

The Change Of Series

A Change OF Heart



A Pride and Prejudice Variation

Shana Granderson

— A LADY —

A Change of Heart
The 2nd Book in The Change Of
Series

A Pride & Prejudice Variation

By Shana Granderson, A Lady

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Dedication

This book, like all that I write, is dedicated to the love of my life, the holder of my heart. You are my one and only and you complete me. You make it all worthwhile and my world revolves around you. Until we reconnected, I had stopped believing in miracles, but now I most certainly do, you are my miracle.

Acknowledgement

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My undying love and appreciation to Jane Austen for her incredible literary masterpieces is more than can be expressed adequately here. I also thank all of the JAFF readers who make writing these stories a pleasure.

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Introduction

In this the 2nd book in the Change Of Series, the story begins with no prologue (my first ever) around the time Bingley leases Netherfield Park. As in canon, he is joined by his two sisters, Hurst, and Darcy at his estate.

Some of the characters are similar to how they are in canon, while others start off differently, even before anyone has a change of heart. From early on we see the differences some changes of heart (some bigger than others) cause to the direction of the story.

As the tale unfolds we will see if Darcy is still his arrogant, sometimes disdainful, self. Will Elizabeth be quick to prejudice as we know she can be? Will Caroline Bingley put on a typical performance or will she too have a change of heart?

Will Collins be the sycophantic, pompous, dunderhead we have all come to love to hate? Who will he choose to as the partner of his future life with the great honour of his proposals? What of our resident snake in the grass Wickham? Will he be free to leave a path of destruction behind him and will Darcy leave him be to protect his beloved sister's reputation? Is it possible his black heart will undergo a change?

We will see if these changes of heart help or hurt the romances we so like to see bloom in JAFF stories. Will those who deserve it achieve their HEA, and will evil and ill intention fail or triumph?

Join me to see the answers to these and many other burning questions.

Chapter 1

Fitzwilliam Darcy was at a local assembly, the very last place he wanted to be. No, if he were honest with himself, it would be the second to last place. The distinction of being the absolute last place belonged to remaining at his friend's leased estate *alone* with only Bingley's youngest sister, Miss Caroline Bingley, for company.

As he surveyed the locals, all were staring at the Netherfield Park party to the extent they had ceased dancing when he, along with the two Bingleys and two Hursts, entered the room. Granted, they were late thanks to Miss Bingley who still clung to her belief it was acceptable to be, as she called it, *fashionably late*.

Darcy was sure he was being sized up like he was at any event he attended in London as a potential husband for some insipid woman of large dowry and no sense. In this little market town of Meryton he was sure the large dowry was lacking, but the rest held true.

How he wished his cousin Richard Fitzwilliam, a Colonel in the Royal Dragoons and co-guardian of his much younger sister, Georgiana Darcy, would have been granted leave from his regiment and able to accompany him into Hertfordshire.

Richard was an amiable man, similar to Bingley, but unlike Bingley, he was not at all capricious. Had he joined Darcy, he would have been able to deflect the cloying attention of Miss Bingley away from himself. His cousin was adept at redirecting the woman's fake fawning over Giana in London.

As annoying as Miss Bingley was, Darcy valued his friendship with Bingley too highly to allow his sister to cause a break between them.



Notwithstanding his father had been active in trade, Bingley had become one of Darcy's best friends after the two

met in Darcy's final year at Cambridge, which was Bingley's first year.

At first, Darcy had kept his distance knowing of the family being in trade. They had met while sparring at the fencing club at university. Darcy had been in the highest echelon of fencers, and strangely enough, so was Bingley. He had always had a natural flair for the sport which had been developed with training.

Over the months a most unlikely, yet strong friendship had grown. Where Darcy assisted Bingley with his scholastic endeavours, the latter smoothed the former's way in social situations.

After he graduated, Darcy dealt with the death of his father and then less than a year later, the Bingleys buried both of their parents who had been murdered by highwaymen in Yorkshire.

Both of the men being orphans brought Darcy and Bingley much closer together as friends. The only drawback was Bingley's sisters and brother-in-law. Bingley had two sisters. Louisa, three years his senior and married to Harold Hurst, the heir to a rather minor estate in Surrey. Three years younger than Bingley was the youngest, and most spoilt in the family, Miss Caroline Bingley.

The sisters thought themselves far higher in society than they were. At least when Louisa married Mr. Hurst, she was elevated to the rank of gentlewoman, even if only a member of the third circle.

The younger sister thought she was as high as a duchess and behaved in the same manner. She had set her cap for Darcy the first time Bingley introduced his friend to his family. Darcy had never done anything to encourage Miss Bingley, but that had not deterred her from her course.

Only his friendship with Bingley had stayed him from giving the woman the cut direct. She always inserted herself whenever he invited Bingley to one of his homes. It was the reason he had never invited Bingley to Pemberley after the first time and why he hardly ever invited his friend to Darcy

House. More often than not they met at one of their clubs—Bingley had only gained membership thanks to Darcy's sponsorship—in London, a place Miss Bingley could not enter.

In his will, Bingley's father had recommended he purchase an estate. He left his son over a hundred thousand pounds for that purpose, while settling twenty thousand pounds on each of his two daughters in the way of a dowry.

That had led Bingley to Netherfield Park near Meryton in Hertfordshire. He had been willing to jump in and purchase an estate until Darcy had recommended leasing first. Bingley's man of business had found the estate no more than twenty miles from London.

The two friends had viewed the estate and that same day Bingley, being somewhat precipitous at times, signed the lease at the office of Mr. Frank Philips in Meryton. The solicitor was the unknown owner's local agent.

His promise to assist Bingley, even with Miss Bingley installed as the mistress of the estate, had brought Darcy to the area, and the assembly on this evening in November 1810.



As he stood looking down on the locals, Darcy could only pray Giana was doing better. He had almost broken his word to Bingley and remained in London to be close to his much younger—by twelve years—sister.

Aunt Elaine, Richard's mother, the Countess of Matlock, had thought it was a better idea for Giana to remain at Matlock House with her and her slightly older cousin, Tiffany. In Lady Matlock's opinion, his sister had a better chance of beginning to recover without him constantly hovering over her. Hence she had convinced her nephew to join his friend.

The almost disaster from which he had rescued Giana—her full name was Georgiana—was a contributing factor to his bad mood and desire not to be at the ball. He and his sister

were the only ones who remained alive bearing the name Darcy.

Their mother had passed away before Giana's fifth birthday and five years ago their father, Robert Darcy, who had never recovered from the loss of his beloved Anne, had joined her in heaven.



He could not but feel guilt over Giana's brush with ruin. Yes, Richard was a co-guardian, but his father had trusted him, and it was he who had made so many errors. He was the one who had employed Mrs. Younge without verifying her characters while Richard had been away on a training assignment. It was he who had not told his little sister the truth about the miscreant George Wickham thus leaving her defenceless when he had imposed himself on her in Ramsgate. Richard had advocated against Darcy's assertion he was only protecting Giana's sensibilities. Richard had been proved right.

The companion had suggested a summer trip to the Darcys' house in Ramsgate so her charge could draw some seascapes and additionally the sea air would be healthy for Miss Darcy.

Her two guardians had escorted their ward and her companion along with several other servants to the house. They had remained for a sennight before one had to return to his regiment and the other to business concerns in London.

Duty had made it so Richard would have to remain in London, but Darcy had planned to join Giana in just over three weeks at the end of July. As it happened his feelings of missing his sister spurred Darcy to accelerate the schedule of his business so he had been able to depart for Ramsgate almost ten days earlier than had been planned.

He would never forget the feeling of trepidation he had felt when he arrived at his house on Bay Street in Ramsgate. There had been no footman on duty at the front door. The door had been unlocked and on entry he saw Mrs. Younge gleefully watching something through the drawing room door which was slightly cracked open.

His foot had caused a floorboard to creak and the companion had whirled around. She had turned white on seeing him and promptly fainted. The feeling of unease turned to one of grave concern.

Darcy had flung the door open causing it to crash against the wall startling his sister and the man sitting far too close to her while he had been kissing her hand. On seeing him, Giana had jumped up pulling her hand away guiltily. The man had turned and looked at him with fear. It was none other than the libertine George Wickham.

Wickham had been about to speak when Darcy had crashed his fist into the profligate wastrel's face. The blow had sent Wickham crashing to the floor blood running freely from his obviously broken nose.

By now Giana had been sobbing, tears flowing freely. Wickham had used his handkerchief to wipe away some of the blood asking Darcy why he would hit his sister's fiancé in that manner.

When he was informed her dowry of thirty thousand pounds would be forfeit as permission had not been obtained from both guardians, Wickham had made derogatory comments about his supposed fiancée, which had earned him another blow from Darcy.

Thompson, one of the footmen who had accompanied the master to Ramsgate took the whimpering man by his collar and dragged him towards the door. Darcy had stopped his man in the entrance hall and warned both Wickham and Mrs. Younge—who had been given ten minutes to vacate his house—that Colonel Fitzwilliam would be sent to deal with the former, and he would have the latter arrested for fraud if either should breathe word to anyone about what had occurred.

Wickham was more afraid of Richard Fitzwilliam than any other man so he had agreed and run like a thief in the night. Mrs. Younge had slunk away as well.

Giana had shared that her plan was to elope with George Wickham three days hence. Realising she had been duped and how wrong her desire to elope was, as well as to

allow him to court her without William and Richard's permission, she lost the confidence she had before Ramsgate and regressed much in her ability to face others.

On their return to London, Darcy had been thankful his aunt and uncle had not left Town yet. He had shared all with them and Richard, who took a few days' emergency leave. Richard had wanted to seek Wickham out and make him *disappear*, however, his father, Lord Reginald Fitzwilliam, the Earl of Matlock, his brother, Andrew, Viscount Hildale, and Darcy had all restrained him.

Unlike when he had looked for and employed the previous companion on his own, Aunt Elaine had assisted in finding Giana a new, and well vetted, companion. Mrs. Annesley, the new companion, was in her forties and was a kindly, sympathetic woman who was slowly breaking down pieces of the walls of protection Giana had erected around herself after Ramsgate.

His sister and her companion were now resident at Matlock House under the care of his aunt and uncle.



When Bingley told him of the assembly, he at first demurred. Miss Bingley then made it known she intended to remain at the estate as well, which prompted Darcy to choose to attend.

Darcy had only arrived a day prior so he had not been present when all of the men in the neighbourhood came to meet with Bingley. Thankfully, there were some matters of business which had not allowed him to travel with the Bingleys and Hursts on Monday past. Had he not a legitimate reason, as much as he abhorred any kind of deceit, he would have invented one so as not to have to travel in the same coach as Miss Bingley.

His mask slipped into place at the end of the current set as he watched a portly man, with a ruddy complexion and balding on the top of his head approach Bingley. Fitzwilliam Darcy was decidedly uncomfortable in company where he was not familiar with those present.

“Mr. Bingley, you are very welcome,” Sir William Lucas, who was the perpetual master of ceremonies at public events he attended in Meryton, said jovially as he offered a deep bow. “It is capital that you are here.” He noticed Darcy as the one member of the party who he had not met yet. “Would you introduce me to your friend, please?”

Darcy was about to object he was higher than this local man until he heard Bingley respond. “Sir William, it is my pleasure to present Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire to you. Darcy, Sir William Lucas of Lucas Lodge.”

Darcy returned the titled man’s bow. He correctly assumed he was a knight. *‘Even though I have noble relatives, I am only a gentleman farmer, so it was correct for him to request the introduction,’* Darcy told himself silently as he bowed.

“My Family,” Sir William inclined his head towards two ladies and two men around Darcy’s and Bingley’s ages, as well as a young lady. “Lady Lucas, Franklin, John, Charlotte and Maria...” Sir William introduced the members of the Netherfield Park party to his family.

“Miss Lucas, may I ask you to stand up with me for the next set,” Bingley requested. He was about to say more when his mouth flapped open like a beached carp.

Darcy saw the direction of his friend’s eyes. There stood an admittedly very pretty lady. She was just like Bingley preferred, tall, blond, blue eyed, and willowy. *‘His next angel, I am sure,’* Darcy thought to himself.

Sir William did not miss the man’s look either. “Allow me to present Mrs. Bennet and some of her daughters. “Mr. Bingley, Mr. Hurst, Mrs. Hurst, Mr. Darcy, and Miss Bingley, it is my pleasure to introduce you to Mrs. Frances Bennet, the Mistress of Longbourn, her eldest daughter, Miss Jane Bennet and her third daughter, Miss Mary Bennet. Mrs. Bennet, Miss Bennet, Miss Mary, those I named are the residents of Netherfield Park.” Sir William turned to Mrs. Bennet. “Where are Eliza, Kitty, and Lydia?”

“Lizzy was collected by Julian Goulding for the next set already. My darling Lydia and her sister are acquiring some refreshments,” Fanny Bennet averred. “Lydia,” she called far too loudly to be polite.

Before the girl arrived, with another following her, the Hursts and Miss Bingley took themselves in the direction of the refreshments. Miss Bingley had her nose high in the air as she walked as if there were bad smells all around her.

“Miss Bennet, do you have the set after this next one open? If so I would like to reserve it,” Bingley asked hopefully. She was one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen and hoped beyond hope all her dances were not already taken.

“I do Mr. Bingley. Thank you Sir; it is yours,” Jane Bennet accepted.

Mrs. Bennet who could never allow a single man to pass without her trying to match him with one of her daughters, was aware the handsome man from Derbyshire, dressed in very fine clothing, had asked no one to dance so far.

In her mind a single man of fortune was in want of a wife, and she had five daughters to dispose of to—hopefully—wealthy men. “Here is my most lively daughter. Do you dance Mr. Darcy because I am sure my Lydia would...”

“Not if I can help it,” Darcy bit out as he turned on his heel, and without another word skulked off towards Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley where he proceeded to ask a set of each.

“Well I never!” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed at the same volume she had called for Lydia. “What a rude, disagreeable man. Any man would be fortunate to dance with my darling Lydia.”



Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five Bennet sisters, who had turned twenty in March past, rather than join her mother and sisters, had been intercepted by Julian Goulding for the second set and had been standing with him and his

parents when Sir William had introduced her mother and some of her sisters to those residing at Netherfield Park.

She had seen the moment the man she assumed was Mr. Bingley took notice of her dearest sister, Jane. Like many before him, he had seemed to be instantly smitten.

Being a sketcher of characters, she decided the two who were obviously Mr. Bingley's sisters thought themselves far above the company, even though she was aware the family's money was derived directly from trade.

Given her favourite uncle, Edward Gardiner, her mother's younger brother and Uncle Philips, married to her aunt and mother's older sister, Hattie, were both in trade, it would have been hypocritical of her to judge them for their roots.

From the little she had seen, it seemed the overdressed sisters were doing everything they could to distance themselves from trade, the very thing which had purchased their wealth.

The taller of the two men was easily the most handsome man she had ever seen, even with the foreboding look on his noble mien. Her mother said something to the man. Whatever it was she said to him caused him to walk away while Mama was still speaking. He looked decidedly unhappy with whatever she had said to him.

Elizabeth did not miss when her mother had screeched for Lydia causing the latter to come to her side, with Kitty in tow. She could only assume Mama was trying to push a young girl who should be in the schoolroom at the tall man who, if she had to guess, was twice her youngest sister's age.

Of course her mother could not but expose the family to more ridicule as she flung rather loud and obnoxious comments at the retreating back of the handsome man.

The start of the second set saved Elizabeth from the additional mortification she was sure her mother would have engendered had the dance not been called.



As much as he did not want to dance with her, Darcy was stuck dancing with Miss Bingley for the first set he danced. Mrs. Hurst was to dance with her husband the next set, so he would do his duty as a guest and dance with her during the fourth set.

The set with Mrs. Hurst would be the last he would dance at the country assembly. If it was not judged rude not to stand up with the hostess of the house where he was being hosted, Darcy would have not asked Miss Bingley, with her overly applied scent, to dance. He did not object to the upcoming dance with Mrs. Hurst like he did the one he was trapped dancing with Miss Bingley since the older sister was married.

As he danced he heard talk of *five thousand a year* and *ten thousand a year* being bandied about by those at the ball. Why was it that any ball he attended his purported income was soon discussed, even when away from the *Ton* in Town.

He knew not, but all he needed was to survive the dance with Miss Bingley so he could have some solitude before the dance with Mrs. Hurst.

During the dance, Miss Bingley made snide and sneering comments about the area and its inhabitants. Darcy did not feel she needed his input so he remained silent willing the dance to end.

It finally did. Darcy led Miss Bingley to her sister and brother-in-law and then, before she could latch onto his arm, he gave a quick bow and walked away. With his mood even worse than when he arrived, thanks to having to suffer Miss Bingley's company, he found a corner of the room and hid himself away as best he could.

He did not see or care about those around him, and he certainly did not notice the petite, dark haired, emerald green-eyed young lady who took a seat right behind where he stood.

Chapter 2

Bingley was captivated by the angel with whom he was dancing. When the ball's third set commenced—his second—he had the pleasure of leading the gorgeous Miss Bennet to the floor.

He was completely lost when she bestowed the first of her smiles on him. She was everything a young lady should be. Miss Bennet was blond, blue eyed, tall, and willowy. Add to that she was very proper and demure. Even better, she was not like so many women Caroline pushed at him who uttered an unending stream of inanities which passed for conversation.

As they danced, Bingley could not help but notice his friend skulking in one of the corners of the room. He was well aware a ball was not Darcy's favourite pastime, and in particular he seemed out of sorts of late. Yet in Bingley's mind it was no reason to behave like a bear with a sore head in a neighbourhood where the Bingleys were attempting to establish themselves. When he asked Miss Bennet who the lady was, she indicated it was her next younger sister.

The first dance of the set ended and Bingley was aware he had a few minutes until the next one began. "Please excuse me Miss Bennet," Bingley requested as he bowed over the beauty's hand. "I need to go speak to my friend; I vow to return to you in time for the second dance of the set."

"You will find me here, Sir," Jane averred demurely.

As he walked Bingley noticed the Bennet sister he had not met, who his partner had pointed out to him, sitting just behind where Darcy was doing his best to blend in with the large potted shrub behind him.

Darcy saw his friend's approach, hoping Bingley would not importune him to dance, but he was sure it was a vain hope. He girded his loins for the coming confrontation.

Elizabeth had been watching Jane dance with pleasure. She had not missed the way Mr. Bingley was looking at her

Janey. It was a look she had observed not a few times before from other men on seeing Jane for the first time.

She was sitting the third set out by choice. Because of the scarcity of men due to the war with the little Corsican's army, by general agreement all the young ladies chose two sets to sit out so anyone who desired to dance would have a chance to do so. Her second set to sit out would be the sixth.

If Charlotte had not been engaged for this pair of dances, Elizabeth would have sat with her best friend—well best outside of Janey—rather than on her own as she was now.

Elizabeth's curiosity was aroused when she saw Mr. Bingley say something to Jane and then make his way over towards where his friend was standing—not two feet from where she was sitting. Thanks to the proximity and the fact neither man modulated his voice, she was able to hear every word clearly.

“Come Darcy,” Bingley began, “I must have you dance. I hate to see you standing about by yourself in this stupid manner. The next set will begin after this next dance. You had much better join the line.”

“I certainly shall not. You know how I detest it unless I am particularly acquainted with my partner. At such an assembly as this it would be insupportable. I have done my duty to Miss Bingley and am engaged to dance the set after the next with Mrs. Hurst. There is not another woman in the room with whom it would not be a punishment for me to stand up.”

‘Well, he must have peculiar tastes if there is not a woman outside of his own party he could not deign to dance with, not even Janey!’ Elizabeth thought to herself as she smiled at the man's ridiculous statement.

“I would not be so fastidious as you are,” cried Bingley, “for a kingdom! Upon my honour, I never met with so many pleasant girls in my life as I have this evening; and there are several of them who are uncommonly pretty.”

“*You* are dancing with the only handsome girl in the room,” said Mr. Darcy, looking at the eldest Miss Bennet.

'At least your judgement is not so very deficient,' Elizabeth agreed silently with the aloof man's estimation of her older sister.

