite a number of pointers. There’s something called a clitoris, cousin, and—”

“I’ve no problem with that aspect of it,” he said, flushing. “That part... she liked that part, just the actual act of it, that part. Is that always unpleasant?”

“No,” said Alex. “I’m not entirely sure why you’re thinking these parts need to be separate, however.”

Mr. Darcy blinked. “Ah,” he said. It was a revelation.

Alex laughed, clapping him on the shoulder.

Darcy thought about it some more. “How would you... reach?”

“There are other positions. She can help.”

“Right.” He chuckled softly under his breath.

“You’re hopeless,” said Alex, also laughing. “You rode all the way here just for this?”

“I am hopeless,” said Darcy, nodding. “Embarrassingly so.” He pointed at him. “You will not breathe a word of this to anyone—”

“When I see her at the next family function, I’m going to think of you with your mouth between her legs—” Alex broke off at Darcy’s expression. “Oh, I see you hadn’t thought of that either.” He shrugged. “Mind you, I don’t know if you’re strictly supposed to do things of that nature with one’s wife, but I find in those sorts of ways, actresses and wives are quite remarkably the same.”

“Right,” said Darcy.

“When you’re in town, if you’d like some introductions...?”

Darcy sighed heavily, feeling morose. “Well, maybe at some point, I may indeed ask for that.” When this arrangement with his wife was over, however, he was fairly certain an actress, no matter how comely or enthusiastic, would seem like a pale imitation.

ELIZABETH SPENT THE day with the dogs and Harmony. Georgiana did not appear for any of her meals.

In the afternoon, Elizabeth decided to look in on her. Even if Georgiana were ill, she might like a bit of company. Most people didn’t like to convalesce entirely alone.

However, Georgiana didn’t seem the least bit ill. She was only angry.

“My brother doesn’t think of me like a person,” she said to Elizabeth. “He ignores me most of the time, and he doesn’t care about my feelings. Then he gets angry with me when I do things like encourage Wickham.”

“But did you encourage him?” said Elizabeth. “I thought he initiated all of it and you were just swept up in it?”

“Oh, I don’t know anymore,” said Georgiana. “I feel as if I’ve told the story so many times I can’t remember the truth. I just remember all the times I’ve told the story.”

Elizabeth knew this sort of sensation. She nodded sagely.

“Fitz gets ideas in his head,” said Georgiana. “Once he’s determined that something is one way, there is no changing his determination. He hates me now.”

“I’m certain he doesn’t hate you.”

“I thought I wanted to be here, at Pemberley, but he leaves immediately.”

“Well, I think that was my fault,” said Elizabeth. “I think I frightened him.”

“What did you do to frighten him?”

Elizabeth could not quite find a way to talk about that. She looked away, shaking her head.

“Oh, dear, you are in love with him, now, I see.”

“Yes, I think I am,” said Elizabeth. “I didn’t quite know what it would be like.”

“Well, tell him to look at me,” said Georgiana. “Tell him to pay attention to Gigi!”

“That’s what you want? Attention?”

“Maybe a season also,” said Georgiana. “A lot of dresses, time in London, fending off suitors left and right, that sort of thing.”

“I see,” said Elizabeth. “Well, I’ll see what I can do. But it’s summer now.”

“Yes, I’ll have to wait to come out in society, of course. But he would know I wanted it if he looked at me.”

“Maybe,” said Elizabeth. “Maybe he would know. How about I tell him you want a season?”

“You’d do that?”

“Of course,” said Elizabeth. “We’re sisters, after all, aren’t we?”

Georgiana flung her arms around Elizabeth, embracing her tightly. “You’re the very best sister in the entire country!”

But then Georgiana still didn’t come down for dinner. Maybe she thought Mr. Darcy would be back by then. He wasn’t.

However, later, in the darkness, when Elizabeth was drifting off to sleep, the door to her bedroom eased open and she sat up straight in bed.

“I woke you,” he said, coming inside. “Sorry. I was going to just look at you while you were sleeping. I suppose that’s a wretched thing to do, isn’t it?”

“Come to bed,” she said. Why did she say it? Oh, she didn’t know, but there he was, and he smelled like leather and the summer breeze and... and himself in such a way

that made her want him.

“I’m fresh from the road,” he said. “You won’t welcome my stench.”

“Yes, I will.” Oh, Lord, how embarrassing.

He was kissing her.

She was untying his cravat.

He had his hands inside her nightdress.

She was peeling off his jacket.

Now, he’d bared her entirely and he was openly gaping at her nude skin as he frantically undid the buttons on his shirt.

He shed his trousers and he was pressing into her, and his scent made her feel wild and frantic, too.

She wrapped her thighs around his hips and she couldn’t stop herself from rubbing her body into his body, even if she knew this was something strange and mutated about her, even if she knew no woman should like this.

He took over, wetting his fingers to rub those treacherously glorious circles into her.

She mewled, overcome.

He turned her body, and now she was half off the bed, half on it, her face pressed into the sheets as he pushed into her from behind. And then it was happening all at once. His fingers were still making circles but he was thick and insistent and stretching and

prodding her, taking up every spare bit of space inside her, and it was all good. So good. Very good.

She did it more than once.

The first crashed through her like a cavalcade going to war, trampling ecstatically through her body, and the next one built on it, taking her to ever higher cliffs of wondrousness. She let out cries that must have been loud enough for everyone in all of Derbyshire to hear and he slammed all the way into her, deep inside, and he let out a shout even louder than hers.

And then she was in his arms, both of them lying on the bed, his mouth panting into her feverish brow. He whispered her name into her skin like an oath. “Elizabeth, Elizabeth, oh, Elizabeth.”

She wanted to stay like this forever.

He shouldn’t be doing that, of course. He had never been with a woman, so maybe he didn’t know that she shouldn’t be getting pleasure from that little strange mannish part of her, whatever it was. He was stimulating it because he liked pleasing her.

If she were a good person, she’d tell him not to.

But she wasn’t good at all.

She liked it too much.

So, she didn’t say a word about it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THEY DID IT constantly.

He came to her room, or sometimes sent a summons that she should come to his. They slept in the same bed and then it happened in the mornings, too.

Once, they did it in that fabulous tub of his, the one built in to the dedicated bathing room off of his bedchamber. She straddled him, the warm water sluicing around both of their bodies, and they rocked against each other.

She got used to the feeling of sleeping close to him, without their clothes, the warm, smooth, firmness of his skin against hers. She got used to the way he touched her, reverent and yet with growing self-assuredness, as he learned just how to please her. She got used to his body, learning the way it felt under her fingers, discovering how to please him as well, how to excite him, how to make him throw back his head and gulp out her name in a destroyed voice.

Once, he pulled her aside after tea, tucked her inside a room in the east wing, locked the door, lifted her skirts, and went down on his knees. He put his mouth on her. There. On the part of her that he wasn't even supposed to be stimulating, because it was some strange mutation.

She let him do it.

She felt guilty about it, at least a little guilty, but she began to wonder if it would really matter one way or the other, in the end. If he never knew that she had some

strangely male element on her body, then he wouldn't have to find it abhorrent. She could keep it from him, and they could both continue as they were.

She enjoyed it, and he didn't seem to mind. He told her that he liked pleasing her, in fact.

Time passed.

Weeks of it.

Her bleeding came, and then she had a thought. She wondered if... because of that strange male part of her, if maybe she wasn't going to be able to bear children. Maybe she wasn't female enough for it.

The thought consumed her, and she ended up in the library in Pemberley with an anatomy book, peering at a diagram of someone who was supposedly a hermaphrodite.

She didn't look like that at all.

But there was only one picture, and she supposed that such things varied amongst the afflicted. It did seem that hermaphrodites, indeed, sometimes could not have children.

She felt horrid at the thought of that. If this progressed, if months and months passed, and she did not conceive a child, then she would have to speak to him about it.

For now, she shut the book and told herself that it might not come to pass. At least he was no longer saying things about the two of them having affairs with other people in several years' time. In point of fact, just the other night, he'd whispered into her hair that he wanted to spend every night just like this for the rest of his life, and she'd agreed. If he knew the truth about her, he'd probably take that back, of course.

Lord, what if he did something horrible like got the marriage annulled? One wasn't supposed to be able to do that if it had been consummated, but in cases where an heir could not be sired, exceptions were made.

That night, he sent a note summoning her to his room, and she sent a note back saying her bleeding had begun. She had settled in for her first night sleeping alone in weeks when her door opened.

"We can still sleep close?" he said. "Unless you'd rather be alone?"

"No," she said. "I would not rather be alone. You don't mind?"

"Of course not," he said.

And then, in his arms in the darkness, he said, "We can still kiss."

"Yes," she said.

And then they were kissing, and then there was touching, and then it came around to assuming that they could still do all of it, really, if he didn't mind that she was bleeding, which he said he didn't.

"And of course your clitoris is still just as sensitive," he said, brushing his fingers over her there, on that part of her.

She went entirely still.

He removed his fingers from under the cloth that was bound between her legs. "I did something wrong," he said softly.

"What word did you say?" she whispered.

“Clitoris?” he said. “Don’t you know...?” He sighed. “It’s positively horrid sometimes, the things they keep from women.”

“It has a name,” she said. “It’s not some sort of deformed small prick?”

“No,” he said.

“And... other women... have them?”

“Every woman, yes,” he said.

She started sobbing. Her emotions were always close to the surface during the times that she bled, anyway. She buried her face in his chest and cried, letting out every bit of her own silly worries—her unfounded worries. Why was she this way? Why did she become so easily convinced that everything was wrong?

“Elizabeth... what...?”

She couldn’t even explain it to him. It was too embarrassing and stupid. She felt wretched about it.

But eventually, after her tears quieted, she lay on his shoulder as he stroked her hair.

“Well, everything is all right, then,” she said. “You have always been attracted to me, and you have always loved me, and I have not been some sort of freak who is wrong and unfeminine, nor am I incapable of having children. There is nothing actually wrong, Fitzwilliam.”

“These are all things you worried about?” he said quietly.

She nodded into him. “I worry rather a lot.”

“Ah, me as well,” he said with a little sigh. “And you... you loved me, or could have loved me, all along, couldn’t you?”

She lifted her head to look at him. “I was confused about it. I love you now. I know that. But there was a time when I thought about it so much I wasn’t sure which way was up or down.”