"I agree, Miss Bennet is the most beautiful creature I ever beheld! But there is one of her sisters sitting down just behind you, who is very pretty, and I dare say very agreeable. Do let me ask my partner to introduce you."

As she had wanted to meet the extremely handsome man since he had entered the room with the rest of the Netherfield Park party, Elizabeth sat up straighter and pushed her shoulders back in anticipation of being gratified with an introduction.

"Which do you mean?" and turning round Darcy looked for a moment at the young lady sitting behind him. He seemingly caught her eye, turned back to face his friend, and coldly stated, "She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men. You had better return to your partner and enjoy her smiles, for you are wasting your time with me."

Bingley was shocked his friend had said something so ungentlemanly within the hearing of the woman. There was no more he could say as the dance was about to start and he would not leave the angel without her partner.

For his part, Darcy felt remorse for the words he had chosen to use. The truth was he had looked towards the young lady but had not seen her.

For the first few bars of the next dance, Elizabeth did not move. *'It is bad enough Mama always tells me I am nothing to Jane, but now this man who I have never met denigrates my looks as well! What an insufferably rude, arrogant, and prideful man he is! How can he give me consequence? He and his friends have no consequence in our neighbourhood. What a disagreeable and hateful man. He may be handsome on the outside, but he is ugly inside,'* Elizabeth told herself silently.

She stood and deliberately stopped in front of the man who had just slighted her. She looked him up and down with as much disdain as she could muster and then turned on her heel and with her head held high, cut him and walked to the other side of the assembly room where she would wait for Charlotte.

Darcy's blood froze in his veins. The woman he had just insulted stood in front of him, anger, hurt, and disdain aimed at him from the most beautiful emerald-green eyes he had ever seen.

Without a word, the woman who was obviously not intimidated by him in the least, turned on her heel, cut him, and stalked around to the opposite side of the room to where he stood. He thought back to the conversation he and Bingley had and realised neither of them lowered their voices, nor did they make sure no one was close enough to overhear them.

She must have heard! He looked to the empty chair where she had sat when he had turned to ostensibly evaluate the woman Bingley was putting forward as a partner and saw it was mere inches, a foot or two at best, from where he stood. He felt instant regret for his intemperate words. He knew he should apologise right away, but two things stopped him. The discomfort he felt talking to those he did not know and the fact he was Darcy of Pemberley. He was a member of the *Ton*, at the top of the first circle of society. Should he have to apologise to someone whose situation in life was obviously so very far below his own?



“Eliza, why do you look angry?” Charlotte asked when she joined her friend after dancing with James Purvis.

“You know the set you just danced was the first one I chose to sit out, do you not?” Charlotte nodded. “I was sitting opposite just next to that rude, insufferable man, Mr. Darcy when Mr. Bingley...” Elizabeth related what had occurred to her friend.

“He did not say that! Aside from you, anyone could have heard him as well. Surely he has more good sense than

that,” Charlotte surmised.

“A codfish would have behaved better I think,” Elizabeth replied, which caused both to laugh softly while looking across at the offending man from Derbyshire.

As uncomfortable as he was with making conversation with those with whom he was not familiar, knowing others were talking about him, and worse, laughing at him was something Darcy hated.

He watched as the one he insulted was joined by a taller and not nearly as pretty lady, and soon the two had their heads together. Now after truly looking at her he had to admit the one he slighted in that fashion was more than handsome enough to tempt him!

Darcy suspected he was the subject of their conversation and when they looked at him and laughed, he was certain he was right. That was when he heard the most bewitching sound. A tinkling laugh he had never heard before reached his ears above the hubbub of conversation in the ballroom.

He was almost sure the siren call was emanating from the lady about whom he had said the untrue words. On one hand, he hated being laughed at, while on the other, he would tolerate it if he was able to hear that wonderfully musical—like the tinkling of bells—laugh again.

Feelings of shame for his comments rather than just telling Bingley to desist importuning him to dance washed over Darcy. Regardless of their relative societal positions, he knew he should have apologised right away, but his feet were glued to the floor. He watched as the victim of his unwise words took to the dancefloor with a partner for the new set. He felt a pang of regret he had not asked Bingley to ask the sister he was dancing with to make the introductions. The Miss Bennet he was observing seemed to be very light on her feet and was, in his estimation, a very good dancer.

There was naught he could do about it now. To request an introduction and ask her to dance after his insult would only make him look capricious and more ridiculous.

A Darcy never looked absurd.



The set with Mrs. Hurst was much more uncomfortable than normal. It seemed his slight of who he now knew was Miss Elizabeth Bennet was known by everyone at the assembly.

What soon became rather evident by the looks of disdain he was receiving, in spite of his wealth and connections, he had fallen afoul of the locals by slighting one who seemed to be held in the highest esteem by all in the neighbourhood.

There was not open hostility, but what he felt was just short of that mark. All he could hope was Bingley, who was dancing a second set with the tall, blond Miss Bennet, would not have his standing in the area suffer.

He was here to supposedly assist Bingley, not hurt him. Questioning himself like this was something Darcy did not enjoy. He had done so after almost losing his sister and here he was again having to question his actions.

Bingley was well pleased he had been granted a second set by his angel. She was to sit out the next two dances after the one they were dancing. “Why do you *have* to sit out?” he enquired.

Miss Bennet explained why and *all* young ladies sat out two sets, just like her next younger sister had during the first set she had danced with him.

The pointed way Miss Bennet explained the reasons to him, Bingley was sure Darcy’s words were widely known among the residents of the neighbourhood. Notwithstanding his affability, Bingley was a rather modest man so he did not know how to address the issue with Miss Bennet. Instead, he said nothing hoping the issue would be forgot soon enough. Confronting Darcy was not something he felt up to right then. Bingley used to prefer peace and quiet to an argument.

After his set with Mrs. Hurst Darcy returned her to where her husband and younger sister were standing. It was

easy to note Hurst was already in his cups. All that was missing was a settee or chaise lounge for the man to stretch out on and fall asleep.

“We are of one mind about the savages in this neighbourhood,” Miss Bingley purred as soon as she grabbed Darcy’s arm possessively.

As he always had to, Darcy disengaged his arm from Miss Bingley’s talons and placed them behind his back and out of her reach. “I know not to what you refer, Miss Bingley,” Darcy responded. “These people may not be dressed for a soiree in London,” Darcy did not miss the look of triumph which Miss Bingley affected with what she thought was him agreeing with her. “However, for a country assembly, they are dressed appropriately. It is a mark of class that one knows how to dress to fit the occasion.” Not being sure if he was agreeing with her or censoring her, something she was loathe to consider as a possibility, Miss Bingley could not be happy with his reply.

“We had been told about the reported beauty of the Bennet sisters, yet you correctly called one of them barely tolerable,” Miss Bingley tittered into her hand and was joined in it by her sister.

“What I said should not have been said by a gentleman and no lady would think it well done,” Darcy stated. He turned and walked away leaving the sisters vastly dissatisfied.

She had been sure Mr. Darcy would agree with her, but for some reason, he had not been pleased with her witty comments. Caroline Bingley was determined she would be engaged to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, by hook or by crook, before they departed this benighted neighbourhood.

Mrs. Hurst saw her sister was out of sorts and made to placate her before she became too upset. “Caro, I am sure he was angry at having to be among these country mushrooms and his bad mood was not directed at you,” Mrs. Hurst soothed. “You know the two of you are of one mind on most things.”

“Yes, that is true. I thank you for reminding me, Louisa. All will be well and I will be the mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House soon enough,” Miss Bingley stated firmly.



“For that man to say such a thing about one of my daughters is not to be tolerated,” Fanny raged during the carriage ride back to Longbourn. “If I were not worried about your father being killed and us being thrown out of Longbourn into the hedgerows, I would insist your father call the man out. How dare he slight you in that way?”

Elizabeth bit her tongue to stop herself from reminding her mother she had said much worse on many occasions. She understood even though she was not her mother’s favourite daughter, in her mother’s eyes, no one else was allowed to denigrate any of her daughters.

“It is just as well you will not demand it,” Lydia added. “Although he does not wear a scarlet coat, he is tall, handsome, much younger than Papa, and looks much stronger.”

“When we are hurt, the bible says we should offer the other cheek,” Mary sermonised.

“Thank you Mary, we do not need your moralising at this moment,” Fanny dismissed her middle daughter as she was wont to do. She looked to her second daughter. “You are not missing anything by not being introduced to that rude, disagreeable man. I care not if he owns half of Derbyshire.”

“Mama, I can safely say I will never dance with that insufferably proud man. I have no interest in knowing one such as he.”

Even as she said it, Elizabeth felt the pain of disappointment. From the instant he had entered the assembly hall, she had been attracted by his noble mien and extreme handsomeness. She had hoped he would be as intelligent as he was good-looking so they would be able to discuss topics of mutual interest as intellectual equals.

Now she would never know as the man obviously wanted nothing to do with her. Had she not been attracted to him she would have allowed his words to wash over her like water off a duck's back.

Elizabeth could not explain why, but that knowledge saddened her. She decided then and there she would harden her heart against the man in order to protect that tender organ from being bruised by him again.

Chapter 3

Talk of the possible arrival of a militia regiment sent the two youngest Bennets into a frenzy of extolling their approbation for the possibility of officers in the neighbourhood. Lydia, with Kitty following her lead, was boasting to one and all how she would be the first to marry—and marry an officer she would.

Jane and Elizabeth were mortified at the crass behaviour of the youngest two Bennets and worse was rather than check them, their mother encouraged their behaviour. If she had believed it would have any sort of effect, Elizabeth would have applied to their father to take his youngest daughters in hand.

It was, however, a fool's errand. Unfortunately, Jane and Elizabeth well knew their father would dismiss their concerns with some sort of soliloquy about how silly Kitty and Lydia, and for that matter Mary too, were. All that would be achieved was a level of frustration for those making the request and once he had amused himself enough, their father would send them out of his study so he could return to his port and books.

“What a great pity,” Lydia whined, “we do not have a new gown to wear to Lucas Lodge this evening. Maria told me that Sir William has invited the officers who are here to look for a site for the encampment.”

“Lydia, you would look rather foolish overdressing for a simple dinner at Lucas Lodge,” Elizabeth volunteered.

“You know nothing on this subject, Lizzy!” Fanny snapped. “Lydia will attract all the officers with her liveliness and looks. Besides, have you not seen how elegantly Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley dressed when we saw them at Hays Park two nights past?”

“Yes, I saw how they were dressed,” Elizabeth sighed.

The ladies in question had been dressed for a soirée with nobles, not a family dinner in the country. Although Jane

found the sisters friendly, Elizabeth found them pretentious, supercilious, rude, and more apt to give offence than anything else.

The supercilious sisters, as Elizabeth had dubbed them privately—only Charlotte was told as she liked to laugh as much as Elizabeth—looked down their noses at everyone in the area, but for some reason, they seemed to find Jane’s company acceptable. As long as they did nothing to harm her older sister, Elizabeth would not tell Jane of her true opinion of the two.

She cared nothing for their opinions so even a snide remark heard from Miss Bingley regarding Elizabeth’s love of walking had not bothered her. What had disconcerted her was the arrogant, proud Mr. Darcy.

Elizabeth had caught the man staring at her in a manner she could not interpret more than once. Using the filter of his slight at the assembly, Elizabeth deduced the only reason he would look at her in that fashion was to bolster his expressed opinion and to find fault with her.

This opinion had been shared with both Jane and Charlotte. For whatever reason both had disagreed with her analysis of the looks from Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth could still hear Charlotte telling her no man spends so much time looking at a woman he disdains. The thoughts of Mr. Darcy were chased away by her mother’s excited utterings.

“It is time to make ready,” Fanny ordered her daughters. “Lizzy, please remind your father he is to be one of our party tonight.”

“Yes, Mama,” Elizabeth responded and made her way to the thick oak door which separated the study from the hallway. She knocked and entered when her father called out “Come.”

“Mama wanted to make sure you will be ready to depart for Lucas Lodge,” Elizabeth reminded her father.

“I suppose there is no getting out of it; after all, I did beg off going to the Gouldings. Your mother would not give

me a moment's peace should I do that again today," Bennet stated as he first placed a bookmark and then put the volume he was reading on his desk, ready for him to take up as soon as he returned home.

He had known William Lucas all his life and quite liked him. Bennet was not a misanthrope, but he was close to it. If he had his druthers, he would be left alone in his study to read the days away.

William Lucas, now Sir William, was rather amusing. He had been a merchant in Meryton and was the current holder of the honorary position of mayor of the town when the Monarchs had stopped in Meryton quite unexpectedly. As mayor, William Lucas had made an impromptu speech. It was very heavy on compliments for both the King and Queen which had, at the Queen's recommendation, earned the man a knighthood.

On his return from his investiture at St. James Palace in London, his former occupation as the owner of the general store in Meryton became disgusting to Sir William. He promptly sold the business and joined the ranks of the landed gentry when he purchased a small estate on Longbourn's western border.

In a good year, the estate, which Sir William renamed Lucas Lodge, had an income just below one thousand pounds. Most years it was around seven hundred pounds as compared to Longbourn's two thousand five hundred pounds per annum.

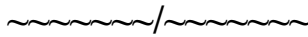
Bennet was not ashamed of the fact his two eldest daughters ran the estate far more than he did. Jane was primarily involved with the tenants while Lizzy was concerned with the actual running of Longbourn.

When an expenditure was needed, one of his daughters would inform him, he would sign off on the outlay of funds, and then return to his books and port. Unfortunately, as much as his brother Gardiner had pleaded with him, Bennet had never begun to lay aside an annual sum to invest for his daughters' futures.

He had intended to father a son and when they finally gave up trying with the birth of their fifth daughter some fifteen years past, it had seemed too late to begin saving. Bennet's conscience told him that was stuff and nonsense; the truth was he was far too indolent to have bothered.

On the other side of their finances, his wife was a spendthrift and for the same reason he would attend the dinner at Lucas Lodge, he would always give in when she wanted to spend more. The quicker he placated her, the sooner he was able to get back to his primary pursuit of reading with the occasional glass of port.

With a sigh, Bennet stood and followed his most clever, and favourite, daughter out of the study to get ready for the departure to Lucas Lodge.



“Why do we have to attend this puffed-up knight and give him consequence by our company?” Miss Bingley whinged not for the first time since the Bingley coach had departed Netherfield Park.

“Is he not a tradesman?” Mrs. Hurst asked in support of her younger and more forceful sister.

“Like us, he *used* to be in trade, but when he purchased his estate he became a gentleman,” Bingley informed his sisters. That very day, he had had a change of heart and decided it was time to stand up to his sisters.

Both coloured at their brother's reference to their own roots in trade, especially Miss Bingley who did not want Mr. Darcy to be reminded of the fact their money came from that distasteful endeavour.

“I understand his estate can hardly be called such,” Miss Bingley asserted to try and make Mr. Darcy forget about her brother's mention of their roots. “Do you not agree Mr. Darcy?”

“It is not the level of income, but the fact he is a landowner, which in turn makes him and his family part of the gentry,” Darcy drawled.

Miss Bingley turned and looked out of the window. That was not the reply she had been wanting to hear. She did not miss the implication those without an estate were not part of the gentry.



Given the party from Netherfield Park had been late at the few events they had attended since the assembly—beginning with that event—no one was surprised when they entered the house half an hour after the time guests had been invited to arrive.

Bennet leaned towards his second daughter. “You are quite correct, Lizzy. Those two dress like they are going to St. James, not a simple country get-together,” Bennet stated amusedly. He loved to laugh at the follies of others. “So that is *your* Mr. Darcy.”

“He is not my *anything*.” Elizabeth knew there was detectable asperity in her reply and her father would find a time to tease her. Before he could unleash his sardonic wit on her, she spied Charlotte and made her way towards her friend.

Charlotte was speaking with three of the officers Sir William had invited for the evening. “Eliza, may I introduce Colonel Forster, and Captains Carter and Sanderson. Colonel and Captains, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, the second of five Bennet sisters.”

Elizabeth curtsied to the men who bowed to her. “To what battalion does your regiment belong, Colonel?” Elizabeth enquired.

All three officers were surprised. “A lady who knows about battalions and regiments! How is that, Miss Elizabeth?” Captain Sanderson enquired.

“I am an avid reader, Captain. My father has a book on the army and the structure within,” Elizabeth explained.

“Very impressive young lady,” Forster allowed. “My regiment is part of the Derbyshire Militia.”

Elizabeth felt eyes on her and looked to the one side and did not miss Mr. Darcy standing close enough to hear

what was being said and as was his wont of late, staring at her to find fault.

She decided to have some sport with the haughty man from Derbyshire, so she chose a topic she was sure would be anathema to him. "If you want to ingratiate yourself with the local populace rather quickly, I suggest you hold a ball, Colonel," Elizabeth teased. "People hereabouts love a good ball, especially the residents of Netherfield Park."

"I will take your suggestion under advisement, Miss Elizabeth," the Colonel averred.

The three officers walked away to join some of the gentlemen which included Sir William and her father. As soon as the three were out of earshot, Elizabeth decided to have some more fun at Mr. Darcy's expense.

"What does Mr. Darcy mean by it, watching me and listening to my conversation with the Colonel and his officers?" Elizabeth asked Charlotte impertinently at a volume she knew the man would be able to hear. "I am sure he does it with a satirical eye."

"That question, Eliza my dear friend, is something only Mr. Darcy is able to answer," Charlotte stated. "You may ask him yourself as he is approaching us now."

"Did you not think, Mr. Darcy, that I expressed myself uncommonly well just now, when I was teasing Colonel Forster to give us a ball at Meryton?" Elizabeth challenged as Mr. Darcy drew level with her.

"You did, but then I am not surprised. A ball is something which always makes a lady excited," Darcy replied.

"Is that all you think ladies care about, Sir?" Elizabeth returned.

"That is not what I said, Madam," Darcy responded.

Charlotte could see her friend was about to say something she would regret. "Come Eliza, it is your turn to be teased now," Charlotte interjected. "I am going to open the instrument, and you know what follows."

“You are a very strange creature by way of a friend! Always wanting me to play and sing before anybody and everybody, even though you know I play very ill! If my vanity had taken a musical turn, you would have been invaluable; but as it is, I would rather not sit down before those who must be in the habit of hearing the very best performers.”

“Eliza, we both know you do not play ill, and your singing is capital,” Charlotte called Elizabeth out on her mischaracterisation of her musical abilities.

“Very well, if it must be so, it must.” Elizabeth turned to where Mr. Darcy was still standing, “There is a fine old saying, with which everybody here is of course familiar: Keep your breath to cool your porridge, and I shall keep mine to swell my song.”

She played a song without singing first and Darcy, thanks to his having heard Giana play the piece more than once, was aware of the mistakes, however, when she played, Miss Elizabeth infused the music with so much feeling it caused any mistakes to be forgot.

When she began to sing with a perfect mezzo soprano voice, Darcy could not remember hearing better. Not even at the many musicales he had attended in London had anyone who was not a professional singer come close to the sweet tones emanating from Miss Elizabeth’s mouth.

While he was thus transfixed, Darcy smelt Miss Bingley’s overapplied scent which did not suit at all. She sidled up next to him and would have grabbed onto one of his arms had he not put them behind him with determination.

“I can guess the subject of your reverie,” Miss Bingley cooed.

“I very much doubt that,” Darcy replied impatiently. He wanted to listen to Miss Elizabeth’s sublime singing voice, not Miss Bingley’s grating one.

“You are considering how insupportable it would be to pass many evenings in this manner—in such society. Indeed, I am quite of your opinion. I was never more annoyed! The

insipidity, and yet the noise—the nothingness, and yet the self-importance of all those people! What would I give to hear your strictures on them!” Miss Bingley asserted. From the look on her face, Darcy could see she was in no doubt of his agreement with her statement.

“Your conjecture is totally wrong, I assure you. My mind was more agreeably engaged. I have been meditating on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow,” Darcy returned before he managed to stop himself.

Miss Bingley preened and immediately fixed her eyes on his face. She was of the opinion he meant herself. “Who is this lady who has the credit of inspiring such reflections in you?” Miss Bingley enquired, batting her eyelids at Mr. Darcy.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet,” he replied without considering his words.