“I was an idiot to suggest we should have affairs.”

“Yes.”

He laughed. “You didn’t want him, either, not like this, and I know that.”

“Him? You don’t mean Wickham.”

He groaned. “Oh, don’t make fun of me, love. I am wretchedly insecure, have you not noticed this?”

“You should not be. You are Mr. Darcy of Pemberley!”

“Yes, well, I am insecure.”

“It’s all right. So am I, obviously.” She groaned, too. “We’re a pair, aren’t we?”

He laughed. “So, we’re in love, then?”

“Oh, very much.”

“Nothing more boring than a husband and wife in love, I suppose.”

“Nothing indeed,” she said.

“We need to talk more,” he said. “We’re both frightened that the other person is going to reject us, so we hide things, but it’s not necessary. I’m never going to reject you, Elizabeth.”

“Well, I am not going to reject you either,” she said. “Fine, we shall talk more, and everything will be just fine.”

He hummed his satisfaction.

“We haven’t been doing a lot of talking, have we?”

“We’ve been distracted,” he allowed. “Speaking of distraction, did we determine we could... during the bleeding or do you want to say no now?”

She giggled. “You seem to be consumed with thoughts about that activity, don’t you, sir?”

“You’re allowed to say no. I simply like being connected.”

She smiled, rubbing her face into his skin. “Oh, yes, Fitzwilliam. So do I.”

So, they were connected, even during the bleeding, and they slept in the same bed, and she banished all the strange and silly fears she’d had.

Now, she would—at long last—have a happily ever after.

AND SHE WOULD have, too.

Except her damnable younger sister Lydia had contrived to make sure that none of that could happen, because she was the worst, most horrible, and most inconsiderate person in the whole of England!

Elizabeth waved the letter at her husband. “She’s run off with Mr. Wickham of all people.”

Mr. Darcy snatched the letter out of her hand to read it himself.

“It’s from Mary,” said Elizabeth helpfully.

“Yes, I see that,” said Mr. Darcy, looking it over. “Why would he try to marry Lydia?”

“Exactly!” said Elizabeth. “What does he have to gain?”

Mr. Darcy sighed heavily. “The last word, I think.” He handed her back the letter. “Well, they’ve not gone to Scotland, of that I can assure you.”

“The last word?” said Elizabeth, looking him over. “What do you mean by that?”

“Just something he said to me,” said Mr. Darcy, sighing. “He knows I am connected to you, and that you are in love with me, and that annoys him. He wishes you to side with him in some way.”

“Why would I do that? After how he treated me? After all his lies? And after poor Gigi, who is beside herself—oh, this reminds me, Fitzwilliam, I did tell your sister I was going to speak to you about having a season.”

“Of course. She has to come out, doesn’t she? She’s of the age. It’s as if she thinks I don’t look at her or something.” He rolled his eyes. “But that is of no consequence at this moment.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Elizabeth, sighing again. “If they’re not in Scotland, where are they?”

“I know where they’ll be,” he said. “London. And likely at a certain lodging house on Edward Street. One owned by—”

“Mrs. Amelia Younge,” said Elizabeth.

“Oh, you know all about her,” said Mr. Darcy with a shrug.

“Yes, she is much maligned according to Wickham, but Gigi says otherwise,” said Elizabeth.

“I could not keep her on as a governess,” said Mr. Darcy. “I daresay I was kind, however. I did offer to write her a reference if she desired. I believe I went so far as to say that she could dictate it and I would sign it. Whatever she wished, if she would simply steer clear of Wickham for the future. She would not let him go. And that is where he is, mark my words.”

“But...” Elizabeth folded her arms over her chest. “If she is in love with him, why would he keep involving her in schemes that involve other women?”

“I don’t know. But I’m off tomorrow morning, to go and seek him out.”

“You? What will you do?”

“We are married, Elizabeth. Your family is my family. He couldn’t get Gigi, this is the next best thing. Certainly, he won’t get my sister’s dowry, but he’ll weasel money out of me, which is all he wants. And now, he’s got your sister, which is the way he gets back at you for what he perceives as your betrayal.”

“Oh,” said Elizabeth. “Oh.”

“Yes.” He shrugged.

“Do we have to give him money?” said Elizabeth. “Do we have to let him get everything he wishes? Is that really what we have to do?”

Mr. Darcy shook his head. “I don’t like it either.”

“Let’s do something else,” said Elizabeth.

“What else could we do?” said Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth sighed heavily. She wasn’t sure. “Well, we’ll figure it out on the way to London, won’t we?”

“You wish to come along?”

“She is my sister, Fitzwilliam,” she said. “Of course I’m coming along.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THEY SET OFF the next morning but not alone. Georgiana, upon hearing of their intent to go to London, made it very plain that she would not stand for being left behind. So, they all left together.

The journey took two days, and they spent one night at an inn.

On the ride down, they did scheme.

“What should happen to him, in an ideal world?” said Elizabeth. “I believe he should be punished in some way?”

“Oh, definitely,” said Mr. Darcy.

“No, that’s not going to solve the problem,” cried Georgiana.

“It’s justice,” said Elizabeth. “Think of all the things he’s done! He attempted to ruin you. He destroyed Mrs. Younge to various degrees. He was wretched to me. He is always causing issues for Fitzwilliam. He needs to pay for his many sins.”

“He has paid,” said Georgiana. “He is always and forever in some kind of situation where he perceives himself to be very put upon. That is his excuse for his behavior. If you worsen his circumstances, it will only serve to incite him to do even more horrible things.”

“He has not paid,” said Mr. Darcy. “He has had a life that is, in many ways, quite

charmed. He's had a number of advantages, more than he should have, by all rights."

"True," said Elizabeth, nodding.

"I suppose so, yes," said Georgiana. "But he doesn't perceive them as advantages. He thinks of himself as very pitiful. He has a vested interest in seeing himself this way, because then he can justify any behavior. So, if we wish him to stop, to cease all manner of his trickery, we must convince him that he has won."

"How do we do that?" said Mr. Darcy. "After all, as I've just pointed out, he's had a number of advantages. None of those advantages have made him feel advantaged."

"No, that's a good point," said Georgiana.

"Maybe it's not about his advantages but about you," said Elizabeth, nodding at her husband. "Maybe he wishes to think that you are disadvantaged in some way."

"He does disadvantage me," muttered Darcy. "All of this, what he's done? None of it is the least bit advantageous to me. I am going to have to pay him through the nose and then he wins and he likely goes on to treat your sister badly and we shall have to watch that—"

"To be fair," said Elizabeth, "Lydia is equally likely to treat him badly. They may be well matched."

Darcy considered. "Your sister, she is..."

"Exactly," said Elizabeth.

Darcy chuckled softly.

“Maybe it’s not the advantages themselves,” said Georgiana softly. “Maybe it’s that he senses, somehow, that he doesn’t deserve them.”

“What?” said Elizabeth, turning to Georgiana. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you have an opinion of yourself—that you are less than everyone else in some essential way—and then you get more for no good reason, just because you get fortunate, some part of you rejects it. Some part of you thinks it’s not really your due. Some part of you wishes to restore the rightness of things, and so you can’t accept it. You fritter it off, restoring things to the way that they should be, with you as less.”

Elizabeth furrowed her brow. What a thought.

“I think I’m following you,” said Mr. Darcy. “You did say that he seems to think of himself as pitiable no matter what.”

“He needs to earn an advantage,” said Georgiana.

“But isn’t that what he thinks he’s done?” said Darcy. “He’s maneuvered me into making this happen for him. That’s a kind of earning, I believe. It’s earned through scheming and trickery.”

“Which only serves to support his low opinion of himself,” said Georgiana. “We need to make him believe that, first of all, having Lydia as his wife is a prized position, something that he cannot simply have, but that he must work for. And then, that he has done something truly noble to deserve whatever money you settle on him, Fitz.”

“I thought we weren’t giving him money?” said Darcy.

“Oh, well, we have money,” said Georgiana. “How else are we going to solve problems?”

MRS. YOUNGE BLINKED several times, her brow furrowed. “I think I’ve gotten lost in all that. It’s quite convoluted, isn’t it?”

“Well, don’t worry about that,” said Mr. Darcy. “I think the important thing we’re trying to ascertain before we attempt to put it into motion is who it is we should pretend he needs to rescue. Do you want him, Mrs. Younge?”

“I don’t need rescuing,” said Mrs. Younge. “He wouldn’t do anything at all to secure me, anyway. Besides, I thought the reason you were here was because of that girl he’s dragged here. If he married me, how would it solve anything?”

“Oh, we have a lot of ideas for that,” said Georgiana. “It’s ever so boring on a long carriage ride from Derbyshire, and we got very creative. We have about seven different contingency plans, if necessary.”

“I think,” said Mrs. Younge, “you seem to have gotten creative for the sake of creativity. If you think to put Georgie in a crucible to see if he will rise to the occasion, I can assure you, he will not. I have been disappointed every time I have expected anything at all from him, even the bare minimum of human decency.”

“So, you don’t want him?” said Mr. Darcy.

“I do not,” said Mrs. Younge. “Honestly, I think I used him as an excuse. I was never quite cut out for being a governess. Your world, with all its propriety and rules, it’s a bit too stifling for me. I’m happier here, in a more permissive environment. Furthermore, owning a lodging house is a great deal more lucrative than being a governess. I am much happier where I am than where I used to be. Don’t worry over me, if you please.”

“All right, then,” said Mr. Darcy. “That settles that.”

The three each gave the others a nod and a smile.

“Stage two of the plan!” said Georgiana, “commences now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

MR. GEORGE WICKHAM did like Lydia Bennet. He liked her rather more than he'd liked her sister. Elizabeth had been fun—well, funny, he supposed. But Lydia was like him in a way that Elizabeth never was. Wickham and Lydia were cut from the same cloth in a number of ways. They were adventurers. They liked to be wild, to have the wind in their hair, the wide world ahead of them. They liked to take risks. They liked feeling alive.

Lots of people wouldn't understand it, the call to danger, he supposed, but he and Lydia, they understood each other.

It was a pity he was going to have to sneak out in the middle of the night and abandon her tonight. He didn't know what would become of her, and there was at least a nominal chance he could have gotten a child on her, which filled him with a kind of dread that insisted he must run and also made him feel a kind of awful guilt. He shouldn't go.