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet!” Miss Bingley spat the name out as she felt the bile rising in her throat. “I am all astonishment. Is she now in fact tolerable enough to tempt you? How long has she been such a favourite? Pray, when am I to wish you joy?”

“That is exactly the question which I expected you to ask. A lady’s imagination is very rapid; it jumps from admiration to love and from love to matrimony in a moment. I knew you would be wishing me joy,” Darcy hedged as he realised his mistake in saying anything, especially to Miss Bingley. That she had thrown his misspoken words back in his face did not well please him.

“Nay, if you are serious about it, I shall consider the matter is absolutely settled. You will have a charming mother-in-law indeed; and, of course, she will always be at Pemberley with you,” Miss Bingley sneered. She needed to point out the disadvantages of Miss Eliza’s family.

Miss Elizabeth finished her song to thunderous applause but demurred when requested to sing another. She was replaced at the instrument by her younger sister, Mary.

She had just begun to play a concerto in her very pedantic, non-feeling style when Lydia yelled at her.

“Mary, play Grimstock, or something else to which we can dance,” Lydia demanded.

Before she could object, their mother spoke up. “Play a lively song, Mary, no one wants to listen to one of your concertos.”

Mary agreed with no good cheer. A carpet was moved to the side of the room and soon the two youngest Bennets were dancing with the two captains and Bingley had led Jane to join them.

Darcy stood near them in silent indignation at such a mode of passing the evening, to the exclusion of all conversation. He was wishing Miss Elizabeth had not refused to play another song. He was too much engrossed by his thoughts to perceive Sir William Lucas was his neighbour.

“What a charming amusement for young people this is, Mr. Darcy! There is nothing like dancing after all. I consider it as one of the first refinements of polished society,” Sir William claimed.

“Certainly sir; and it has the advantage also of being in vogue amongst the less polished societies of the world. Every savage can dance,” Darcy responded dryly.

Sir William only smiled. “Your friend enjoys dancing,” he inclined his head towards Bingley and Miss Bennet, “and I doubt not you are proficient at dancing yourself, Mr. Darcy.”

“You saw me dance at Meryton, I believe Sir,” Darcy responded wishing the man would move on.

Just then Sir William noticed Miss Eliza moving towards them. “My dear Miss Eliza, why are you not dancing?” He turned to the man from Derbyshire, “Mr. Darcy, you must allow me to present this young lady to you as a very desirable partner. You cannot refuse to dance with such a beauty before you.” He reached as to take Elizabeth’s hand to give to Mr. Darcy. She stopped before he was able to.

“Indeed, Sir, I have not the least intention of dancing. I entreat you not to suppose I moved this way to beg for a partner,” Elizabeth stated forthrightly.

“Would you stand up with me, please Miss Elizabeth?” Darcy requested gravely.

“As I just said, I have no intention of dancing. It is not something I find *tolerable* this evening,” Elizabeth responded archly.

By the time Darcy recovered after having his unwise words flung in his face, Miss Elizabeth had gone to join Miss Lucas. Thanks to Miss Bingley’s indecorous words, it was not the first reminder of his unwise and rude insult that evening.

Miss Elizabeth was indeed singular. His reported income, which was not close to reality, would not induce her to dance with him. He could think of no other woman in society who would have refused his entreaty regardless of what he would have said to or about them.

He felt a burgeoning attraction to Miss Elizabeth, and he knew not what to do with it. She was, after all, so far below him in society.

Chapter 4

Everything had been peaceful that morning—as much as the Bennet house was ever peaceful—when a note from the supercilious sisters arrived. Within was an invitation for Jane to join Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley for dinner as they were to be alone due to the men dining with the officers at the Red Lion Inn in Meryton that evening.

Mama had, as was her wont, snatched the note from Jane's hand. Her effusions were plenty when she saw her eldest was invited to dine with, as she called them, the *elegant* and *refined* ladies of Netherfield Park.

Jane, with her 'see no evil' way, accepted the invitation sending her reply with the waiting footman who had delivered the offer for her to dine with the sisters. Elizabeth had clamped her mouth closed when in her naïvety—in Elizabeth's opinion—Jane had extolled her new *friends*.

As she was sure as she was breathing, Elizabeth was certain the sisters were anything but Jane's friends. After the assembly, and again after Lucas Lodge, she had attempted to have Jane open her eyes to the reality of the sisters, but as she always did, Jane only sought the most noble and true motives in the supercilious sisters' behaviour.

One thing puzzled Elizabeth ever since that night at Lucas Lodge, when they had been in company together, Miss Bingley was no longer just disdainful to her, it seemed like there was seething hatred directed at her from Mr. Bingley's sister.

As would be expected, Jane requested the use of the carriage to convey her to Netherfield Park. Their mother looked out at the darkening sky and building clouds and then decreed the horses were busy on the farm and Jane would have to ride the plodding mare, Nellie, to her dinner engagement.

The reasoning was if the carriage was used, then Jane would return that evening without seeing Mr. Bingley and that, to Mama's way of thinking, was unacceptable. She was certain

it would rain making it impossible for Jane to return, hence she would be thrust into Mr. Bingley's company again.

Elizabeth appealed to her father to intercede, but her mother interjected before he could. The result was he receded rather than have an argument, which would have led to much screeching and caterwauling.

Now Elizabeth stood at the window looking out into the pouring rain while her mother sat in her favourite chair in the drawing room, a smug, satisfied look on her countenance. To make matters worse, not many minutes after Jane's departure on Nellie, her father had boarded the Bennet carriage to carry him to the inn for the dinner with the officers.

When he departed, at the same time the rain began, Elizabeth had shot her father a look of disapprobation. It was nothing her father had ever before seen from his supposed favourite daughter and he had the decency to look ashamed.

Both Mama and Papa were well aware Jane was susceptible to colds and chills. When the rain had begun, Jane—especially with the pace Nellie managed—could not yet have been even halfway to Netherfield Park. Her poor sister would be soaked to the bone all in the name of catching a husband.

What worth would there be in her mother's machinations if Jane got sick, or even worse happened to her? Elizabeth would not, could not, allow herself to contemplate what the possible *worse* could be.



At the dinner given by Colonel Forster and his officers, Darcy had the misfortune of being seated next to the father of the woman who inhabited his dreams. It was not only at night when she occupied his thoughts, he thought about the pert Miss Elizabeth anytime his mind was not engaged in something productive.

As much as his head was telling his heart not to, as she was wholly inappropriate for Darcy of Pemberley to marry, his

heart ignored the messages his head had been sending. He was well on his way to being in love with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Once the introductions were made, Bennet realised he was sitting next to the insulter of his favourite daughter. He was the *proud, disagreeable* man, as his wife termed Mr. Darcy, and the insufferably arrogant man to hear Lizzy's opinion.

Bennet discounted his wife's ramblings, but after hearing Lizzy's account of the slight the man had delivered at the assembly, he had arrived at the conclusion in this case his wife was correct in her assessment of the man.

"I trust it is *tolerable* to be seated next to me, unless of course you feel you will give me too much *consequence* in my own neighbourhood," Bennet stated after the introductions were made.

Darcy was mortified to be reminded once again of his false words at the assembly. He had just met Mr. Bennet and he could see it was from her father that Miss Elizabeth inherited her dry wit. "Mr. Bennet, please accept my apology for the words..." Darcy's voice died in his mouth as the man next to him raised his hand.

"I was not the one you insulted so it is not me to whom you need to make your amends," Bennet drawled. "All I will say is what you said, and my opinion would be the same had you said that about one who was not my favourite daughter, was beyond the bounds of gentlemanlike behaviour."

"And that is the reason I wanted to apologise to you, Sir," Darcy clarified. "It is not a substitute for what I owe your daughter, but as her father, I feel I need to beg your pardon for my abhorrent behaviour towards one under your protection. That I was in a bad mood and concerned for a family member in no way mitigates my actions."

"On that basis, I accept your apology; please call me Bennet."

"I am Darcy," he said as he inclined his head in thanks to Bennet.

While Bennet sat and ate he could hear the rain beating on the windows of the room they were in, the same rain he had seen and heard during his carriage ride to the inn. It was not only Lizzy's look of disappointment; he was feeling genuine remorse he had not stepped in and stopped Jane from riding Nellie to Netherfield Park.

At the very least, he could have told Jane she could ride with him, and sent her on to Netherfield Park with instructions to return to collect him in a few hours. Was the peace he was purchasing by acquiescing to his wife's whims really worth it? Bennet knew well that out of all of his daughters, Jane was the most apt to get sick. If she became ill because of being drenched, he would not feel good about that at all. A serious illness would cause his conscience to scream at him. All he could do was pray Jane was well.



The next morning a note arrived from Jane. It was addressed to Elizabeth and thanks to her mother's not rising before ten in the morning, it was delivered into the intended recipient's hands and not intercepted by Fanny Bennet.

20 November 1810

Lizzy dearest,

I wanted to make sure you were not too worried for me. I have a trifling cold and the sniffles. Unfortunately, I did have a fever last night, but it was not bad.

Elizabeth was adept at translating *Jane speak*. What Jane was actually saying was she had a bad cold, was coughing and sneezing very much, and had a high fever. She admired her older sister's desire to not be a bother, but she saw no value in downplaying how ill her dearest Janey really was.

She hoped her mother would be proud of the result of her machinations and her father would feel remorse over his having quit the field without asserting his authority to correct the situation before it occurred.

Who was she fooling? Her mother would see nothing wrong in her actions and Papa would make a joke of the

situation to assuage his conscience. Things would never change at Longbourn. Elizabeth returned to her sister's short missive.

Please inform our parents and would you pack a valise for me so I have some of my own clothes here my best friend and sister? All I have is the night rail which Miss Bingley kindly lent me yester-evening.

Before I took ill, Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley took much interest in me, our family, and our connections. They are being most solicitous of me and spent at least a half hour sitting with me before a maid took over yester-evening.

In other words, the supercilious sisters—who Elizabeth knew were the daughters of a tradesman—had grilled her dearest sister, even while Elizabeth was sure Jane was already exhibiting signs of illness. Based on what she had observed about how they—especially Miss Bingley—held themselves to be vastly superior to those who by birth were in fact higher than themselves, she was convinced they would disdain the Bennets' extended family who were in trade.

If you happen to be close to Netherfield Park on one of your rambles, I would love to see you sister dearest.

In other words: please come and spend time with me because no one else will care for me the way you will.

With much sisterly affection,

Jane

Elizabeth could not believe the impropriety of her mother. She supposed she should not have been surprised given how Mama always behaved. The fact her father had given in to her again—and this time to the possible detriment of her most beloved sister—caused Elizabeth to view her father with a critical eye, something she had avoided doing previously.

In the past, she had always tried to find excuses for Papa's lackadaisical and indolent style of parenting, but in this case, she found she could not. How could a parent, one

supposed to protect his wife and children, knowingly put Janey in harm's way?

She felt like she wanted to scream, or cry, or both. How was she, the second of five Bennet daughters, more worried for the eldest daughter in the family than her parents were?

As soon as she completed reading Jane's note and calming herself, Elizabeth made for her father's study. He and Mary were the only others who would be awake at this hour of the morning. The former would be reading with a steaming cup of coffee and some warm rolls and butter on a plate, while the latter would be sitting in the small parlour reading some of her Fordyce's Sermons to give her the moral lessons she would repeat at times during the day.

Elizabeth rapped on the thick oak door and pushed it open before her father had a chance to call out for her to enter.

"Lizzy, to what do I owe this honour of seeing you before your constitutional this morning?" Bennet enquired.

"I need to make for Netherfield Park," Elizabeth stated directly. "Thanks to her parents' decisions yesterday, Janey is ill and begging my company at our neighbour's estate."

Bennet had the decency to look embarrassed at his lack of action the previous day. He rang for Hill. "Please have my wife summoned," Bennet instructed when the butler entered his master's study.

Some twenty minutes later the rather bedraggled mistress of Longbourn entered her husband's study with an indignant huff. It was not hard to see she would have much rather have been in her warm bed, fast asleep dreaming of all of her daughters well disposed of in marriage.

"Why was I dragged out of my bed at such an ungodly hour?" Fanny demanded. "Such flutterings and palpitations! Being woken at this time I thought you had met your end and the girls and I were about to be thrown out of our home and into the hedgerows!"

As his wife said the last, Bennet with some guilt looked at one letter in particular which was on his desktop. He decided it was not the time to break that nugget of information to his wife.

“Please read this,” Bennet ordered succinctly and handed his wife the note Lizzy had received earlier that morning.

“It will be just as I said it would be. With Jane at Netherfield Park she will return home engaged to Mr. Bingley or my name is not Fanny Gardiner Bennet!” Fanny crowed triumphantly.

“And if Jane should die in service of your plans, what then, Mrs. Bennet?” Bennet demanded.

“She says her illness is slight, no one dies from a trifling cold,” Fanny sniffed.

“Mama, you know better than anyone how Jane downplays her symptoms when she is ill. If she said as much as she did then she is sick indeed!” Elizabeth insisted.

Fanny looked away to hide her feelings of guilt. As much as she hated to admit it, what Lizzy said was the truth. She would not allow her husband to see it because he would only make sport of her. However, after interpreting Jane’s words she was sure her eldest and most beautiful daughter was quite sick.

“Allow me to get dressed and I will go to my...” Fanny began but ceased to speak when her husband raised his hand.

“Jane requested Lizzy come to see her and Lizzy it will be.” Bennet turned towards his second daughter. “The horses really are on the farm this morning; they will be available in two to three hours.”

“In that case, I will walk, I have no intention of waiting to see my sister,” Elizabeth decided.

“But after walking over the muddy fields you will not be fit to be seen,” Fanny protested.

“I care not about anyone else’s opinion. My aim is to see Janey, not socialise with the residents of the estate,” Elizabeth stated forcefully.

“Lizzy has my permission to walk,” Bennet instructed firmly before his wife could raise any more objections.

“Thank you, Papa.” Elizabeth went around the desk and kissed her father on his cheek.

Fanny would not admit it aloud, but she was well pleased Lizzy would be with her sister. Jane would not advocate for her own needs, but her younger sister would have no compunction in doing so.

To maintain her façade of disagreeing with her second daughter walking in the mud and such, she sniffed and walked out of the study to return to her warm bed. The truth was she would not rest easy until she received a report of Jane’s true health, about which she knew Lizzy would have no hesitation in relaying the unvarnished truth.

A minute after her mother returned to her own chambers, Elizabeth ran up the stairs to her and Jane’s shared chamber. After packing a valise for Jane to be sent with the footman, she changed into a heavy muslin walking dress with an extra layer of undergarments to ward off the post-rain cold.

Once her goodbyes were conveyed to her father, Elizabeth went to the kitchen where her sturdy walking boots and heavy winter coat were kept as she always left from the kitchen door to begin her rambles each day there was no rain. It was the work of a minute to have her boots securely tied in place. She shrugged on her jacket and made sure it was well buttoned.

Cook gifted her with a warm lemon pastry, an equally warm roll, and an apple. With her warm sustenance wrapped up and deposited in one pocket while the apple was placed in the other, Elizabeth walked across the kitchen garden and through the gate in the low stone wall at a blistering pace.

She made sure the wooden gate was well secured. No one wanted a repeat of the pigs getting into the vegetables

again. She turned to the west and struck out towards Netherfield Park at an even faster pace.

By going over the fields and not through Meryton, it was a little more than two and a half miles, which to Elizabeth was a short walk. When she drew parallel with Oakham Mount, she looked at it wistfully. It was, after all, one of her favourite destinations on her morning jaunts, especially when it was a clear day.

She crossed over each stile she got to without too much of an effort, never caring or noticing if she landed in a puddle or a muddy patch on the other side. As she walked, she did not seek out the puddles and mud, but neither did she actively avoid them.

The only thing Elizabeth cared about was arriving and seeing Janey. After about forty minutes of fast walking, Netherfield Park's manor house was in sight.

Chapter 5

Of all the people she had no desire to see, the first person Elizabeth saw when she arrived at Netherfield Park was Mr. *Proud* and *Insufferable* Darcy. Evidently he was walking back to the manor house from the stables. She cursed her bad luck which put her in his company. All she could hope was he would keep walking as if he had not beheld her and she would not have to interact with the man.

Lady Luck did not smile on her, but strangely enough, Mr. Darcy did. ‘*Oh my,*’ Elizabeth thought to herself. ‘*How much more handsome he is when he smiles.*’

“Miss Elizabeth,” Darcy intoned in greeting as he bowed to the woman who had invaded his heart. “I assume you are here to see Miss Bennet?”

‘*Of course, she is, come now William, you are more articulate than that,*’ Darcy chastised himself silently. ‘*There is no putting it off, you know what you must do.*’

“Your perspicacity does you proud,” Elizabeth riposted archly.

“Miss Elizabeth, if I may have a minute of your time, will you allow me a few words before we enter the house?” Darcy requested.

Even though she knew it would be churlish of her, Elizabeth was about to refuse his request when she stayed the words which were about to be unleashed. It had been a request, not a demand and his tone had been rather conciliatory.

She stopped and turned to the man who was watching her intently. Up to now, she had assumed it was his way of looking at her to find fault, but now she was no longer as sure as she had been when she had mentioned her thoughts to Jane and Charlotte who had both disagreed with her.

“The fact is I owe you a very heartfelt apology for my untrue and ungentlemanly words at the assembly,” Darcy

began.

If she had been confused before, now Elizabeth was at sixes and sevens. Mr. Darcy was making an apology to her, and furthermore, he sounded sincere.

Seeing her surprise at his words struck Darcy deeply. It seemed Miss Elizabeth had believed him so deficient in his manners she had never expected him to beg her pardon. "It does not pardon my words, but that evening I was in bad humour and I would have remained here if it were not for my hostess threatening to remain and keep me company. That being said, as my aim was to cause Bingley to stop importuning me to dance, that is what I should have articulated.

"The insult, which was completely false on a number of levels, should never have passed my lips. All I can do is throw myself on your mercy and ask you to forgive this fallible man."

Elizabeth's head was swimming. Was she wrong about Mr. Darcy? It was disconcerting as she had always believed her character sketches were perfectly accurate. Here was an example of her not having the right of it. She would have to begin to sketch Mr. Darcy's character all over again.

"You have my forgiveness, Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth granted. "Please, show me to my sister's chamber."

Darcy saw Miss Elizabeth relax and as she did he realised until now she had been tense in his company. "Please follow me." As he needed to remove his riding boots, he led Miss Bennet to the kitchen door, but he explained why he needed to use that entrance.

The last thing he wanted was right after his apology for Miss Elizabeth to think he was directing her to the kitchen entrance for any other reason.

For her part, Elizabeth appreciated Mr. Darcy's explanation. She had to admit to herself even though he had apologised, her prejudices would have led her to assume the man was leading her this way to insult her.

While Mr. Darcy removed his riding boots and donned a clean pair of hessians, Elizabeth scraped the mud off the soles of her half boots on the piece of metal for that purpose just outside the door. Soon they were on their way up the stairs.

Miss Bingley's grating and nasal voice could be heard from the breakfast parlour. Darcy cringed. He knew he would have to at least greet his hostess before he went to change, which meant Miss Elizabeth and her fine eyes, glowing from the exercise of the walk from Longbourn would have to do the same.

Until a few days previously the cloying shrew had kept Town hours giving Darcy some peace and quiet in the morning without her constantly trying to gain his attention. Unfortunately, she had decided she needed more time to be in his presence so Miss Bingley had begun to appear early to break her fast.

"Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley cooed when she saw the object of her desires. Her look instantly soured when she saw who followed her intended into the room. "Miss Eliza, I did not hear a carriage."

"That is because I did not come in one, I walked," Elizabeth retorted. "How is my sister?"

"She had a slight fever yesternight, I am sure it will be better today," Miss Bingley stated dismissively. "My sister and I will visit Miss Bennet after our meal."

"Caroline, Mrs. Nichols told me Miss Bennet had a high fever but you told her not to call the apothecary," Bingley reported.

"Well yes, that was because our *dear* Jane should be seen by a qualified physician from London," Miss Bingley prevaricated.