He would miss her.

Ah, well, there was really nothing for it, that was the cold truth of the matter.

Currently, she was at the table, rereading a gossip news sheet that had been left behind at their luncheon table and sipping at some port—they had both been too often drunk during this entire enterprise, really. There had been a dearth of clear thinking on either of their parts. He liked to blame her equally, even though she was too young and too silly to really be blamed. Whatever the case, it was all terrible, and that was

that.

He was sitting on the bed in the room at Amelia's boardinghouse, with his own glass of port, thinking about how best to make his escape that night. He must not wake Lydia, of course, that was imperative. He was debating on whether he wanted to have her again that night. On the one hand, he definitely did, on the other, it would make him sleepy, and then he might drift off, sleep too long, and miss his chance to get away.

There was a knock at the door.

He wasn't expecting anyone. "Who's there?"

"Open up," said the voice on the other end, and he stood up in an ecstasy of relief. God in heaven, it had actually happened. Darcy had come. He had despaired of the man coming at all. He had hoped and then realized he was idiotic and then given up entirely and decided to escape and seek his luck elsewhere.

Delighted, Wickham crossed the room and flung open the door. "Fitzwilliam."

"Georgie," said Darcy, but he wasn't alone. He had his wife and his sister with him. What was the man thinking?

Darcy swept into the room. "There. Good, you're here. Come along, then, Miss Bennet."

Lydia looked up, furrowing her brow. "Come along? To where? I'm here, with Georgie. We're getting married."

"Are you," Elizabeth said. It wasn't really a question.

Lydia glanced at Wickham, as if waiting for him to confirm it.

He didn't.

Lydia sighed, rolling her eyes. "Well, at some point, anyway. I'm certainly not leaving. I have to get married one way or the other."

"You do," said Elizabeth. "But we've taken care of that."

"Yes," said Darcy. "It's all settled. We have someone in mind for you. His name is Grayson."

"Grayson," said Wickham, affronted. "In Lambton, that Grayson? With the dogs?"

"Oh, you know him," said Darcy.

"You saw my dogs, I suppose?" said Elizabeth.

Wickham had seen her dogs. He had thought they seemed rather too much like mutts for the mistress of Pemberley, but he hadn't said anything.

"Mr. Grayson insists we stole those dogs from him," said Elizabeth.

"It's all entirely untrue, but since he's so upset, this situation presented itself, and we're all very pleased with how it's worked out," said Mr. Darcy.

"I'm not marrying anyone except Mr. Wickham," said Lydia hotly. "Tell them, Georgie."

"I'm confused," said Wickham. "Grayson won't want her, not after I've..." He cleared his throat. "There's no marrying her to someone else. Everyone knows she

ran off with me. It won't work."

"Well," said Georgiana, smiling brightly at him, "we had an idea about that, you see. You remember how Fitz and Lizzy were in a carriage accident?"

"You two, you could have been in a carriage accident," said Elizabeth. "Somewhere remote, of course. And then, the story will be that Grayson found you both, and rescued you from bandits or highwaymen or something, and Lydia was so swept up in his gallantry, she fell in love with him."

"No," said Wickham. "That's preposterous. No one would believe that. And why would Grayson want to marry her?"

"Excuse me?" said Lydia, glaring at him. "I am a very enticing prospective wife."

Wickham did not like the idea of Grayson on her, he found. Not at all.

"She's the daughter of a gentleman. It will be a step up for Grayson," said Darcy. "Would be a step up for you, too, I suppose, but you don't want to marry her."

"Why would you give her to Grayson?" said Wickham.

"Well, Grayson wants us to pay for the dogs," said Elizabeth. "And this way, he'll forgive the debt."

"But you can pay him," said Wickham.

"Yes, but this also saves the Bennet family reputation," said Darcy.

"No one will believe there have been two carriage accidents for both of the daughters," said Wickham. "It's preposterous."

“That’s exactly why people will believe it,” said Georgiana. “The sort of coincidence that’s just too strange not to believe. As if it’s divine providence. People will love the story. They’ll absolutely never question Lydia’s reputation. And all will be well.”

“So, come along, Lydia,” said Elizabeth.

Lydia shook her head. “No, I shan’t. I absolutely shall not do such a thing. Georgie, tell them.”

Wickham seethed. “You’re not taking her.”

“I suppose if you could convince Grayson not to marry her, you could marry her instead,” said Mr. Darcy. “He’s in town, in fact. We know he’s going to be at Gustav’s Tavern later tonight. We’ll take Lydia there to meet him tomorrow.”

“How would I convince him of anything?” said Wickham.

“I don’t know,” said Georgiana. “You’re good at convincing people of things.”

“He’d want money,” said Wickham. “I don’t have any.”

“It seems to me you’re good at finding ways to get money, actually,” said Elizabeth with a shrug. “Always trickery, always for selfish reasons, of course. You wouldn’t be capable of doing something to take care of another person or to prove your love or to show you were worthy of the hand of my younger sister.”

“She’s practically my niece,” said Mr. Darcy. “I would definitely never let you marry her.”

Lydia glared at him. “Georgie.”

He furrowed his brow.

“Georgie!” said Lydia again, very offended. “You don’t want me at all.”