"Mr. Jones is both a doctor and an apothecary," Elizabeth informed everyone. "He has seen to all of us since birth and he is well aware of my sister's history and what helps her and what does not." She turned to her host. "If you

would have Mr. Jones summoned, it would be greatly appreciated, Sir.”

“Of course,” Bingley stated as he skewered his younger sister with a look of disgust. The housekeeper answered the bell and was soon on her way to see the master’s order executed.

It had not sat well with Mrs. Nichols when Miss Bingley had commanded her not to summon medical help. She was well pleased the master was correcting that oversight. Never had the housekeeper worked under a mistress who knew less about the running of a manor house than Miss Bingley.

“Allow me to ring for a footman to show you to Miss Bennet’s chambers,” Bingley offered.

“No need Bingley, I need to go up for my after-ride bath. I will show Miss Elizabeth to Miss Bennet’s chamber,” Darcy volunteered.

‘You are playing with fire!’ Darcy admonished himself silently. *‘You know it can never be between you, do you not? She is too far below you in society.’*

As surprised as she was by his curtesy to herself, Elizabeth was pleased Mr. Darcy had volunteered as she was about to say how familiar she was with the house and that may have led to questions she was not willing to answer.

Darcy and Elizabeth had no sooner departed the breakfast parlour when Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst began to abuse Elizabeth. They derided her for her petticoats being six inches deep in mud, among other things.

Darcy was mortified at the abject display of ill-breeding by Bingley’s sisters. For all of their boasting about their educations at the oft bragged about seminary, neither had a clue how to be a hostess. How was it they were not aware abusing a guest in their home was the epitome of bad behaviour?

It was one of the many reasons the harpy would never be his wife—even if she lowered herself to compromise him.

Darcy could not imagine a fate worse than being leg shackled to Miss Caroline Bingley for the rest of his life.

Unlike Mr. Darcy's now forgiven slight at the assembly, Elizabeth cared not for Mrs. Hurst's and Miss Bingley's words which followed them halfway up the grand staircase. The opinions of the supercilious sisters meant nothing to her.

How close had she come to calling Miss Bingley out on her lie regarding calling someone to examine Janey? Loosing her tongue against the woman would have contravened all bounds of propriety. It was obvious the woman knew nothing about being a good hostess, so Elizabeth would not give the virago the satisfaction of drawing herself down to Miss Bingley's level of classless behaviour.

She almost walked into Mr. Darcy's back. So deep in thought had she been, Elizabeth had not noticed he had come to a halt.

"Miss Bennet's chamber," Darcy pointed to a door to his left. He bowed to the bewitching woman and she gave a curtsy in return.

Darcy headed to his suite a few doors down. When he had arrived at Netherfield Park, Miss Bingley had him housed in the family wing, right next to her own chambers. After a stern talk with his friend, Bingley had ordered Mrs. Nichols to move his friend to the guest wing and seriously admonished his younger sister.

With one more look towards the tall, handsome man from Derbyshire, Elizabeth entered Jane's suite.



"I am sure the state of Miss Eliza's dress and the blowsy look of her hair has diminished your attraction to her *fine* eyes," Miss Bingley pounced as soon as Mr. Darcy returned to the breakfast parlour.

His hope she would have completed her meal before he returned was dashed. Darcy should have known the harpy

would have waited for him to arrive to break his fast. She never passed over an opportunity to importune him.

“On the contrary, Miss Bingley,” Darcy replied, “the exercise only enhanced her eyes.”

Miss Bingley’s face pinched up with displeasure. That was not the answer she wanted to hear. Never one to withdraw from a field of battle, she soldiered on.

“What was she thinking to walk three, four, five miles, whatever it was? It shows an unattractive conceited independence to go traipsing through the mud. I am sure you would never allow your sister to walk so many miles in that fashion.” Miss Bingley was certain she had played a trump card in mentioning Mr. Darcy’s sister.

“All I see is a deep sisterly affection,” Bingley opined. “Would not either of you do the same for the other?”

“No, I would not encourage my sister to walk that distance,” Darcy paused as he saw the look of triumph flash across Miss Bingley’s face. “However, if either of us was sick like Miss Bennet is, I could see the other walking as far as he or she needed to in order to nurse the other.”

Mr. Darcy’s statement caused Miss Bingley’s face to fall. The inference was clear. What was it about Miss Eliza which would not allow her to turn Mr. Darcy’s head from the chit?

With a huff Miss Bingley stood, followed by Mrs. Hurst and the sisters vacated the breakfast parlour.



“Lizzy, you came,” Jane croaked when she saw her sister enter her bedchamber. “I did not...” Jane stopped speaking as she had a coughing fit. “...want to be a bother.”

The maid who had been sitting with Jane curtsied and took her leave. At least someone had made sure Jane was not alone. Elizabeth suspected the someone was Mrs. Nichols, not Miss Bingley.

“Come now, Janey,” Elizabeth said as she approached her sister. “You could not be trouble even if you tried to be.” She placed her hand on her sister’s clammy forehead. “Bah! Slight fever! You are burning up.”

Before Jane could protest she did not feel so very badly, coughing stopped her. “Mr. Jones?” Jane managed.

“Even though your *good* friend would not call him, Mr. Bingley has sent word to Mr. Jones to call as soon as he is able to,” Elizabeth related. “I should have flayed her with my tongue! Allowing you to suffer and not having the apothecary summoned.”

“I am sure...” Jane sneezed twice, “...it was an oversight.”

“You believe that if it makes you feel better,” Elizabeth returned. “Now is not the time to discuss the pros and cons of the supercilious sisters, you need to rest.”

Elizabeth heard the noise of people in the hallway and thought Mr. Jones had arrived already. She opened the door and found Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy without.

“How does Miss Bennet?” Bingley enquired worriedly.

“Much worse than I hoped to find her. Her fever is high and she is not well. Your footman is on the way to summon Mr. Jones, is he not?” Elizabeth queried.

“He is. In fact, he should have reached the apothecary’s house by now,” Bingley averred.

Elizabeth relaxed a tiny bit knowing Mr. Jones would not be long in coming, unless he had some sort of emergency to which he needed to attend. “On behalf of my sister, I thank you for your attentiveness,” Elizabeth stated and then slipped back into the chamber.

“Bingley, you know I would not openly criticise your sister under normal circumstances, but her not calling for the apothecary last night is beyond the pale. She constantly holds herself to be the perfect hostess while forgetting one of the most important things, the care of guests in her house.” Darcy

stopped before he included Miss Bingley's rude behaviour towards Miss Elizabeth in his statement.

Bingley hung his head. "I am not blind to my sisters' faults. Sometimes I wonder how it is we came from the same parents," Bingley shook his head sadly. "I agree, it is unconscionable Caroline did not summon Mr. Jones yesternight when Miss Bennet took ill."

"Her behaviour here has highlighted one of the many reasons I will never offer for her," Darcy told his friend. "Please make sure she gives up on her delusion I will marry her. There are *no* circumstances under which I will *ever* propose to her."

"And I would never sentence you to a life in hell with her by insisting you marry her if she sinks so low as to attempt a compromise," Bingley assured his friend.



Less than an hour since the footman rode to Mr. Jones's offices, the man arrived at Netherfield Park and was shown up to Miss Bennet's bedchamber directly.

Elizabeth remained with her sister while she was examined. "It is a very bad cold," Mr. Jones pronounced once he had completed his examination of Miss Bennet. "I will leave some willow bark to make tea. It will assist with her fever and any pain your sister may be suffering. In addition, I am leaving two elixirs to assist with reducing her cough."

"Thank you for coming to see my sister," Elizabeth stated gratefully.

"It is my pleasure, Miss Lizzy. After all, I have taken care of you and your sisters from the time you and they were born," Jones replied while he closed his bag and prepared to depart the sick room.

"May I ask a favour?" Elizabeth requested. Mr. Jones nodded his permission. "Please stop at Longbourn and inform my parents of the truth of Jane's malady."

"It will be so," Jones agreed. "She will be well, Miss Lizzy. We know Miss Bennet is susceptible to this kind of

illness and sometimes it cannot be helped. Try not to fret too much.”

Elizabeth had to bite her tongue as she wanted to say if it were not for her mother’s machinations, not to mention her father’s abdication of his parental duties, Janey would not have gotten ill. Instead, she smiled a little and said, “Thank you, I will rest a little easier.”

Mr. Jones took his leave and made his way to the study per Mr. Bingley’s request when he arrived. There he met with the master of the estate and his friend Mr. Darcy and reported on Miss Bennet’s state of health.

Bingley thanked and paid the man. When the study door was closed, Bingley turned to his friend. “I know, I need to speak to my sisters. The way they treated Miss Bennet is wholly unacceptable.”

Darcy could do nothing but nod his agreement.

Chapter 6

Later that afternoon, Elizabeth judged it was time for her to depart, Jane called out to her to stay. “As much as I would like to, Dearest, I believe I have overstayed my welcome already,” Elizabeth told Jane.

She had been unaware Mr. Bingley and a much chastened Miss Bingley were standing at the door when Jane beseeched her best friend and favourite sister to remain. Elizabeth did not see Mr. Bingley elbow his reluctant sister in her ribs.

“W-we would welcome you to remain with your sister while she recuperates, Miss Eliza...Elizabeth,” Miss Bingley offered through clenched teeth.

“I do not want to impose,” Elizabeth responded when she saw how reluctant Miss Bingley was to extend the invitation.

“It is not an imposition,” Bingley jumped in before his sister said something impolitic. “I am sure Miss Bennet will be greatly comforted by your presence here with her. Please write a note to inform your family you will remain here and ask them to send a trunk for you. Give it to the maid when you are ready and I will send it to Longbourn forthwith.”

“In that case, I thank you for your *warm* hospitality, Miss Bingley, and you too Mr. Bingley,” Elizabeth decided. She would feel much more at ease to know she was the one who would be there to take care of Jane’s needs, and there was no doubt it was Jane’s preference as well.

The note was ready in a matter of minutes and handed to the maid. As he had promised to do, Bingley dispatched it as soon as it was handed to him.

Darcy was proud Bingley had taken his sister to task for her despicable treatment of guests under his roof. At the same time, he was both glad and trepidatious the bewitching Miss Elizabeth would be residing in the same house as he was, even if it was for only a matter of days.

He would have to remain strong and push his feelings to the side. She was not an appropriate woman for him to attach himself to—for himself, for his family honour, or for Giana’s future match and that was all there was to it.

‘I must keep reminding myself of that else I offer for her in a moment of weakness,’ Darcy told himself silently.



When Mr. Jones stopped by and delivered his diagnosis of Jane’s malady, both Bennet parents had looked somewhat embarrassed. Neither felt like he or she could enquire if either Jane or Lizzy had shared how it was Jane had been riding Nellie when the weather clearly indicated rain.

Fanny and Bennet had to live with the knowledge they had directly contributed to their daughter’s illness. One by her machinations and the other by his inaction. Before either could begin with recriminations after the apothecary took his leave, Hill entered the study and handed his master a note.

“It is from Lizzy. The Bingleys invited her to remain and nurse Jane back to health. She requests we send a trunk with some of her clothing,” Bennet informed his wife.

Fanny’s first instinct was to rail against her second daughter being there to distract Jane and Mr. Bingley from being in company, one with the other. She admitted to herself no one helped Jane feel better when she was sick than Lizzy. She could not understand her second daughter, who was her least favourite of her five daughters, but that did not detract from the fact Lizzy was an excellent nurse.

“Mrs. Bennet, may I point out to you while Jane is sick, Mr. Bingley will not spend any time with her. He will not be allowed in the bedchamber of an unrelated lady, so although our daughter is in his house, it will not further your aim of throwing them together,” Bennet pointed out.

“I will go supervise the packing of her trunk,” Fanny stated ignoring her husband’s last words. At least it gave her an excuse to escape the study and having to hear Mr. Bennet remonstrating with her about sending Jane on Nellie when

they had both known the horses had been available for the carriage.

Within the hour, the trunk—containing more clothing for Jane as well—was on its way to Netherfield Park.



Bennet picked up the most ridiculous letter he had ever received from his desk not long after his wife departed the study. The letter was from one William Collins, the heir presumptive of his estate, thanks to an entail to heirs male Bennet's great-grandfather had instituted.

It was his greatest regret he and Fanny had never been blessed with a son. The entail ended with the generation after Bennet so had they a son, there would never have been the danger of the estate, which had been in the hands of Bennets since before the Magna Carta, being inherited by one other than a Bennet.

If Mr. Collins was as much of a dunderhead as his letter seemed to indicate, Bennet was sure it would not take the simpleton long to drive the estate into bankruptcy. The man was a clergyman who had been preferred to the living of the parish of Hunsford in Kent.

Not only could Bennet not understand how this brainless twit had managed to gain a living, but it was unfathomable the man had finished basic schooling, never mind university and then taking orders.

The man's patroness was one Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who he seemingly revered even above God. The letter exuded pomposity with his distant cousin under the misapprehension being a clergyman made him far higher than he was.

At the same time, Bennet could see from the way and what he wrote that the man was a sycophant of the highest order. Like he had over not interceding between his wife and Jane before the latter's ride in the rain, Bennet felt a tinge of guilt over having responded to the man's letter in the

affirmative knowing how he would laugh at his family's discomfort.

The idiot wrote he wanted to heal the breach in the family—caused by his own miserly, illiterate father—and come and admire his fair cousins. How Mr. Collins knew his daughters were comely Bennet could not fathom as the man had never met any of his distant cousins.

The guilt he felt was because Bennet was aware of how much enjoyment he would have watching the man try to offer his *olive branch* to the family. Bennet knew this meant the man intended to choose a bride from among his cousins.

Unless one of his daughters was adamant she wanted to marry his cousin—and even then he may not give his consent and blessing—he would not agree to them attaching themselves to such a man.

The problem would be his wife. He was sure as soon as he mentioned who was coming she would loudly and vociferously remonstrate with him about the unfairness of the entail. As soon as she heard he intended to marry one of her daughters, all would be forgot and then the nodcock would be her favourite person in the world.

He would never allow Jane or Elizabeth to attach themselves to such a man. The only one who would possibly suit was Mary with her quoting—usually out of context—scriptures and passages from *Fordyce's Sermons*.

The day he told his wife of his cousin's coming, Bennet knew he would need to talk to Mrs. Bennet and have her be sure she was to direct the parson at Mary, or one of the two younger girls, but under no circumstances towards Jane or Lizzy.

With that decided, Bennet poured a half glass of port and took up his book once again.



The first evening nursing Jane, Elizabeth chose to order a tray for dinner in order to remain with Jane for the rest of the night. Jane's fever was building once again, and her

sister felt as hot as Elizabeth could remember her feeling during any prior illness.

Elizabeth sent a note down to Mr. Bingley to request Mr. Jones be called back. Not long after there was a knock on the door to the hallway. Elizabeth opened the door and much to her great surprise it was Mr. Darcy standing without.

“Miss Elizabeth, would you like me to send for my personal physician in London?” Darcy volunteered.

“It is a most gracious offer, but no thank you, Mr. Darcy. I am confident in Mr. Jones’s capabilities, and he has the added advantage of knowing Jane since birth,” Elizabeth declined kindly.

About an hour later Mr. Jones was shown in to find a thrashing, rather delirious Jane burning up with fever. He felt her forehead and was alarmed at the intensity of her fever. He stuck his head out of Miss Bennet’s door and commanded the footman to tell Mr. Bingley he needed plenty of ice and cold water.

Footmen were soon bringing ice which Mr. Jones directed be placed in the bathtub in the suite’s bathing room. Cold water was added and then with the help of two footmen, Jane Bennet—wrapped in a blanket to preserve her modesty—was lowered into the bathtub.

Seeing Jane convulsing from the fever had driven Elizabeth to tears of concern which started to recede as she watched the ice cold water work its magic on her beloved sister. Jane stopped thrashing about and soon enough her fever was reduced to a level which allowed Mr. Jones to have his patient removed from the ice bath and returned to her bed.

As soon as the door was closed, Elizabeth and two maids stripped Miss Bennet and thoroughly dried her. Once she was dry, she was dressed in a clean, and more importantly, dry night rail.

Jones pulled Elizabeth aside as soon as they noted Jane was sleeping relatively calmly. “Miss Lizzy, if your sister’s fever should intensify to, or near to, the levels it was before I

placed her in the ice bath, please repeat the process. However, never more than five minutes at any one time.”

“The instructions are understood,” Elizabeth acknowledged. “All I can do is pray it will not be necessary to repeat the treatment.”

“That would be my preference as well,” Jones admitted. “Please have me summoned if things take a turn for the worse at any point during the night.”

‘Mama and Papa look what your actions, or in Papa’s case, inactions, have purchased us. My Janey is teetering on the edge. If she is taken from us, I will never be able to forgive either of you regardless of what the commandment says,’ Elizabeth told herself silently.

As he did earlier in the day, Mr. Jones reported the goings on to Mr. Bingley who was accompanied by Mr. Darcy.

“This is what my sister called a *slight* cold and fever,” Bingley stated looking at nothing in particular. “I do not know about you, but I have no desire to return to the drawing room and listen to my sister’s inanities.”

“I am in agreement with you,” Darcy averred.

Bingley splashed some cognac into two snifters and the friends drank to Miss Bennet’s health and a rapid recovery.



When Elizabeth woke, she was not sure where she was for the first few moments. Suddenly, she remembered she was at Netherfield Park nursing the dearest person in the whole of the world to her.

She was sitting in a chair next to Jane’s bed, holding her hand. A maid was sitting in a chair in the corner working on some sewing. Yesternight came rushing back to Elizabeth and she stood and placed her hand on her sister’s forehead. Much to her delight, she felt only a very low fever.

Tears of relief ran down Elizabeth’s cheeks as she sat back down, refusing to relinquish the hold on Jane’s hand. She

felt her sister stir a little bit and watched as her eyes fluttered open.

“Water,” Jane croaked out.

Before the maid could move, Elizabeth was up and poured Jane some water from the pitcher on the dresser. By now the maid was standing across the bed from where Elizabeth’s chair was and together they assisted Jane so she could sit up.

Very gingerly, Elizabeth held the glass to her sister’s lips and slowly allowed some water to be dripped into Jane’s mouth. This was repeated four or five times until Jane indicated she wanted to lie back down.

According to the clock on the mantelpiece, it was after eight in the morning and the new day’s weak rays of sunlight were invading the cracks in the curtains over the east facing windows.

Over the next hour, Jane asked for more water and was able to drink some bone broth to at least give her some much needed nutrients. Just before nine, Mr. Jones came to see his patient.

Based on the progress he was seeing, there was no need to feign good cheer to bolster Miss Lizzy’s spirits. The fever had broken during the night and Miss Bennet was on the road to recovery. It would take her some days before she would be allowed out of bed to go downstairs, but it was a good start.

Feeling buoyed by the news, Elizabeth decided to take a walk in the park in celebration. As soon as the new maid arrived to replace the one who had sat with Jane through the night, Elizabeth made her way into the park for a pre-breakfast walk.



From the window in his chamber, Darcy observed Miss Elizabeth and her pleasing figure skip down the stairs. ‘*Her sister must have begun to improve,*’ he told himself as he watched her and the *joie de vivre* she was displaying.

As tempting as it was to make his way down and join her in the park, Darcy refused to allow himself to give into his heart choosing rather to listen to his head and all of the reasons why Miss Elizabeth was an impossible choice of wife for him.

If Miss Bennet was on the mend that meant the days the Bennet sisters were to remain at Netherfield Park were numbered. He only had to maintain his iron control for a few more days.



Matlock House was a rather imposing edifice on the western side of Grosvenor Square in London. It was diagonally across the square from Darcy House which was on the eastern side of the square.

Lord and Lady Matlock had three children, Andrew—Lord Hildale, Richard—a Colonel in the Royal Dragoons, and Lady Tiffany—who was seventeen. Like her friend and younger cousin Giana Darcy, she was born twelve years after the next older Fitzwilliam sibling—Richard.

Since a little before her brother had decamped for Hertfordshire, Georgiana Darcy, and her companion, Mrs. Annesley, had been guests at Matlock House. Giana was happy—as happy as she could be after her near ruination this summer past—to be with her aunt, uncle, and Tiffany.

She saw Richard occasionally when he was given time away from his regiment. The two cousins spent time with Andrew and Priscilla, Lady Priscilla Carrington as she had been, who lived at Hildale House on Portman Square, a few times a week.

Lady Priscilla Fitzwilliam was in her fifth month of carrying their second child, which meant the Hildales planned to retreat to their estate in Staffordshire early in December. Their plans were to remain there until after the newest Fitzwilliam arrived, just as they had after their daughter was born almost three years ago.

The girls were in the music room under the watchful eyes of their companions working on a duet for the pianoforte

when the ageing butler proffered the silver salver to Miss Darcy.

It contained a letter from William which Giana snatched up gleefully forgetting the melancholy which still gripped her from time to time.

“Tiff, you do not object if I read William’s letter right away, do you?” Georgiana enthused.

“Go ahead, Giana. I know how much you enjoy reading Wills’s news,” Tiffany allowed.

“He mentions Miss Elizabeth Bennet again,” Georgiana remarked after she completed her brother’s letter.

“Who?” came from the door. Both girls turned and found the Countess standing and watching them. “Who is the young lady William mentions?”

“A young lady by the name of Elizabeth Bennet,” Georgiana repeated shyly.

“And you say he has mentioned her more than once?” Lady Matlock verified.

“In every letter except his very first from Hertfordshire,” Georgiana confirmed.

“Do you think Wills loves this young lady?” Tiffany asked her mother.

“Only William will be able to answer that,” Lady Matlock stated stoically. “Until he tells us otherwise, it does us no good to speculate.”

Not long after, the cousins sat down at the instrument once again and continued working through the piece of music.

Chapter 7

With Jane feeling much better and her fever being nominal, Elizabeth joined the family for dinner on her second full day in residence at Netherfield Park. It amused Elizabeth how Miss Bingley placed her as far from Mr. Darcy as was possible at the table.

She knew not if Mr. Darcy would have preferred her company during the meal, but one thing was certain, he found no pleasure in Miss Bingley's overdressed companionship. Elizabeth could not but smile as every attempt to engage Mr. Darcy's interest was rebuffed, albeit politely, by that man.

Her interest was diverted when she heard Mr. Bingley address her. "Is your sister much improved today, Miss Elizabeth?" Bingley enquired solicitously.

"She is thank you, Sir," Elizabeth replied gratefully. Janey had the right of it, he was everything a young man should be.

"It is such a burden when one is sick," Miss Bingley pronounced. "It is why I make a point of never being sick."

At this ridiculous statement, Elizabeth coughed into her serviette to stop herself from laughing aloud. No matter how diverting the woman in orange was, it was not good manners to openly laugh at one's hostess.

To Miss Bingley's right, Darcy was fighting to keep his face schooled. No matter how he tried, the corners of his mouth turned up. '*It seems she says the first thing which pops into her head with no thought whether it makes sense or not,*' Darcy told himself silently as he fought to keep his composure.

"But Caroline you have been sick many times," a confused Bingley stated.

Being caught out having *exaggerated* Miss Bingley's pallor turned a shade of puce. "I meant of late," Miss Bingley hissed through gritted teeth. At that moment, she realised Mr.

Darcy was watching her so she plastered a fake smile on her face. "It was nothing but a jest."

"I do so love to laugh," Elizabeth contributed as she forced a neutral look back onto her face.

Miss Elizabeth's reaction was almost Darcy's undoing, thankfully at that moment, Hurst decided to speak.

"You do not have any ragout," he observed with distaste as he looked at the food Miss Bennet had served herself.

"Unfortunately, I am not a lover of that dish," Elizabeth responded politely. She could not understand why Mr. Hurst felt it necessary to comment on the fare on her plate.

"That is most singular," Hurst responded before returning to drain his goblet of wine. He put the glass down and signalled a footman to refill it again.

"I for one love ragout, it is indicative of a high-classed and discriminating palate," Miss Bingley claimed. How perfect was it that Eliza gave her an opening to demonstrate her own superiority.

"If that be the case, then I am afraid I have classless and indiscriminate tastes as I do not enjoy ragout either," Darcy stated.

Miss Bingley was horrified. In her intention to point out deficiencies in Eliza Bennet, she had insulted Mr. Darcy. "Y-you must have misunderstood what I-I intended to say," she managed as her blush of embarrassment, which travelled from the roots of her hair to where her flesh was hidden by her ostentatious gown, deepened.

For the second time in as many minutes, Elizabeth had to cover her amusement with coughing. Miss Bingley shot her the gimlet eye strongly suspecting the hoyden was laughing at her.

'She is rather magnificent, what a pity I cannot offer for her. My family would never accept her,' Darcy told himself sadly. If not for her lack of wealth, lack of standing, and lack

of connections, he was convinced she would have been the perfect Mrs. Darcy.

He was well on his way to being in love with her. That, however, could not override his duty—as he saw it—to his name, Giana, and his family.

When dinner was concluded, Elizabeth excused herself to go check in on her sister. No sooner had she departed the dining parlour than the sounds of Miss Bingley’s grating voice abusing her roundly was heard.

Elizabeth could hear the harpy going on about her having *conceited independence*.



“You summoned me, Mr. Bennet,” Fanny sniffed. Mr. Hill had delivered her husband’s orders after dinner when she had been sitting in the drawing room worrying about Jane and praying she was improving.

“Yes, I received this note from Lizzy,” Bennet held up the page. “She says Jane has begun to recover and her fever is no longer as high as it was the first night Lizzy was there to nurse Jane.”

“I knew how it would be, all she had was a trifling cold...” Fanny closed her mouth with a clack seeing her husband’s angry glare. She knew not why she could not admit the level of relief she felt at the news. She began to relax for the first time since being notified of Jane’s infirmity.

“The fact Jane is recovering is thanks to our second daughter’s attention and care of her. You were here when Mr. Jones told us it was a serious illness, one which could have gone either way.” Seeing his wife wanted to speak, Bennet held up his hand. “Before you try and tell me how this was not your fault, it was, but it was as much mine as yours.”

That was not what Fanny had expected to hear from her husband. She hung her head. “The entail drives me to distraction, I just wanted Jane to have time in Mr. Bingley’s company.” All of the pent-up guilt she felt over sending Jane

out on horseback in the rain had been pressing down on her shoulders.

“I never suspected you of wanting to make our daughter ill,” Bennet assured his wife. “As I said, I was as much to blame. I find I have had a change of heart and I should have contradicted you and allowed Jane the use of the carriage, but my desire for peace overrode my better judgment. It is *not* an error I intend to make again.” He lifted the letter from his cousin from the tray on one corner of his desk. “Speaking of the entail, please read this letter. To my shame, I was only going to tell you the day of his arrival.”

Bennet handed his wife the letter and took a seat on the settee next to her as she read. He watched the various emotions play across her face while she read the nonsensical missive.

On completion of reading the letter, Fanny sat without speaking for some moments. “I am sure he is only coming here to catalogue everything which will be his one day. He does seem to revere his patroness, does he not? And what is this olive branch to which he refers?” Fanny articulated once she regained her voice.

“As to your first point, you could very well have the right of it,” Bennet responded. “Avarice runs in his family; it was one of the reasons there was a break with Mr. Collins’s father. You echo my opinion regarding the *great* Lady Catherine; it seems he believes she walks on water. I am sure his *olive branch* is his intention to marry one of our daughters.”

“What a good thing that will be,” Fanny gushed as she excitedly clapped her hands together.

“Mrs. Bennet, let me be rightly understood. I will never give my consent for him to marry one of our girls unless the daughter in question chooses him of her own *free will*.”

“Jane is for Mr. Bingley so Lizzy must be his choice.”

“Fanny, is not one of your complaints against Lizzy that no man will want a wife more *intelligent* than himself?

You read Mr. Collins's letter. Do you honestly believe Lizzy would *ever* accept such a stupid man? You know she would not and I would not give my permission even had she a lapse of judgement and accepted him."

Before she responded and gave her nerves free rein, Fanny considered her husband's words carefully. She also cogitated about her least understood daughter. It took her some minutes, but she arrived at the inevitable conclusion.

"He and Lizzy would never suit, but will he want to consider another when he is denied Jane and Lizzy?"

"He can be easily directed. Look at the deference he gives to anyone in a position of power, like his patroness for instance. If he is allowed to pursue Lizzy, he will be angry when she rejects him, and reject him she will. If that comes to pass, he would never consider the one daughter who *may* accept him—Mary. But I assure you, if he proposes to her and she refuses him, I will no more force her to marry him than any of our girls."

Deep thought was not a common activity for Fanny Gardiner Bennet, but think she did. Bennet watched as her eyes narrowed while the wheels in her head ground. A few times she was about to speak, but stopped herself as she returned to her cogitation.

"If I tell him we expect Jane to receive an offer and point out all the ways Lizzy would be unsuitable as a parson's wife and worse, unacceptable to his dearest patroness, and point out the opposite for Mary, then he will choose her, will he not?"

"Those are my thoughts, Fanny. Please remember, I will not countenance your pressuring any of our daughters to accept him if it is not her own free choice. At least with Mary, there is a chance."

"I will have to help Mary change her style of dress and the way she wears her hair." Fanny paused as she felt a certain level of chagrin at her behaviour towards her middle daughter who may hold their collective futures in her hands. "It will be

my task to show Mary she is not plain as I have too often told her.”

“That is another thing in which we have both erred. Neither of us should have shown a marked preference for any one of our daughters above any of the others. It is something we will discuss at another time,” Bennet told his wife.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Fanny left her husband’s study to seek out her middle daughter. She had work to do and not many days in which to do it.



As much as she would have preferred not to be in the supercilious sisters’ company again that night, Elizabeth knew it would have been rude of her to not show her face in the drawing room at all. She did not plan to remain long.

When she entered the room, four of the party, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Hurst, Mr. Bingley, and Miss Bingley were seated around a card table playing what looked like whist to Elizabeth. Mrs. Hurst was sitting and disinterestedly looking at nothing in particular while playing absent mindedly with her bracelets.

Elizabeth spied a book of Shakespeare’s sonnets on a side table. She picked it up, sat down in an armchair, and began to read the Bard’s well known words.

“Do you not want to join us in playing whist, Miss Elizabeth,” Hurst grunted as he looked at the cards in his hands disgustedly.

“No thank you, Sir, I am quite happy to sit here and read,” Elizabeth averred. Besides not wanting to play, she suspected they were playing too high for her tastes.

“You prefer reading to playing cards! How singular,” Hurst managed as he watched Bingley play his cards.

“Miss Eliza is a great reader and prefers reading above all else,” Miss Bingley commented derisively.

“I neither deserve such censure nor praise Miss *Caro*, I do enjoy reading, but I take pleasure in many things. In fact,

some in this house have pointed out I am a *great* walker,” Elizabeth responded sweetly.

Darcy sat fighting not to smile as the highly intelligent Miss Elizabeth tied Miss Bingley in verbal knots. He almost guffawed as he watched the latter trying to decide whether she had been insulted or not.

Miss Bingley was about to ask Mr. Darcy if he agreed with her assertion about Miss Eliza’s single-minded interest in reading when she remembered he was an avid reader. She did not want to hear him publicly disagree with her again. Miss Bennet could not recover soon enough for Miss Bingley because it would mean Miss Eliza would be out of her house.

How dare the hoyden call her by a name which was not hers? Miss Bingley entirely missed the irony of her having just called Miss Elizabeth, Miss Eliza. To try and regain Mr. Darcy’s attention, Miss Bingley began to speak of the accomplishments a true lady needed to have.

With everyone distracted from the game of cards, Hurst stood and made his way over to the nearest chaise lounge and was soon snoring loudly.

When Miss Bingley prattled off a list of things which she decided made a woman accomplished—all her own accomplishments by some coincidence—she was angry when she heard Mr. Darcy amend her list.

“In addition,” said he, “one must possess one more attribute to be truly accomplished—the practice of extensive reading to expand one’s mind.” Darcy was looking at Elizabeth when he said the last and she did not miss his meaning, causing her to blush.

Elizabeth was not the only one who understood who Mr. Darcy was referring to. Miss Bingley was trying to maintain an outward façade of calm while internally fuming *her* Mr. Darcy had found a way to compliment the hated Miss Eliza.

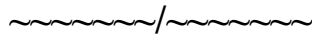
To break the spell spawned by the way Mr. Darcy was looking at the hoyden, Miss Bingley suggested some music.

“Louisa, you do not mind if my playing wakes your husband do you?” Miss Bingley made for the pianoforte not waiting for an answer to her question.

She played a sonata with cold precision, not infusing the music with any warmth. Listening to Bingley’s sister play reminded Darcy how much he enjoyed hearing Miss Elizabeth’s playing.

‘I will conquer this!’ Darcy assured himself silently.
‘We can never be more than indifferent acquaintances!’

While the hostess was exhibiting, Elizabeth made her excuses and wished everyone a goodnight. Thereafter, she made her way upstairs to spend time with Jane.



On entering Jane’s chamber, Elizabeth could see her favourite sister was asleep, and unlike the previous night, her sleep seemed to be peaceful. A maid was unobtrusively seated in the corner of the room.

As gently as she could, Elizabeth felt Jane’s forehead and was well pleased to be able to detect her fever was far lower than it had been the previous evening. It was still detectable, just far less worrying than before.

Elizabeth lifted her eyes to the heavens offering prayers of thanks. The *worst* she had dreaded was no longer a worry. That first night when Jane had been burning up and convulsing, Elizabeth had worried her worst fears would become a reality.

Before she went to her chamber to change, Elizabeth wrote a note to her mother to request her presence to evaluate Jane’s progress. As upset with her parents as she was, Elizabeth knew they loved their daughters and would never knowingly cause them harm.

With the note sealed, she handed it to a footman requesting he have the butler send it out in the morning. After checking on Jane once more, she instructed the maid to summon her if Miss Bennet’s fever climbed again. She then moved to her adjoining chambers.

She had not realised how worn out she was, and soon after her ablutions and changing into a night rail, Elizabeth was dead to the world.

Chapter 8

Fanny Bennet felt a wave of relief when she was able to see for herself Jane was well and truly on the mend. She had made her call with only Mary, leaving the two youngest Bennets at home—much to their consternation.

In a subsequent far ranging discussion with her husband, she had agreed that her two youngest daughters' behaviour needed serious amendment, especially Lydia.

When their mother and next younger sister had entered the chamber, there were a few things which had forcefully struck Jane and Elizabeth. Their mother's demeanour was far calmer than they had ever seen her; loud, flirtatious, boisterous Lydia was not with their mother; and lastly, Mary looked very different.

Her hair was arranged in an attractive style; she was without her spectacles; and her dress was a pale rose. The colour complemented her natural colouring and did not make her look pale like the severe and dark dresses she was wont to wear.

“Mary, how well you look,” Elizabeth complimented.

Not used to being admired for much of anything, especially her looks, Mary glowed with pleasure. “Thank you, Lizzy,” she responded shyly.

When Mama had come to speak to Mary yesternight, it had flabbergasted the middle Bennet daughter that her mother was paying her any attention—attention which was not critical of her looks or her studies.

You could have knocked her over with a feather when her mother had explained about the heir presumptive coming to visit who would be seeking a wife from among the Bennet sisters. Once the shock wore off, Mary had to agree with her mother's logic—that in and of itself was a great surprise. Her mother told her that she was the daughter most suited to be a parson's wife. In addition, Mary keenly felt the honour of possibly being able to save Longbourn for her family. She had

always wanted to be of use to her family and as they never appreciated her pearls of wisdom by way of Reverend Fordyce, this was her chance.

Mama had handed Mary the letter Mr. Collins wrote to Papa and there was no denying the man was not an intelligent being. However, in Mary's mind, if he chose her, and he was not a vicious man, she would more than likely accept him.

She appreciated the fact Mama had gone to great lengths to explain if Mr. Collins ever offered for her, the choice would be Mary's and no one would try and pressure her to change her mind if her decision was negative.

By this morning, Mama had not forgotten her determination to make sure Mary was presented in the best possible light. She had directed Sarah—the maid the five Bennet sisters shared—to concentrate on Miss Mary.

Mary could not but smile as she remembered Lydia's reaction when Mama refused to send Sarah to her. That explosion of temper had been nothing compared to Lydia's tantrum when she was informed she and Kitty would remain home and not make the call to Netherfield Park.

Almost as confounding for the three Bennet sisters at Longbourn that morning was Papa's behaviour. He had not hidden himself in his study, but rather he had come and ordered Lydia to be quiet. When the youngest Bennet increased the volume of her caterwauling—as was her wont to get her way—Papa told her she had just forfeited a quarter's pin money.

If that was not enough, Papa then ordered Mr. Hill to have two footmen take and lock Lydia in her bedchamber. Most shocking of all was when Lydia appealed to their mother to step in. Mrs. Bennet had done nothing except tell her *favourite* to heed her father's words.

“Jane, are you truly feeling better?” Fanny asked concernedly. She sat next to her eldest on the soft, very large four-poster bed and felt her forehead. She was well pleased to detect only the slightest of fevers.

Just then there was a knock on the door and Mr. Jones was admitted to examine his patient. After some minutes he turned to Mrs. Bennet. "It pleases me to tell you the worst is definitely behind Miss Bennet," Jones stated. He turned to Elizabeth. "I assume there was no repeat of the issues from the previous night during the night past."

"Her fever was somewhat elevated, but nothing like the night before," Elizabeth reported. "There was no disturbance to Jane's sleep and she slept for most of the night without waking. The one time she did wake it was just to drink some water."

"Excellent, you are doing better than I had hoped for at this stage, Miss Bennet," Jones stated with a smile.

"When will Jane be able to return home?" Elizabeth asked sure her mother was about to object and tell them to remain at Netherfield Park as long as possible.

Both Jane and Elizabeth looked to their mother waiting for the expected disapproval to be vociferously expressed regarding Jane's return to Longbourn anytime soon. Much to their surprise, said reaction never occurred.

"That is a good question, Lizzy," Fanny said calmly.

Jane and Elizabeth looked at one another and were independently wondering if this was someone else who had taken on the form of their mother.

"Once Miss Bennet is free of a fever for a day complete, it will be safe for her to travel home the next day," Jones revealed.

"Lizzy, after Jane has been free of a fever, based on what Mr. Jones stated, send a note and the carriage will come and collect you," Fanny told her astounded second daughter.

"Yes, Mama," was all Elizabeth managed.

Mr. Jones took his leave. The two eldest Bennet sisters were looking at their mother trying to decipher what had caused such a sea change in her demeanour. "Jane, we are going to call on your hosts before we leave for Longbourn.

Would you like Lizzy to remain with you?" Fanny enquired, "If not she can accompany us to the drawing room."

"The maid will sit with me, Mama. Lizzy is free to join you downstairs," Jane allowed. "Thank you so very much for coming to see me."

"It was my pleasure, Jane dear," Fanny stated. She kissed her eldest on her cheek and then headed for the door.



Darcy remembered the Bennet matron's behaviour from their brief meeting at the assembly as well as her loud, vulgar ways the times they had attended the same neighbourhood events. Hence, he expected more of the same from her. Imagine his shock when she behaved with decorum and made no crass statements.

"This is a sweet room, Mr. Bingley," Fanny stated. "It faces east so even in the winter you receive the morning sun here."

"Yes, I have noticed that," Bingley averred. "How does Miss Bennet?"

"According to Mr. Jones, she is doing far better. He expects she will be able to return to Longbourn in a day or two at the most," Fanny informed the master of Netherfield Park.

Elizabeth was as surprised by her mother's response—or lack thereof, as it seemed was Mr. Darcy. She was wildly inquisitive to find out what had occurred to cause her mother's behaviour to change this radically.

"But surely Miss Bennet should remain for some days yet," Bingley insisted. "I am sure she will be too sick to leave in such a short time."

"Fortunately with Lizzy's excellent nursing, Jane's recovery is significantly better than we had expected it to be. As such, there will be no further reason to impose on your hospitality when she is healthy enough to return home," Fanny replied adamantly.