“I can’t do anything about it, Lydia,” he muttered.

“Yes, you’re so very pitiful,” said Georgiana with a sigh.

“Come with us now, Lydia,” said Elizabeth.

“No,” said Lydia, but when they came over to take her by the hands, she didn’t struggle as they led her out. Instead, she simply looked over her shoulder at him, her gaze begging him to say something, to do something.

And then, they were gone.

He sat down heavily at the chair where she’d been sitting, glanced down at the gossip sheet, and began drinking the port she’d left behind.

It was better, he told himself. He’d wanted rid of her, after all. It was exactly as he wanted things.

But he left the room after about twenty minutes and he went down to a tavern he sometimes frequented, where he knew he could get in on a card game on credit. It was a risky move. He didn’t have many lines of credit left. And he was as wont to lose as to win when it came to gambling.

But... he didn’t entirely know why that it was different this time. He found himself making different choices than he usually would have made. He wasn’t playing for the sensation, for the feeling of risk and possible excitement. He was playing for Lydia. And now that Lydia had been taken from him, he was angry about it.

When he left, some hours later, it was with a full purse.

He didn't even debate going elsewhere with it. He wasn't even tempted to drink it away or to book a passage to the continent or any number of other things he'd usually be interested in doing.

Instead, he went directly to Gustav's Tavern and inquired after Mr. Grayson.

He was directed to a darkened corner, where a man sat in a hooded cloak, the hood entirely obscuring his face.

The man was not Grayson. Wickham knew that. It had been some time since he'd seen Grayson, but he would know this regardless. However, there was something strangely familiar about the man, he thought.

"I'm looking for Mr. Grayson," said Wickham.

"You can speak to me," came a gruff voice from under the hood.

"It's concerning a woman he wishes to marry," said Wickham.

"I can speak for Mr. Grayson on that matter."

"Can you?"

"I can." Something about the man's voice. Wickham didn't know why it seemed familiar. "I am here, in fact, to speak to the master of Pemberley about the very matter."

"Look, Grayson won't wish to marry her. She's likely gone with another man's child."

The man with the hood only grunted.

“He’s accepting her in lieu of some debt for dogs,” said Wickham. “But those dogs, I’ve seen them, and they can’t be worth quite that much.” He named instead, an amount he thought the dogs were worth. “I have that much here.”

“Do you?”

“Well, Mr. Grayson could take the money, and he could find himself free from a wife he wouldn’t want anyway. Seems to me it’s a winning situation for Grayson.”

“Hmm,” said the man in the hood.

“I have more,” said Wickham, sighing, taking out the purse. “Double that much, in fact. Grayson can have it all.”

“I see,” said the man in the hood.

Wickham waited.

The man in the hood shrugged.

“You tell Grayson whatever you like. Skim money off the top if you want. But you keep him from marrying Lydia Bennet. Do we have a deal?”

“Well, if the girl is really gone with another man’s child, I suppose you did Grayson a service keeping him off her,” said the man, holding out his hand. “Give me the coin.”

Wickham felt defeated, because if that was the way of it, he’d spent money when all he’d needed to do was, well, spend in the girl. But he’d gotten the money to free her, hadn’t he? He handed the purse over.

“Pleasure doing business with you,” said the man with the hood, dismissing him.

“Wait,” said Wickham. “What proof do I have that Grayson won’t go after Lydia?”

“He simply won’t be there.”

“But I don’t know where she is.”

“They’ll bring her here tomorrow,” said the man in the hood. “I was meant to take her from this very table. You can arrive and be here instead.”

Wickham nodded. “All right.”

He retreated, and he might have gone back to the boardinghouse, but he was too nervous to do so, frightened that the man in the hood would somehow see Darcy and Lydia before he did. He spent the night walking round the building. When the tavern opened for breakfast, he was inside, sitting at the table, waiting.

He might have dozed a bit, he supposed. But he was awake when Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Lydia all came in and stood over his table.

“Where’s Grayson?” said Darcy.

“Got rid of him,” said Wickham. “You’ll marry her to me, and that’s that.”

“Oh, Georgie, I knew you hadn’t abandoned me,” said Lydia.

“Well, then,” said Georgiana. “This seems to have worked out well.”

“There is the fact that I don’t know how exactly we’re going to live,” said Wickham.

Mr. Darcy sighed. “You predicted that, too, Gigi.”

“He is nothing if not predictable,” said Georgiana.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

MR. DARCY HAD been the man in the hood. He was gratified that he could at least use the money that Wickham had given him towards whatever money he was giving the couple so that they could be settled.

But he agreed to giving Wickham more money than he would have liked. He bought Wickham's commission, too, so he could remain on at the regiment—after deserting twice. Really, Darcy didn't understand why they kept taking him back.

He and Elizabeth decided to stay out of the business.

The official story was, as had been suggested by them, that Lydia and Wickham had been in a carriage accident and therefore been stymied in their attempt to get married. Now, however, the nuptials were completed, and the news was conveyed to the Bennets, all of whom were quite pleased to have it settled.

Mr. and Mrs. Darcy invited the family to their London town house to dine with the newly wedded couple. Wickham seemed to dote on Lydia in a way that he hadn't before.