At her mother's public compliment to herself, Elizabeth almost fell off the wingback chair she was seated on. If she did not know better, she would think a magic spell had been cast over Longbourn.

"Where are your three youngest daughters and who is this lady we have not met before," Miss Bingley sneered.

She had expected Mrs. Bennet to make a spectacle of herself reminding Mr. Darcy of the ills of such a connection, but instead, Mrs. Bennet was behaving very well. Hence, she had brought up the youngest Bennets, especially the two youngest to remind Mr. Darcy of their atrocious behaviour.

"Mary, were you never introduced to Miss Bingley?" Elizabeth enquired with a wink to her next younger sister.

Darcy's eyebrows shot up. He had met the middle Bennet sister and there had been nothing memorable about her. He did remember her pedantic playing of the pianoforte, and as much as he would not say it publicly, he could understand why Miss Bingley had not identified the pretty young lady as being Miss Mary Bennet.

"We have indeed met Miss Bingley," Mary stated with a deadpan expression taking her lead from Elizabeth. "More than once I believe."

"Mary, Miss Mary! But you are so dowdy..." Miss Bingley caught herself but only after the words had escaped her mouth. There was no mistaking the look of disgust on Mr. Darcy's countenance, and it was directed at her.

"Caroline! That is no way to speak to a guest in our house," Bingley remonstrated with his sister.

Her mortification deepened as Miss Bingley saw Mr. Darcy's approving look directed at her brother for him chastising her. In front of Mr. Darcy was bad enough, but with the hoyden looking on was not to be borne.

"Mr. Bingley if my girls are not welcome in your home, I am sure Jane will survive returning home today," Fanny stated firmly.

She had not missed the disdainful looks being directed at herself and especially at Lizzy. There was a time Fanny had considered Miss Bingley elegantly dressed but no longer. She was beginning to see behind the façade Miss Bingley presented to the world.

“Your daughters are most welcome in *my* home, that I promise you, Mrs. Bennet,” Bingley assured the matron, “the attitude you have just observed is not indicative of the feelings of any other member of this house.” Bingley looked directly at his older sister daring her to contradict him.

“In that case, we will not roust Jane from her sickbed,” Fanny decided.

“Mrs. Bennet, if you will, when we all met at Lucas Lodge, I promised your youngest daughter I would give a ball,” Bingley stated. “Please inform her as soon as Miss Bennet is completely well, her eldest sister will name the date.”

“That is very kind of you, Mr. Bingley. I will be sure to tell her,” Fanny responded.

Miss Bingley, still fuming at her public setdown, reluctantly ordered tea. Once the tea was drunk and some treats consumed, Mrs. Bennet and Miss Mary took their leave.

Elizabeth escorted her mother and Mary to the bottom of the stone steps in front of the house and watched the Bennet carriage disappear from view in a cloud of dust. As soon as she could no longer see the conveyance, she turned and made all possible speed to Jane’s bedchamber. She had so much to tell her sister and she could not wait until she was able to do so.



With Mrs. Bennet and Miss Mary departed and Eliza back upstairs with her sister, Miss Bingley decided it was time to further her campaign of showing Mr. Darcy how degrading a connection with the Bennets would be to him, and especially his sister.

“Louisa, do you remember what Miss Bennet told us about their connections before she was taken ill at the dinner?” Miss Bingley prompted.

“Oh yes, I do,” Mrs. Hurst tittered. “One uncle is the local solicitor, married to Mrs. Bennet’s vulgar sister.”

“Now I recall,” Miss Bingley joined in. “Mrs. Bennet’s brother is a tradesman who lives in...” she tittered into her hand and looked around as if she was about to share some great secret, “...*Cheapside*.”

Darcy had known the Bennet’s connections were not stellar, but he had not imagined they were so very bad. He could only imagine the tradesman in London being a male version of Mrs. Bennet—not the Mrs. Bennet of today.

“And what of their non-existent dowries,” Mrs. Hurst egged her younger sister on.

“Yes, Sister. Can you imagine, they will only have one thousand pounds each, and that is when Mrs. Bennet is no longer alive,” Miss Bingley revealed. “My twenty thousand pounds is so much more than all the Bennet sisters will have—combined!”

‘Do you not realise how vulgar you are discussing your dowry at every turn?’ Darcy told Miss Bingley silently. *‘Your money comes from trade, which you seem to like to ignore when you boast about your wealth.’*

“I would not care if Miss Bennet had uncles enough to fill Cheapside,” Bingley interjected. “I have no need for more wealth, I have more than enough for a wife and any children in the future.”

“The point, I believe, your sisters are making is these things materially lessen the chances of the Misses Bennet marrying men of consequence,” Darcy stated.

No sooner had the words passed his lips than Darcy regretted them. Miss Bingley looked like the cat who had got the cream. She had one aim, to make Darcy aware of the Bennets’ situation and he had played right into her hands.

“At least the Bennets do not boast of their dowries like some others are wont to do. It is quite crass after all,” Darcy added. He felt some satisfaction at the way Miss Bingley deflated. He did not like to give pain, but it was time the shrew let go of her never to be gratified ambition of becoming Mrs. Darcy.



“What has Mama drunk?” Elizabeth asked her sister once she had dismissed the maid sitting with Jane and closed the bedchamber door.

“And Mary?” an amazed Jane exclaimed. “In the past, we told her she was not plain, but she always dismissed what we said. What do you think caused the change in her dress and not wearing her spectacles?”

“You need to be without fever on the morrow so we may return home,” Elizabeth instructed her sister. “I believe until we are at Longbourn we will not be able to answer any of the questions we now have.”

“How were things in the drawing room?” Jane enquired.

Elizabeth shared the fact their mother had behaved just like she had when visiting Jane. “Janey, I do not like to give you pain, but do you remember when I told you Miss Bingley was not a friend to any Bennets?”

“Yes, I do, but she has been pleasant...” Jane began but her sister interjected.

“She is a fake. She showed her true colours in the drawing room today...” Elizabeth related what Miss Bingley had said and the fact Mr. Bingley had remonstrated with his sister right away.

Jane had mixed feelings. She could not like someone who was dismissive of, and downright rude to, any of her family. On the other side of the ledger, she was very pleased Mr. Bingley had stood up to his sister. It boded well for the future—if there was ever to be a future between Mr. Bingley and herself.

Elizabeth did not miss the dreamy look Jane sported when she had told her about Mr. Bingley's actions. "Janey, are you in love with Mr. Bingley?" Elizabeth questioned.

"As I have never been in love before, I cannot tell you for sure, but I can say I have tender feelings for him," Jane admitted as she blushed furiously. "Lizzy, will you order a full tray for me for dinner this evening? I have not had an appetite until today."

Even had Mr. Jones not made his pronouncements, Elizabeth would have known her sister was far down the path to recovery by her desire to have a full meal. It was a sure sign that there would be no fever on the morrow.

She did not press Jane—who was a very private person and never showed her feelings—on the subject of Mr. Bingley. "Janey, I will take a tray with you so we can celebrate that you are feeling much better," Elizabeth decided.

"Lizzy, I cannot ask you to forgo dining in the dining parlour," Jane demurred.

"You are not asking me, Dearest. I volunteered," Elizabeth assured her sister she would brook no opposition.

When the maid delivered the note requesting two trays for the Miss Bennets, Miss Bingley was well pleased. No Eliza to distract her Mr. Darcy at the table.

Chapter 9

Even knowing it could be construed as rude to not join her hosts in the drawing room that evening, Elizabeth chose to remain with Jane in her chambers and eschewed joining the residents of the house downstairs.

She had overheard enough of Miss Bingley's abuse of her and the snide remarks she made to know the woman would decry her rudeness for not being present, while at the same time being well pleased a Bennet was not polluting her drawing room.

Elizabeth leaned over and placed her hand on her sister's forehead. "I do not think you have a fever any longer Janey," she said excitedly as she felt again to make sure.

"My body hardly aches like it has for the last two days," Jane responded. "If I have no fever tonight, are we to go home or will we remain here for the day on the morrow?"

"Mr. Jones did say a full day, so you will be able to go downstairs and possibly see some of the residents. I wonder who it is you would like to see before we return to Longbourn," Elizabeth teased.

"Lizzy!" Jane blushed as she playfully swatted at her sister's arm. "But yes, I would not object to seeing Mr. Bingley."

"In that case, if you go the night with no increase in your fever, then I see no reason why you cannot spend the day downstairs on the morrow," Elizabeth mused.

There was a knock on the door leading from the hallway into the sitting room. Elizabeth nodded to the maid who went and answered the door.

"It be the master and 'is friend," the maid reported when she returned.

"Sit here with Miss Bennet, I will see what the gentlemen need," Elizabeth instructed. She made her way into

the sitting room, pulling the door to Jane's bedchamber closed behind her.

"We came to check on Miss Bennet's progress but also to make sure you are well, Miss Elizabeth," Bingley stated once they entered the sitting room, with the door to the hallway left wide open for proprieties sake.

It was hard to miss the intense way Mr. Darcy was looking at her. Before he apologised, she believed he looked to find fault, now Elizabeth no longer knew why he would stare at her so intently. Surely Charlotte and Jane could not be correct in their assertions he was enamoured with her.

"On behalf of my sister and myself I thank you for your solicitude," Elizabeth inclined her head to the men from her seat opposite where the two had seated themselves on the settee. "Jane is vastly improved, so much so I am almost certain we will return home to Longbourn the day after the morrow." She paused remembering he had asked about her health as well. "I am perfectly well; I just felt the need to remain with Jane and celebrate her vast improvement with her being able to eat a full meal again."

"Remember what I said when your mother was here, your and Miss Bennet's residence at Netherfield Park is not an imposition, so please do not allow your sister to leave before she is ready. I would hate for her to have a relapse," Bingley stated.

"Your sentiments are appreciated, Sir," Elizabeth averred. "I assure you; we will not depart before Jane is ready to do so safely."

Darcy was sure Miss Elizabeth had, at least in part, decided to remain with her sister to avoid Miss Bingley's acerbic tongue. He did not doubt, even for the smallest measure of time Miss Elizabeth's ability to tie Miss Bingley in verbal knots. He understood, unlike the aforementioned harpy, Miss Elizabeth was too well mannered to put the woman in her place in her own house.

As if he had heard his friend's thoughts, Bingley spoke. "Miss Elizabeth, please tell me you have not been driven away

from the dining parlour and our company due to my sisters' inhospitable behaviour."

"Do not make yourself uneasy, Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth assured her host. "It would take far more to scare me; in fact, my courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me. The truth is I would rather not be the cause of any unpleasantness in your drawing room. Before you say it, I know I am not at fault, but I see no reason to provoke anyone with my presence, thereby making it uncomfortable for everyone else."

Her sensibilities impressed Darcy. Yes, if she chose to, Miss Elizabeth could put Miss Bingley in her place and then some. Rather, she was choosing the comfort of all and not gratifying herself by issuing Miss Bingley a well-deserved setdown.

What a great pity it was he could not consider her for his wife because she had all of the attributes he wanted in the woman he would marry, not to mention he had gone and fallen in love with Miss Elizabeth.

He could not think of another woman he knew of in the *Ton* who would put the feelings of others ahead of her own self-gratification. If only...

"Please allow me to apologise on behalf of my family," Bingley requested contritely.

"As much as I appreciate the sentiment, you have done nothing for which to beg my pardon," Elizabeth granted.

"As the master of this estate and head of the Bingley family, I beg to differ," Bingley asserted. "All I can tell you is that I will not allow such behaviour in my homes in the future."

"Are you sure you would not like to come down to the drawing room for some time?" Darcy asked before his head could tell his mouth to close.

"Thank you, but no," Elizabeth demurred. "I am quite happy here with my sister."

Darcy felt a great deal of relief at Miss Elizabeth's refusal. He did not want to raise expectations that would never be met and he knew if he was in her company much more, he may forget himself and propose to her in a fit of passion-driven haze.

The two men stood, bowed to Elizabeth, and then after Mr. Bingley asked—not for the first time—to be remembered to Jane, they took their leave.



The reason Darcy had jumped at the chance to escort his friend to enquire about his current angel's wellbeing was simple. Since they had gone into dinner, he had not a moment's peace.

All through dinner Miss Bingley had prattled on about who knew what. Much to Darcy's chagrin, with Miss Elizabeth's absence the shrew had doubled the amount of attention she lavished on his person.

If that had not been bad enough, in order to create some distance from Miss Bingley, Darcy had sat at the escritoire in the one corner of the drawing room and begun to write to Giana. That had not dissuaded Miss Bingley. She did not give him any peace which caused him to abandon his letter half done.

He had lost count of how many times she had asked to pass her raptures of how she longed to see his sister on to her in his letter—he had not done so; all he had written was how frustrating Miss Bingley was while he tried to concentrate.

The brazen woman had been openly suggestive, telling him how well she could mend his pen more than once. She trilled on the subject of the speed of his writing—he wrote slowly, how tedious it was to have to scribe so many letters of business.

In short, the woman had done anything and everything she could imagine to capture his attention. Hence, when Bingley mentioned he was about to go check on Miss Bennet, Darcy had taken his half-written letter and followed his friend

with alacrity before Miss Bingley was able to say a word in opposition.

“Bingley you return to the drawing room, I will turn in early. There is a letter I desire to *finally* complete to my sister,” Darcy stated when he snapped himself out of his ruminations.

“Darce, please forgive me. I realise Caroline did not give you a moment’s solitude to write the letter. I should have stopped her from interrupting you,” Bingley stated contritely.

“As Miss Elizabeth so ably pointed out, you are not to blame for your sister’s actions,” Darcy granted.

“Thank you, Darce,” Bingley inclined his head to his friend. “You go. I will absorb my younger sister’s displeasure at you not returning to the drawing room.”

He clapped his younger friend on the back and then Darcy slipped into his chambers where he told Carstens to lock all doors which allowed access to the rooms.



“Well?” Jane enquired as soon as Lizzy re-entered her chamber.

“Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy...” Elizabeth related her encounter with the two men.

There was no mistaking the look of pleasure on Jane’s face when Mr. Bingley asking after her, more than once, was canvassed. However, Jane had an uncharacteristic scowl when the parts regarding Miss Bingley were repeated.

“Talking of our hostess, how many times have she and her sister been to see you since the first day you took ill?” Elizabeth enquired.

“None,” Jane revealed.

“They seemed to indicate they came to visit you when I was not present.” Elizabeth related.

“It seems my *supposed* friend likes to dissemble,” Jane shook her head. “I can only be ashamed of my defending them when you told me what they were really like.”

“It is not in your nature to suspect someone’s motives, Janey, and I would never want you to change who you are,” Elizabeth responded warmly.

“It has come to my attention I am far too naïve at times,” Jane admitted. “No Lizzy,” Jane pre-empted her sister’s protests, “you know it to be true. It may be advantageous for me to see the world, at least in part, with a bit of your satirical eye.”

“And I, Sister dearest, need to learn to consider the world can be good and pure—to a certain extent—just like you do.”

Jane began to feel fatigued and was soon asleep. Elizabeth called the maid in and then went to her chambers to change into her night attire.

Once she was ready for bed, first she donned her robe, then Elizabeth crossed back through the shared sitting room to Jane’s chamber. She made sure to ease the door open gently as the last thing she wanted was to wake her slumbering sister.

Like yesternight, Jane was sleeping without any disturbance and when Elizabeth felt her sister’s forehead, it was cool to the touch. No fever at all. Elizabeth instructed the maid to wake her if awaken her if there was any significant change Miss Bennet’s fever.

The maid promised Miss Elizabeth she would wake her if there was reason to do so. With that assurance, Elizabeth returned to her chambers, took off her robe, and placed it over the back of a chair near the bed in case she had to go to Jane during the night.

After extinguishing the final candle next to her bed, Elizabeth slid below the covers and allowed the warmth to envelop her body. Just before she slipped into Morpheus’s arms, Elizabeth’s mind drifted unbidden to thoughts of a certain extremely handsome man from Derbyshire.



A few suites down from the Bennet sisters, Darcy was preparing for bed. He had completed his letter to Giana

without the shrew's constantly importuning him while he tried to write. In addition, he had written a letter to his aunt and uncle, and one to Richard.

As he did every night, he had Carstens check that all doors, including the one leading to the servants' passages, were locked. Even if she compromised him, Darcy would never marry the harpy, but he preferred to avoid the situation so her brother would not have to face his sister's ruin and the ensuing scandal that would be attached to the Bingley name.

In an additional layer of security, Carstens had a pallet between the doors from the sitting room and the hall. His man had requested all copies of keys to his master's chambers, but Darcy did not want to take a chance Miss Bingley somehow found another of which the housekeeper was not aware.

His valet assisted him to prepare for bed and soon the candles were blown out and Darcy was lying in his bed, his hands behind his head, deep in thought. Within a minute or so he could hear his man's deep breathing telling Darcy that Carstens was asleep.

He had always known what his duty was with unswerving surety, so how had this slip of a woman come to cause him so much confusion? That he was in love with Miss Elizabeth Bennet was an irrefutable fact. Darcy was aware denying it to himself would be a complete prevarication and disguise of any sort was something he abhorred.

His head told him he had to remember his duty to his name, and especially to Giana. If he married someone so far below himself, his belief was the *Ton* would see it as a degradation and his sister would suffer for it in the quality of her future match.

At the same time, his heart was screaming he would be a simpleton to give up a woman like Miss Elizabeth. Each time his heart began to gain the upper hand, his head would remind him about the low connections and the behaviour of her family. Even if the mother seemed to behave with decorum on her visit to Netherfield Park, his head would not allow him

to forget how she and the younger sisters had carried on at the assembly and other times they had been in company together.

‘No!’ he told himself silently. ‘I must get over this, I cannot give in to my heart in this. I will conquer these feelings!’

He lay awake wrestling with his feelings until well after midnight. Darcy eventually drifted off to sleep, but it was a fitful rest during which he dreamed of being with the raven-haired beauty with the finest emerald-green eyes he had ever seen.



Elizabeth Bennet usually woke before the sun rose. This morning she woke with a start seeing the sun streaming through the cracks in the curtains in her bedchamber. No one had come to wake her.

At first, she panicked that something had happened with Jane during the night and she had slept through all. With that feeling of guilt pervading her, she threw her robe on and made her way to Jane’s bedchamber as fast as she was able.

“Good morning, Lizzy,” Jane greeted when her sister burst into her chambers. “I trust you slept well?”

“Jane...you look very well; did you not have a fever during the night? Why did no one wake me earlier?” Elizabeth queried as she began to relax at noticing how cheery Jane looked.

“I am perfectly well, Dearest. I did not wake with a fever in the night and had none this morning,” Jane reported. “As to why you were not woken, that was at my request. You have spent the last few nights at my side and have not had nearly enough sleep.”

In order to satisfy her lingering worries, Elizabeth approached Jane and placed her hand on her sister’s forehead. Much to her pleasure, Elizabeth felt no fever, Jane’s forehead felt as it always did when her sister was well.

“Janey, I am so happy. That first night...” Elizabeth choked up as she remembered her fears that night. A few tears

escaped her eyes.

Jane took her sister's hands in her own and squeezed them reassuringly. "Please pardon me for causing you such grave concern."

"Only you Janey would apologise for that over which you bear no fault," Elizabeth gave a watery smile.

"What say you we get dressed and descend the stairs to join the residents in breaking their fasts? I have had enough eating on trays," Jane suggested.

Elizabeth happily kissed her sister's cheek and made for her own chamber to dress. It was a great day; Janey was truly well and they would return home on the morrow.

Chapter 10

Bingley could not contain his joy when Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth entered the breakfast parlour. He and Darcy stood as the ladies arrived. It had just been the two of them as his younger sister and the Hursts had not yet ambled into the room.

“Miss Bennet, it is such a pleasure to see you up and about again,” Bingley effused. “Are you sure you are well enough to be out of your chamber?”

“Thank you for your care for me while I was recuperating under your roof, Sir,” Jane responded evenly. “You may rest assured I am well and have had no fever since yester-afternoon. I must say I feel well enough to call for our carriage to come collect me and my sister today.”

“D-did not Mr. Jones say you were to remain indoors for one full day with no fever before you chance the elements?” Bingley reminded his angel.

She had been in his home for some days now, but never in his company. He was hoping Miss Bennet would remain for this day so he would be able to spend some time with her, hopefully getting to know her better.

Charles Bingley was self-aware enough to know in the past he had fallen in love and then out of love just as fast, with ladies he had called his angels. He was also sure his feelings for Miss Jane Bennet were far deeper than any lady before her. It was not only her outward beauty. She had an inner beauty as well and he very much wanted to learn more about her to see if, as he suspected, he had at last found the lady who would share his future.

The task ahead of him was not an easy one. He had to somehow divine Miss Bennet’s feelings for him. The problem was she was a very proper, demure young lady who did not wear her heart on her sleeve so he was cognisant it would not be easy to detect whether or not she had tender feelings for him.

“That he did,” Elizabeth interjected. “As such, we will send a note to our mother to send the carriage to collect us on the morrow.”

“If you wait another two days, we will be happy to return you to your home on Sunday after church,” Bingley tried.

She looked to her younger sister first who nodded. “As much as we appreciate your kind and generous offer, Elizabeth and I have imposed on your hospitality for long enough. Also, we miss our home, as I am sure you can understand.”

The truth was, had they not been so curious to discover what had caused the change in their mother’s disposition—something they prayed was not fleeting—the sisters may have been amenable to remaining for a few extra days.

He did not want to be seen as pressuring his guests to remain in his home so Bingley receded. “Then, at least, we will be able to spend time with you, both of you, today,” Bingley stated.

Darcy was somewhat confused while both happy and sad at the same time. It pleased him the temptation who was Miss Elizabeth Bennet would be removed from his immediate notice in less than a day. For that self-same reason, he was also sad.

What confused him was the willingness, no more than that, the keenness of the Bennet sisters to return to their home while refusing the offer to remain at Netherfield Park for a few more days. As he was convinced Miss Elizabeth had noticed his marked attentions to her, he was sure—like most debutantes in the *Ton* or Miss Bingley—she would have grasped at any excuse to remain in his company.

The same was true for Miss Bennet and Bingley, but even with a direct offer to remain, Miss Bennet had demurred. It was most perplexing. Darcy knew it was a conundrum he would need to take time to solve.

As far as he remembered, he had always been right about this kind of thing before so it was an uncomfortable

feeling of not being sure of the truth of the matter.

The Bennet sisters had just helped themselves to food from the chafing dishes on the sideboard when the Hursts and Miss Bingley—the latter’s grating, high-pitched voice preceding her—entered the breakfast parlour.

“Dear Jane, are you feeling better?” Miss Bingley enquired insincerely. “Miss Eliza.”

“Miss Caro, good morning to you,” Elizabeth returned with a deadpan look on her face. “As you can see by her presence, Jane is much better.”

“My name is Miss *Caroline* Bingley,” Miss Bingley sneered.

“As mine is Miss *Elizabeth* Bennet,” Elizabeth riposted.

“I heard Miss Lucas call you Eliza,” Miss Bingley insisted.

“She and her family are the only ones from whom I accept being called Eliza. They do not use the name as a form of derision but rather from friendship,” Elizabeth returned.

Miss Bingley looked over at Mr. Darcy and was able to tell he was not at all amused with what she had considered her witticisms. She sniffed and went to make herself a plate.

For the rest of the meal, other than Mr. Bingley and Jane who had their heads together speaking quietly, there was little conversation between the rest of those at the table.

Elizabeth placed her knife and fork together and moved aside slightly making it easier for the footman to remove her plate. “Jane, unless you need me, I will take a walk in the park,” Elizabeth said.

“Go Lizzy, it has been a few days since you have been able to exercise. I am well taken care of in the house,” Jane responded.

She stood, curtsied to those in the parlour, retrieved her bonnet from the butler, and then headed for the front doors. As

soon as Elizabeth left the breakfast parlour, Miss Bingley forgot, or cared not, that her sister was still seated within.

“We do know Miss *Eliza* is a great walker, after all.” Miss Bingley tittered into her hand and was joined in that by her sister.

“Did Miss *Elizabeth* not point out but minutes ago you do not have her permission to address her thusly,” Darcy stated rather firmly.

Rather than respond, Miss Bingley found the food on her plate rather interesting. She did not look at anyone. Instead, she sat with her head down pushing her food around on her plate until Mr. Darcy, Miss Bennet, and her brother left the dining parlour.

“Caroline, take care. You will alienate Mr. Darcy and then how will you induce him to offer for you,” Mrs. Hurst opined.

“Do not worry so, Louisa. *My* Mr. Darcy cares not for that low-born hoyden. The sooner she and Miss Bennet return to that hovel they call an estate, the better.” Miss Bingley stated nastily. “With their so-called estate being entailed, they will lose their status as gentlewomen when their father is no more.”

Louisa Hurst was sure her sister was wrong, but she would not tell her that. The last thing she wanted was for Caroline to have a tantrum and begin abusing her verbally as she had done many times in the past.

Rather than rebut her sister, Mrs. Hurst returned her attention to the food on her plate.



Darcy had to fight his inclination to go walk in the park as well and *quite by chance* come across Miss Elizabeth and her lithe figure as she took her exercise. It was less than four and twenty hours before the temptress would be gone.

He decided to go to the library—if one could name a room with so few books with that hallowed moniker— and

seat himself with a book because it was one of the few places in the house Miss Bingley never entered.

Before he did, he watched Miss Elizabeth as she walked along one of the paths in the park. Behind him, he could hear the hum of conversation between Miss Bennet and Bingley.

Rather than the library, he told himself he would remain in the drawing room instead to guard propriety so Miss Bennet and Bingley were not left alone. He had to admit with the doors wide open and a footman just outside, he was not needed in the room, but he wanted to keep watching Miss Elizabeth.

“When your mother was here, I told her I would have you name the date for a ball to be held here once you were well again,” Bingley told Miss Bennet. “What say you to the first Friday in December? That would allow for more than a fortnight to plan and make sure there is enough white soup ready.”

Just then, Miss Bingley and the Hursts entered the drawing room. “Charles, you cannot be serious about holding a ball in this unsophisticated place,” Miss Bingley interjected.

“I most certainly am serious,” Bingley replied firmly. “If you are not up to organising it, I will request Louisa replace you as mistress of the estate.”

“Of course I am able to make the arrangements,” Miss Bingley huffed indignantly. “I was just concerned that some of our party will not enjoy such entertainment.” No one missed how Miss Bingley looked at Mr. Darcy’s back as she said the last.

“You mean Darcy? If he chooses to, he is welcome to hide in his chambers and sleep, but a ball we will have,” Bingley turned back to his angel. “The seventh day of December is not too soon is it?”

“For my part, no, that would not be too soon,” Jane averred.

“Then it is decided, the ball will be held here on that night,” Bingley insisted.

“If only balls did not have so much dancing and more discussion,” Miss Bingley sighed. “What say you, Mr. Darcy?”

Miss Bingley was sure she was gratifying Mr. Darcy’s sensibilities with her description of a ball she imagined he would enjoy.

Darcy turned around as the object of his obsession had disappeared behind a stand of trees. “What you are describing would not be a ball, Miss Bingley,” Darcy drawled. “I do not object to a ball as long as I know those attending, as I will in this case.”

She was not happy with his reply, but Miss Bingley did not say any more as the last thing she wanted was to provoke Mr. Darcy into disagreeing with her yet again.



“Is that another letter from Wills?” Tiffany asked her younger cousin.

“It is,” Georgiana averred. “I will read it to you if you like.”

“As long as there is nothing personal you would not want me to hear,” Tiffany responded.

“Tiff, you know I have no secrets from you,” Georgiana assured her cousin. She opened the letter and began to read.

22 November 1810

Netherfield Park, Hertfordshire

Dearest Giana,

I miss you my dearest sister and as much as I would have enjoyed you being here with me, I would not force you into the company of one with whom you do not feel comfortable.

“Wills knows you dislike Miss Bingley and her sister intensely, does he not?” Tiffany enquired.

“I-I have not told him that...exactly. After my almost elopement, I do not want to give William any reason to be upset with me,” Georgiana explained.

“Giana! Wills would not be cross if you told him how you truly feel,” Tiffany insisted. “Like Andy and Rich would for me, your brother would do anything in his power to make sure you are happy.”

“What of his friendship with Mr. Bingley? I would not want to be the cause of a breach between them,” Georgiana stated plaintively.

“Miss Darcy, excuse me if I interject,” Mrs. Annesley said gently. Giana nodded her permission. “Lady Tiffany has the right of it. Your brother would do anything to make you happy. I have seen Mr. Bingley around his sister. He is aware of, let us say, her deficiencies. If your brother took steps to make sure Miss Bingley no longer importuned you and it caused a problem between him and Mr. Bingley, the friendship would be a very weak one indeed.”

Giana looked to her cousin who was nodding her agreement with vigour. “I suppose I will talk to William when I see him next,” Georgiana decided. She returned to the letter.

I am sitting in the drawing room and silly me, I thought when Miss Bingley saw I was busy with a letter, she would leave me be. No such luck. She interrupts me constantly and has asked me to send her warmest regards to “dear Georgiana” no less than five times already.

Please tell me in your next letter. Did you ever give Miss Bingley leave to address you so informally? I know neither Rich nor I have done so.

If only Miss Elizabeth was in the drawing room, she would have drawn Miss Bingley’s attention. She has such an easy way of countering Miss Bingley’s barbs and rudeness.

So many times when in company with Miss Elizabeth, I have to fight my mirth from bubbling over. She is so witty and

intelligent that Miss Bingley can never quite work out when Miss Elizabeth is putting her in her place and making sport of her.

I am continuing this letter in my chambers. I could no longer concentrate on what I wanted to write to you with Miss Bingley buzzing around my head like an errant housefly.

Bingley and I stopped by to make sure Miss Bennet (Miss Elizabeth's older sister, the one who has taken ill) and Miss Elizabeth were both well.

They were. Miss Elizabeth decided to spend the evening with her sister and forego dinner and the drawing room with the rest of the residents. She stated she wanted to be able to be with her sister who was vastly improved. My belief is she chose not to put herself in Miss Bingley's company. As she told my friend, Miss Bingley does not intimidate her in the least.

My hope, Giana sweetling, is that your spirits are much recovered and I will repeat what I have said before: I hold you blameless for Ramsgate. The blame lies at the feet of that blackguard who tried to insert himself into your life and the faithless companion who was in league with him.

Enjoy your time with Aunt, Uncle, and Tiffany. Have you seen much of Andy and Cilla? Are they still in London or have they returned to Hilddale already?

As I promised, we will be together for Christmastide. I will let you know when I plan to return to Darcy House.

With my warmest regards,

Your brother, William

"It is the most he has mentioned Miss Elizabeth," Tiffany postulated. "I think I would enjoy meeting her."

"I as well, but what would she think of me if she discovered my folly?" Georgiana worried.

"The only way she would do so is if you told her, and if you did, she would be worthy of the knowledge," Tiffany

stated with surety. “She sounds nothing like that harpy who would use such information for her own benefit.”

Georgiana’s face showed deep worry. “What you said made me think about Aunt Catherine. If she knew, she would use it to apply pressure and force William to marry Anne.”

“If our *dear* aunt ever sunk so low, she would be rejected by all of us in the family, we would never know her again,” Tiffany insisted. “Do not forget, Papa is the executor of Uncle Lewis’s will and he is able to exert much control over Lady Catherine.”

“I forgot about that,” Georgiana averred as she visibly relaxed.

Giana put the letter aside and thereafter the two girls sat on the bench in front of the pianoforte to work on duets.

Chapter 11

For the first time since she arrived at Netherfield Park, Jane Bennet enjoyed a full dinner in the dining parlour. When she had arrived initially, some days past, she had not been able to last more than half of the meal before becoming sick and having to be put to bed. Now here she was, seated next to Mr. Bingley who looked perfectly happy with himself to have her placed next to him at the table.

For Bingley's part, he was more than pleased to have his angel at his right hand, her younger sister seated to his left. When he had told Caroline how he wanted the seating arranged for dinner she had initially balked at the idea of Miss Bennet sitting next to him.

Suddenly her opposition had disappeared like wisps of smoke being blown by a strong wind. Bingley had assumed—correctly—his sister had realised with Miss Bennet next to him, her younger sister would be close to her and far away from Caroline, and more importantly, Darcy, at the other end of the large table.

Caroline had placed Louisa next to Darcy and Hurst next to her on the other side. Even though there was a distance between the two groups at the ends of the table, Bingley did not miss how pleased Caroline was to have Darcy next to her and Miss Elizabeth far away from her prey.

He had warned his sister, in no uncertain terms, against being snide or rude, even in the smallest measure to their guests. The penalty was banishment to Scarborough and a drastic reduction in her allowance.

Bingley was well aware he would have to apologise to Darcy for the seating arrangements later. The formidable Darcy mask was in place and if he responded to Caroline at all, it was with monosyllabic replies.

Elizabeth was too pleased to be seated across from Jane in a dining parlour to care about the four at the other end

of the table. She was deriving too much pleasure from seeing Janey looking like her normal, healthy self.

Knowing how much pleasure Jane took in Mr. Bingley's company, Elizabeth only responded when one or the other spoke to her directly, which was hardly at all. The two, Elizabeth judged, were well on their way to falling in love with each other.

Some years past, just before Jane was pushed out by their mother at the tender age of fifteen, Jane and then twelve-year-old Lizzy had sworn they would only marry for the deepest love and a healthy respect.

Their parents had loved one another at first, but without respect and with no meeting of the minds, their love had withered and died. It was not a fate either of the eldest Bennet daughters would agree to suffer even if it meant they never married and had to go into service to provide for themselves.

At his end of the table, Darcy was suffering the inanities and cloying attentions of Miss Bingley. If only he had never confessed his attraction to Miss Elizabeth's fine eyes to her. Ever since then, she had redoubled her attempts to gain his favour.

He was aware Bingley had told her—on numerous occasions—her desires regarding himself would never—under any circumstances—be gratified. It seemed Miss Bingley saw and heard only that which fit her preconceived notions.

It was times like this when Darcy missed Richard even more. His cousin could deflect the most determined fortune hunter or social climber—Miss Bingley was both—away from himself, an ability Darcy wished he had.

Thankfully, after what to Darcy felt like an interminable period, dinner came to an end. Usually, being such a small party, the men eschewed separation of the sexes, but on this evening, Darcy needed a break from Miss Bingley so he requested one.

When Miss Bingley heard Mr. Darcy's request, she flattered herself that Mr. Darcy shared her feelings and was trying to cut the amount of time to a minimum he would have to be with the lowborn Bennets.

Normally she would ignore her brother's edicts about politeness, however, she had seen something in his eyes which told her Charles would follow through. This time it was no idle threat. It was hard, but so far she had held her tongue, much against her own inclination, regarding the hoyden. She could not take a chance in the drawing room before the men joined them as she would not risk her brother hearing her.

Miss Bingley stood and led the three ladies out of the dining parlour while Bingley stood and seated himself where his younger sister had been, placing him close to Darcy and Hurst.

The butler delivered a silver tray with port, wine, and brandy decanters and the requisite glasses. All three men selected brandy. As was his wont, Hurst poured himself well over two fingers' worth, while the other two poured barely one finger each.

"You owe me," Darcy told Bingley. There was no worry about Hurst paying attention to them as long as he had his brandy and the decanter in front of him to replenish his glass as needed.

"Of that I am well aware," Bingley responded as he raised his glass in a salute of his friend.

"I know not how much longer I can continue to be pleasant to your younger sister," Darcy stated after he took a small sip of his brandy. He was not one to over imbibe. He hated losing control. "One of these days, I will forget my manners and tell Miss Bingley the truth of how I feel about her and her pretensions."

"If you feel you need to, you have my blessing," Bingley averred stoically. "It will be nothing I have not told her at various times. Mayhap if it comes from you she will finally accept the truth of the matter."

“As loathe as I am to speak to any lady in that way, I will do so if I feel I have no choice,” Darcy mused.

During the time they had spoken, Hurst had twice refilled and drained his glass of a similar amount of brandy as he had with his first helping. Hurst was already in his third helping, and neither his brother-in-law nor Darcy had finished even their original one finger of brandy.



When the men entered the drawing room, one of them rather unsteadily, they found two distinct groups of ladies. On one settee was one set of sisters, and on another, across the room from them was the other.

Bingley went directly to where the Bennet sisters were seated. “Miss Bennet, will you not join me over there,” Bingley pointed to a divan on the other side of the fire from the door. “I would hate for you to take a chill when you have only now recovered from your malady.”

“Why thank you Mr. Bingley, I would enjoy that,” Jane responded with the faintest trace of a blush.

She took the proffered arm and Bingley led his angel to the divan. As soon as she was seated, he had the fire built up a little higher than it had been.

Miss Bingley sprang up from her settee leaving her sister in mid-sentence and made directly for Mr. Darcy aiming to take his arm. He was unfortunately too fast for her and reached an armchair just next to the settee where the hated Eliza was reading a book. They were seated far too close one to the other for Miss Bingley’s liking. The fact Eliza had not lifted her head from the book was beside the point.

Not wanting the hoyden to steal Mr. Darcy’s attention, Miss Bingley turned to her sister. “Louisa, some music would be nice,” Miss Bingley stated, brooking no opposition.

The fact Louisa’s lout of a husband was snoring away on a chaise lounge bothered her not at all. If the glutton was woken by the music, it would be his problem, not hers.

Mrs. Hurst who had been playing with her bracelets stood obediently and made her way to the instrument. She began to play the first piece which happened to be open. It was a lively reel.

Bingley solicited Miss Bennet's hand to dance, if she was feeling up to it, which evidently she was so he led his angel to the centre of the room and began to dance with her.

At first, Miss Bingley preened when she saw Mr. Darcy, who normally eschewed dancing, stand. She was certain he was coming to ask her to stand up with him. Her joy turned to horror when Mr. Darcy turned to Miss Elizabeth and not herself.

"Will you do me the honour of this dance," Darcy bowed before Miss Elizabeth and extended his hand to her.

Before his apology, Elizabeth would have refused, but now she had no reason to do so. "It is my pleasure, Sir," she responded as she stood and allowed him to lead her to where Jane and Mr. Bingley were dancing.

Miss Bingley had fallen into a trap of her own making. If she demanded Louisa cease playing or play something other than a dance, she would look churlish in Mr. Darcy's eyes. All Miss Bingley could do was bite the inside of her cheek to stop herself from screaming at the unfairness of it all.

Thank goodness the Bennet sisters would be leaving first thing in the morning on the morrow. Things would go back to normal without Miss Eliza and her arts and allurements distracting Miss Bingley's intended.

It was with great pleasure Miss Bingley had instructed a footman to deliver the note to Longbourn which requested the Bennet carriage arrive to collect the sisters in the morning. She had heard a positive reply had returned.

If it had been negative, Miss Bingley would have been willing to drive the two Bennets home herself. '*One more night, only one more night,*' Miss Bingley repeated to herself silently.

When Mrs. Hurst looked to her sister as the piece she had been playing drew to an end she did not miss the tight and angry shake of Caroline's head. Hence when the music came to an end, Mrs. Hurst stood, closed the instrument, and returned to the settee where she previously had been seated.

Hurst had not stirred at all during the musical interlude. It seemed more than six fingers of brandy was too much even for one who imbibed as much as he did.



The Bennet carriage arrived at nine just as their mother had promised. Except for Mr. Hurst, the Netherfield Park party was present to farewell the two Bennets. Soon Jane and Elizabeth were on their way home.

“Did you miss how pleasant Miss Bingley was this morning?” Elizabeth observed as the manor house receded behind the conveyance. “She must be overjoyed to be ridding her house of the *country mushrooms*.”

“She called us that?” Jane verified in disgust.

“Among other things, yes,” Elizabeth confirmed. “It seems Miss Bingley missed the lesson at her oft boasted-about seminary about the offspring of tradesmen being below those who are born to landed gentry.”

“She is a sad person,” Jane shook her head. “At least my eyes are open and I will not be taken in by her and her false friendship any longer.”