The Darcys were unsure if Georgiana's theory would prove correct, if such a gesture would produce lasting change in Mr. Wickham. It did seem to mean that he was markedly happier in his marriage than they might have predicted. Maybe he would be a better man henceforth.

If such a thing didn't prove true, however, neither of them would really be surprised.

The family dinner was quite an experience, for Elizabeth had often felt embarrassed by her family when she was in Mr. Darcy's presence, but this time, she didn't worry. He would not reject her, no matter what her family did or said.

They were going to be better now, because they were going to communicate and everything was going to go much easier from now on.

She firmly believed this, and it did seem to be true thus far. Everything was going much better than it might have been even a few months ago, and neither of them were nearly as worried as they had been hitherto.

Anyway, everyone was there, with the exception of Jane, who was married now, and Elizabeth had not been there for the wedding. She realized now that there was no barrier to her having gone. If she had spoken of it to her husband, he would have been sure to see to it for her.

She had already been given free rein with many of her husband's resources since they were communicating better, anyway. She now knew that she was allowed to command the carriage herself (of course she should have known this already, but it was better to hear it from her husband's own mouth) and that she was allowed to dictate her own comings and goings. Her husband had been a bit horrified to think she was considering herself his "prisoner" as he had termed it. Elizabeth, you are the lady of the house. You go where you must. It is up to you, not me.

It was all much improved, though she was saddened to have missed Jane's wedding.

If it could have gone differently, it would have, but it hadn't. Now, everything was settled.

But then, that night, the night that her parents came to dine, she had a dream, like the dreams she'd had before Mr. Darcy had come to propose marriage.

She and Mr. Darcy were snug in each other's arms, sleeping together in his bed in the house in town, but in her dream, they were back outside of that burning house. In her dream, Mr. Darcy was shot dead. He lay there on the ground, with the house smoking behind them, and those men leered at her and they laughed and they put the barrel of the rifle under her chin and—

She woke up gasping, her heart pounding, but nonetheless safe, here with her husband, who was very much alive.

“Lizzy?” he said sleepily. “What is it?”

“Only a dream,” she whispered, burrowing into him. “Nothing at all, my darling.” But she put her fingers to his chest, seeking out the scar the bullet had made. She knew it was there, obviously, but until this point, she had never touched it, and they had never acknowledged it. Of course, when they weren't wearing clothes, they had not been wont to speak overmuch.

She trailed her fingers back and forth over it. She made little whorls around it with the tip of her finger.

“That tickles,” he yawned.

She let her fingers come to rest there.

He sighed and his breath went even again. He had fallen back to sleep.

THE DREAMS WERE back.

They did not happen exactly often, however, maybe once every several weeks, but they began to occur with a certain frequency. The second or third time she dreamt of it, she told Mr. Darcy what she had been dreaming of, and he told her that he had

dreams like that all the time.

“Sometimes, they’re dreadful,” he said. “Sometimes I lie there, bleeding out, watching them do awful things to you. Sometimes, I triumph in some way. I wrench the pistol out of that man’s hand and turn it on them and we make an escape. I think it’s quite normal to have dreams about these sorts of things. It’s the body’s way of working it out of us, perhaps. It’s only dreams.”

Yes, she thought, but she had thought these dreams were over since she was married to him. She had thought everything was now sorted and safe.

She worried about the dreams. Why had they come about now? Was there any significance to it? Should she try to stop them? If so, should she address the fears in the dreams or attempt to bury them?

She would sit outside, staring out at the fields of Pemberley, as the dogs ran and gamboled and sometimes came to put their dear, wet little noses into her lap, and worry.

They had not gone straight back to Pemberley from London, however. They had lingered in the area for a time, making several day trips to Hertfordshire, once to spend the afternoon with her parents and younger sisters—though only Mary and Kitty were now still at home—and three or four times to Netherfield, to spend time with the newly married Bingleys. There were plans for Jane and her husband to come and spend some time in Derbyshire by and by as well.

But now, they were home again, and she was back with her dear, sweet dogs and the summer days were growing shorter.

One day, during a long stretch of worrying, she realized that she had thought that the dreams had originally been chased away by Mr. Darcy’s proposal. However, what if

they'd been chased away by her worry over whether or not Mr. Darcy loved her? The dreams had been a manifestation of fear and anguish. The fear and anguish hadn't gone away. It had simply changed form.

Had she felt such fear and anguish before the carriage accident?

She thought about it, and she didn't think that she had, not in this way, this unending and somewhat oppressive way, where she must go through and through a thing, turning it this way and that, trying to nail it down and come to some conclusion about it.

But why would the carriage accident have wrought this change in her?

She thought of that moment, in which she'd realized that she was out of touch with her body—it was crying, but she was detached from herself in another way—had something gotten out of sync within her?

Perhaps she'd simply touched something, a dark something. A veneer on the world had been peeled away for her, and she had experienced the truth about her existence intimately. It was fragile. Her life could be snuffed out in a moment.

Danger was lurking in that way, lurking all over, ready to pounce on her. She knew it was there before, she supposed, in an abstract way, but now it had shape and form. Now, it was real.

She'd worried about small, personal things recently, things about her own being. Did she love Mr. Darcy? Were her lady parts deformed and mannish? Perhaps some part of her had wished to contain the fear, to bring it inside her, so that she could tease it out and untangle it, make it tame.

But it wasn't that way, was it?

Would she always worry like this? Would she ever be able to go back to the carefree woman she'd been before, the one who dearly loved to laugh?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

AUTUMN WHISPERED INTO Derbyshire with the scent of mulled wine and woodsmoke. The dogs still capered in the afternoons, but now, often the mornings were too cold for either Elizabeth or the dogs to go out. Cleo especially went out to do her business and then ran back to the door, anxiously wagging her tail to be let back into the warmth.

There were still jars and jars of blackberry jam, made up at the height of the summer, but outside, the leaves curled and changed colors and everything seemed to grow dimmer, as if the world itself were turning down an oil lamp and ready to go down for a long night's sleep.

Her bleeding was late.

She hadn't noticed it herself, which wasn't so strange, really. She had never been in the habit of counting the days until its arrival. It almost always caught her by surprise.

It was Mr. Darcy who mentioned it. They were taking off their clothes to get in bed together one night, in his room. They always slept in the same bed. As the months had passed, the feverishness of their early joining had waned, much like the autumn, but it seemed right to Elizabeth in a way she couldn't quite describe.

Perhaps they'd been so desperate to be connected because they were terrified of losing the other one. Perhaps, back in that horrible time, when they had faced down the bandits and Mr. Darcy's wound and the cold nights in that abandoned house, they had forged some bond. Perhaps they wouldn't quite feel safe without the other there.

Perhaps joining their physical bodies so frantically had been some attempt to reassure themselves the other one was still there.

It still happened, and with frequency, but not every night and not every morning. It wasn't necessary anymore, because they were certain of each other. It was too frantic a pace to keep up forever, she thought, that kind of frenzied passion. This was better, stronger, warmer, like a fire built up in a fireplace burning strongly instead of the crazed sparks of a blaze trying to catch.

"Is your bleeding late?" he said, sitting down on the bed and running a hand over his jaw. He looked over at her with dreamy eyes, as if she were the most perfect and beautiful thing in his entire world, and she felt consumed by that gaze, awash in his love.

"Is it? I'm afraid I've never been good at keeping track," she said, sitting down on the opposite side of the bed.

"I think it is," he said.

She gave him a little smile. "Well, there we go. Heir and spare, and then I shall be off to bed all the rakes in London."

He snorted, pulling aside the covers. "You're never going to let me forget that I said that."

"I am," she said, climbing into bed. "I'm only gently teasing, Fitzwilliam."

"Do I tease you about thinking your clitoris was somehow a prick?"

"Well, that would be cruel," she said.

He gave her a pointed look.

“Oh, it is not the same thing,” she said.

He pulled the covers to his chin, very prim.

“Is it the same thing?” She rolled onto her side, worried now. “Am I teasing you in a way that makes you feel horrible? I’m so sorry, Fitzwilliam. I never meant—”

“No, no, I was teasing you,” he said with a gentle smile.

“Well, it’s not nice to make fun of a lady when she’s carrying your child.”

He grinned. “Do you think you really might be? Carrying my child?” His voice lilted around the words, as if they filled him with wonder.

“I hope so,” she breathed.

And then they made love.

And now, she waited, and her bleeding didn’t come.

The days grew colder and colder, and the dogs began to shiver around her skirts when she walked with them.

One afternoon, she and Mr. Darcy were walking together through the grounds, and everything was looking decidedly brown and drab. Cleo was whining at her husband’s fingers. She wanted him to pick her up, something he had done often when she was a puppy.

“No, no, Miss Cleo,” Mr. Darcy murmured to her, scratching the top of her head. “You are far too big for such things these days.”

Then a shot rang out through the air and his face went white and he went entirely still.

Her heart stopped.

She seized his hand and her heart pounded again, and they looked into each other's eyes and their breath came in noisy gasps, in the same rhythm. She pulled his hand into both of hers and tugged it against her chest, between her breasts.

"Likely some farmer chasing foxes out of a hen house," he said breathlessly.

"Yes, of course," she said. She had grown up in the country. The sound of a gun being fired was hardly a strange sound to her, and yet... and yet...

They hurried back to the house anyway, the dogs all around them, yipping at their heels as if they had caught their anxiety.

There was more lovemaking, then, this time in the afternoon for the first time in a very long time. This time there was something desperate about the way they moved against each other. He was over her, his gaze holding hers all the time, saying her name again and again, like a chant to ward something off, to ward off that darkness.

But then, as the winter stole over the countryside, and they began their plans to go back to town for Georgiana's season, she began to wonder if she didn't have it wrong.

Her joining with her husband, it wasn't like the seasons, and this part now, it wasn't autumn or even winter. It wasn't dimming and it wasn't losing its passion. Rather, they had come together in a clash of chaos and pain and fear. And now, they were settling into safety together. Things were coming together into strength and steadiness. This was the way things were supposed to be. This was home.

She was sure her belly was curving a bit. She placed her hands on it in the mornings before Harmony dressed her for breakfast and she whispered good morning to the little one who must be growing there, who was coming to complete them in a way

that was exactly right, that was closing a circle, that was mending all the ragged places and making them smooth.

* * *

Thank you for reading!!