At the same time as the Bennet sisters were talking, those who had seen them leave had very different reactions.

Bingley was sad to see the back of his angel, thinking about ways he would be in her company soon.

Darcy was conflicted. It was good, according to his head, that Miss Elizabeth had departed, while at the same time, his heart was telling him it was the opposite.

Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley were both much pleased by the Bennets taking their leave. Mrs. Hurst because she knew their absence, especially Miss Elizabeth's, would help

her younger sister's mood improve. Miss Bingley was overjoyed. She would have Mr. Darcy's undivided attention now. If she never saw Miss Eliza again it would be too soon.

There would be no choice but to see her at the ball, but she was determined she would find a way for them to leave the benighted neighbourhood as soon as may be after the infernal ball.



“Jane and Lizzy, you are come back,” Mr. Bennet said in welcome as he handed his daughters out of the carriage.

Their father being the one to greet them and assist them to alight, was as surprising as had been their mother's calm demeanour. The two eldest Bennet sisters looked at one another questioningly but neither could fathom what had come to pass at Longbourn during their sojourn at Netherfield Park.

Just like she had been the last time they had seen her, their mother was calm. Mary had not reverted to her old way of dressing and presenting herself to the world. Not only that, there seemed to be genuine warmth between their parents.

Fanny and Mary were next to greet the returning sisters. “Jane, are you truly recovered from your illness? You did not depart before you were ready to be outside, did you?” Fanny questioned concernedly.

“I am quite recovered, thank you, Mama. It has been more than a full day since I last had a slight fever,” Jane revealed.

“Thank you for taking such good care of your sister, Lizzy dear,” Fanny squeezed her very surprised second daughter's hand.

“It was my pleasure,” Elizabeth managed.

“Where are Kitty and Lydia?” Jane enquired as the five Bennets walked back into the house.

“They are no longer out,” Fanny said matter-of-factly. “Your father and I decided they are not near mature enough to be out in society.”

In the entrance hall Hill relieved the two Miss Bennets of their outerwear. There was a rumble of noise from upstairs somewhere, not as much as Jane and Elizabeth would have expected, if as they suspected the two youngest Bennets were back in the schoolroom.

“Come let us make for the drawing room and we will explain the genesis of the changes you see around you,” Bennet stated. He stood back to allow his wife to proceed him. “After you, Fanny.” His wife gave him a warm look further shocking Jane and Elizabeth who had never seen any discernible warmth between their parents.

As soon as everyone was seated Bennet explained about the letter from Mr. Collins and how he and their mother had a long talk *with* each other, rather than *at* one another. He related how they had both had a change of heart realising the way they had been acting as parents was not a way to secure their daughters’ futures.

Their parents revealed how they came to the conclusion regarding Mary being the only one who might suit Mr. Collins and how they decided to deflect him first from Jane and then from Elizabeth.

The letter was handed first to Jane and then to Elizabeth to read. After doing so they were both extremely grateful their distant cousin would be directed away from them.

“Mary, are you sure you want to accept his attentions, if he bestows them on you?” Elizabeth verified. “He does seem like a rather singular creature.”

“Mama and Papa have assured me it is my choice. You well know I am not romantic like you two, and as long as he is a decent man who is not vicious, I will accept him if he offers for me,” Mary explained.

“We will support you in your choice,” Jane assured their sister.

“What of Kitty and Lydia? It is much calmer than I expected with them put back in,” Elizabeth observed.

“It was not such for the first few days,” Bennet revealed. “After Lydia lost her second quarter’s allowance and Kitty one quarter, they started to realise their screaming and misbehaving was gaining them nothing.”

“That was until yesterday when the Derbyshire Militia arrived in Meryton. Lydia almost had an apoplexy being denied being in company with the officers,” Fanny said. “Her behaviour only highlighted the rectitude of them not being out and the danger she would have posed unchecked among the officers. I should have never told her those stories about Colonel Millar and his regiment from all those years past. In my romanticising the memories of a silly girl, Lydia began to believe an officer was her ideal man.

“Your father took the time to explain what junior officers in the militia earn. It is enough to barely keep themselves, never mind a wife.”

“The material point is we have both made changes and we will attempt not to repeat the errors of the past,” Bennet stated. “As I told your mother, I blame myself more than anyone. We cannot change the past, but we can change how we do things as we move forward.” He paused. “I wrote a letter to your Aunt Gardiner requesting her assistance in finding a companion for your youngest sisters. One who can operate as a governess if needs be.”

When the shock of the changes in her parents began to wear off, Elizabeth told them how Mr. Darcy had apologised to her and about the stay at Netherfield Park, including Miss Bingley’s behaviour.

“How can that virago call herself a lady?” Fanny demanded. “She has not a clue how to be a hostess if that is how she treats guests in her house.”

At least they had a few days until the heir presumptive descended on them. After taking tea with their parents and Mary, Jane and Elizabeth made their way up to their bedchamber to unpack.

Chapter 12

On Monday at precisely four in the afternoon, a gig pulled to a halt in Longbourn's drive. Bennet could not but smile. He had intelligence from one of his tenants that the gig had been waiting in the lane near the turn off into the estate for at least two hours based on when Mr. Black had seen it there. Bennet had remembered a sentence in Mr. Collins' letter about how his patroness demanded punctuality.

Next to the driver sat a man the five Bennets present to meet him correctly guessed was their distant cousin, William Collins. While the driver of the gig went to unlash the trunk tied to the rear bench, the passenger began to stir.

Once the man climbed down from the bench, it was observed he was tall—not quite as tall as Mr. Bingley—and was a little portly, but not overly so. He was dressed in the black garb one would expect of a clergyman and wore a broad-brimmed hat, also in black. His shirt and cravat—not intricately knotted—were white.

Collins was impressed, first by the manor house which would be his one day, and then by his fair cousins he noted standing next to the older woman, he assumed was their mother. All three were pretty, but the one closest to her mother was exceptionally beautiful. It was easy to see where their looks came from as their mother was still a very pretty lady for one of her age.

His brow creased slightly, were there not five daughters? Why had two of them snubbed the future master of the estate? *'Mayhap,'* he told himself, *'the other two are homely and their parents did not want to present them to one of my status.'* Collins mused silently. He gave a low bow to those greeting him.

As Mr. Collins gave a bow—one which would be expected to be given to nobility or even royalty—he removed his hat exposing a head of thinning hair.

Bennet gave a bow and the ladies all curtsied. “Mr. William Collins, I presume,” Bennet drawled.

“At your service. Mr. Bennet, I assume,” Collins responded. “If I may be indelicate, do you not have two more daughters and should they not have been here to greet the future master of this estate?”

Although he could have drawn on an acerbic retort, Bennet chose not to at this time. “Our two youngest daughters are not yet out and are at their lessons. I am sure you can understand why we would not want to disturb their schedule of classes.”

“Of course Cousin, I apologise for raising the issue of their absence. As Lady Catherine would say...” Collins did not complete his thought about his beneficent patroness because his cousin cut him off.

“Standing next to me is my wife, Mrs. Frances Bennet, and our three eldest daughters, Miss Jane Bennet, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Mary. At some point later you will meet Kitty and Lydia who are but seventeen and fifteen respectively.”

He automatically bowed to each lady as she was introduced. Collins no longer felt slighted that the two youngest were not present as he understood the reasons, especially as Lady Catherine had pontificated more than once on the importance of a gentlelady’s education. It was a point in his cousins’ favour that they held to one of the tenets Lady Catherine held dear.

It took him but moments to decide Miss Bennet would have the honour of being the recipient of his addresses. She was after all the oldest and most beautiful; no less than he deserved. He was sure it would be the work of a few days until he was engaged to the blond, tall beauty.

“Mrs. Hill, our housekeeper will show you to your chamber,” Fanny told her guest. “Please let her know if you need water to wash. When you are ready, we will be in the drawing room.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bennet, that is most kind of you. Some water will be appreciated,” Collins bowed to the mistress of the estate in thanks.

He followed Mr. and Mrs. Bennet into the house where he was introduced to the butler and housekeeper. After the mistress told her the guest required some water, Mrs. Hill led the man up to his chamber.



When Collins arrived in the principal drawing room, which like the rest of his future property was comfortable—nothing like the luxury of Rosings Park, but then nothing would be like that magnificent house—he was surprised to find only his cousin and Mrs. Bennet present.

“Would you like some tea and shortbread?” Fanny offered.

Collins loved the Scottish biscuits and accepted a cup of tea, with milk and three spoons of sugar—he had a serious sweet tooth—and four of the delectable biscuits on his plate.

There was no conversation until the tea service had been cleared away by one of the maids. Bennet waited until the door was closed. “Mr. Collins, are we to understand your allusion in your letter to *admiring our daughters* and the *olive branch* for the crime of being the possible recipient of the estate via the entail, it is your intention to make one of our girls your wife?”

“Yes, but I desired to get to know more about your daughters before I proposed,” Collins explained. “All who I met were very pretty, especially the one on whom I have chosen to bestow the honour of being my wife, that being Miss Bennet.”

“As much as I hate to disappoint you, Jane is in an unofficial courtship and we expect an offer from the man, one Jane is very happy with, in the near future,” Fanny informed Collins delicately showing some put on contrition.

“In that case, I will select Miss Elizabeth, she is next in line after all...” Anything else Collins was about to say was

lost when his cousin raised his hand.

“As much as we love our Lizzy, I am afraid I must as a matter of honesty and honour inform you she would never make a good parson’s wife,” Bennet related with put on sadness. “Allow me to confirm something. In your letter you alluded to the fact your patroness is much involved in dispensing her wisdom in the running of your home and the parish in general, is that accurate?” Collins nodded emphatically. “It is what I feared.” Bennet shook his head sadly.

Now he was alarmed. “What do you fear?” Collins asked fearfully.

“It is my fault really, my wife told me I was erring, but I did not heed her warnings,” Bennet sighed.

“Very true Mr. Bennet, but there is no advantage to crying over spilled milk,” Fanny agreed.

“Please speak plainly Cousins, to what are you referring?” an alarmed Collins wanted to know.

“Lizzy is highly intelligent and over the years I have educated her like I would have a son. She has received an education similar to one a man would at university and due to that she is rather opinionated. Mrs. Bennet warned me no man would accept a woman who was *far* more intelligent and learned than himself, but I did not pay her heed.” Bennet shook his head in fake contrition. It was time to play the trump. “I am ashamed and afraid with her outspokenness she will never submit to your patroness and therefor be most unacceptable to her as your wife...unless you are willing to engender the wrath of Lady Catherine by bringing an impertinent wife back to Hunsford with you, that is.”

Both Bennet parents had to school their demeanours as they saw the look of abject terror on Mr. Collins’s face at the thought of one who would not only not listen to his venerated patroness, but would contradict her.

“I had so hoped to find a wife from among my cousins,” Collins moaned, “how will I be able to return and

face Lady Catherine having failed her. Some days before I left, my patroness summoned me to see her. ‘Mr. Collins,’ she said, ‘you must marry. A clergyman like you must marry. In order to alleviate the pain of the entail, choose properly from among your cousins, that way, for my sake she will be a gentlewoman; and for your own, let her be an active, useful sort of lady, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way, and educated in the bible so she will be a good parson’s wife. This is my advice. Find such a woman as soon as you can, bring her to Hunsford, and I will visit her.’

“What am I to do now?” Collins fairly wailed.

“It just so happens you have overlooked one of your cousins who is *exactly* the type of young lady your patroness described,” Fanny stated innocently.

“Truly?” Collins perked up.

“Yes, our middle daughter, Mary. She is everything Lady Catherine spoke of and additionally she is very well versed not only in the bible but she is also a student of the writings of Reverend Fordyce,” Bennet added the *coup-de-grâce*.

Fanny and Bennet said nothing as they watched Mr. Collins cogitating. They were certain he would choose to pursue Mary and consider it his own choice to do so.

Collins thought back to when he arrived. Miss Mary was not quite as pretty as Miss Elizabeth but she was more than acceptably good looking. Honour would not allow him to choose Miss Bennet and he would never think of someone for the post of his wife who his patroness would find unacceptable.

He owed his cousin and his wife a huge debt of gratitude. Without their warnings, he may have made the greatest of errors. How unselfish of them to warn him even to the detriment of their second daughter’s marital prospects. He felt sorry for Miss Elizabeth as she would never receive a proposal of marriage, but that was not his worry at the moment.

As he went over everything in his head, he realised Miss Mary would be the perfect woman to marry and present to his all-wise patroness. “I have settled on Miss Mary as my wife-to-be,” Collins announced.

“In my opinion, *if* Mary accepts you, you will have done very well for yourself,” Fanny stated.

“W-what d-do y-y-you m-mean *if* s-she accepts me?” a flabbergasted Collins reacted.

“Simply this, Mr. Collins,” Bennet replied. “We will not force Mary, or for that matter, any of our daughters, to accept a man, regardless of how eligible he is, without an inclination on her side to do so. We are not saying Mary will not accept your proposals positively, only that you need to woo her. Get to know her and allow her to get to know you. That can only engender positive feelings for you and then when you do make your addresses your chance of a positive response will be greatly enhanced.”

As he thought about his cousins’ words, Collins found nothing objectionable in what they said. In fact, they had helped him with their advice. Miss Mary may have rejected him had he made his addresses without them getting to know one another.

He was resolved, he would do what he needed to in order to court Miss Mary as she deserved to be, and then when the time was right, before his departure in a fortnight, he would propose to the middle Bennet daughter.

“I thank you for your wise words,” Collins stated sincerely. “It will be as you suggested.”

Fanny looked at her husband with a smile. They had redirected the parson while not alienating him.



That evening at dinner, the family was joined by Kitty and Lydia. The former had accepted her change in status with good cheer—eventually—while the latter still railed against the unfairness of it all whenever she had time with her mother.

Lydia was well aware any misbehaviour this night would cost her a further two quarters' allowance. With what she had already lost, it would mean she would go a year with no pin money. It was worth it to bite her tongue to not lose more money.

Most galling of all was the fact there was a regiment of the Derbyshire militia encamped not a mile from her home and not one scarlet jacketed officer or soldier had she seen.

Maria Lucas had called and extolled the attributes of the many handsome officers, especially one she named Lieutenant Denny. Life was so unfair and now it seemed her dream of being the first sister to marry was to become dust as well if the way their boring cousin was looking at boring, plain—no she had to admit her middle sister no longer looked plain—Mary.

With the nursery being on the uppermost floor, and a footman always on duty outside the door, there was no hope of escape.

Other than by Lydia, dinner was enjoyed by all. The two youngest Bennets were farewelled and sent back to the schoolroom after dinner while the rest of the family retired to the drawing room with no separation of the sexes.

After tea and coffee, Bennet sat and read, Fanny busied herself with some sewing, Jane and Elizabeth had their samplers to work on, which left Mary and Mr. Collins.

The latter two sat together happily discussing one of Fordyce's sermons. To all of those observing in the drawing room, the two seemed to genuinely enjoy each other's company.

By the time everyone made for their bedchambers, Mary and William Collins were well on their way to becoming better acquainted with each other.



George Wickham could not believe he had to join the damned militia in order to escape his creditors and some angry brothers and fathers who were on his trail. It was not his fault

young ladies—with the emphasis on *young*—were so gullible and would routinely surrender their virtues to him.

Earlier that afternoon he had run into Jim Denny, now a Lieutenant in the Derbyshire Militia. Thankfully he owed none of Denny's family money and he had not meddled with the man's sister, so Denny had been friendly towards Wickham.

He had learnt Denny was in London on a recruiting trip to find men willing to join his regiment to serve as officers under Colonel Forster. When Wickham had enquired the cost of a commission, it had been the best news when he learned as a native of Derbyshire and having a gentleman's education, a Lieutenant's commission would be free. It was fortuitous because he was almost out of blunt and Karen Younge would not give him more, and worse, she had kicked him out of her boarding house on Edward Street.

So here Wickham was, his final night of hiding away from those seeking him in London. He would meet Denny in the morning and be on his way to some little town—the name he could not recall—in Hertfordshire on the morrow.

At least to hear Denny tell it, the people were welcoming to the militia, the merchants willing to issue credit, and more than a few pretty girls in the neighbourhood.

A scowl formed on his handsome face as he remembered how close he had come to eloping with Georgiana Darcy. If that bastard of a prig had not come when he did! Thirty thousand pounds! That was how much Darcy cost him. At least his nose had healed and was almost straight again.

He refused to accept what Darcy told him was the truth. According to his former friend, he would have been denied the dowry because of some technicality about permission being needed from both of her guardians. Wickham nursed his whiskey as he had bitter thoughts about his failed plan to avenge himself on Darcy.

As much as he had blustered, Wickham had not mentioned a word of the affair to another breathing soul. He

had no doubt Darcy had not issued an idle threat when telling him one word abroad and Fitzwilliam would be on his trail. There was one man in the world he feared above all others, and that man was Richard Fitzwilliam. He would do far more than plant a facer like Darcy had.

All he had to do was survive this night without being caught by any of those seeking him and he would be gone from London with no trace.

Chapter 13

Darcy was torn. Bingley had asked him if he would like to go to Longbourn with him to enquire after Miss Bennet's health. It was a dichotomy between his emotional feelings and his rational mind he had not yet solved.

In the end, worried about his weakness and giving in to his desires while ignoring his duty, Darcy decided he could not accompany Bingley. However, he also had a duty to his host, therefore, in the end he reluctantly accepted Bingley's invitation. The two men decided to ride their horses—Miss Bingley's disdain for riding was the major inducement not to take a coach.

It was Tuesday, early afternoon and about four days had passed since either man had seen the object of his interest. Being closer to Meryton, the Netherfield Park party worshipped at St. Alfred's in Meryton and the Bennets attended the church near their home in the Longbourn village.

Unfortunately for Darcy, the days since Miss Elizabeth had left the house had done nothing to tamp down his desires for her. He would beat this! He had to beat it! His duty was too important, not to mention his family's expectations for him to make an excellent match.

One member of his family—his late mother's older sister, Lady Catherine de Bourgh—was still shopping a tired old lie about his being engaged to his cousin Anne de Bourgh since they were in their cradles.

While they were still alive, both his parents roundly refuted any claim of a cradle betrothal, notwithstanding their son was three years older than Anne. Darcy was well aware his uncle, the Earl of Matlock, was in possession of letters from both of his late parents clearly stating there had never been an agreement to any kind of engagement to Anne de Bourgh, or any other.

The only way he would have married Anne was if it had been something both she and he desired. As it happened,

they had discussed their preferences some years ago. Anne, being of a sickly constitution, had no interest in ever marrying as she was sure she would never survive childbirth. Darcy likewise was not interested in his cousin as anything more than a relation.

After his father's death, Lady Catherine had attempted to revive her tired old lie but her brother had run her off with her tail between her legs and a flea in her ear. Darcy was sure his aunt would be her most vociferous about the supposed engagement Easter coming when he made his annual visit to review the Rosings Park estate matters.

Anne was about to turn five and twenty and from that point, she would be allowed to claim and receive her full inheritance, which was Rosings Park, among other properties. There were none in the family who did not know Lady Catherine's true motivation. She was under the misapprehension if her daughter and Darcy married, she would be left to run Rosings Park unmolested. Darcy grinned at that thought. If he were ever to become the master of that estate, his aunt would not like it at all.

Darcy's thoughts dissipated when the groom led his stallion, Zeus, to him. He mounted at the same time Bingley seated himself on his own horse. Soon the friends were cantering down the drive to turn onto the road which would take them through Meryton and on to Longbourn.



Mary and Mr. Collins spent much time Tuesday morning speaking and getting to know one another better. Mary was not blind to the man's deficiencies. He was not an intelligent man, he was obsessed with being subservient to his patroness, and he had a certain level of pomposity about him. She had determined the man meant no one harm.

Her decision, if and when he asked, had been reinforced and she would accept unless she saw some trait with which she was not willing to live. The more they spoke, the more Mary realised he would not be difficult to steer.

If they were to marry, her first task would be to help him understand he did not need to revere his patroness and take everything she said as law. He had told her how Lady Catherine had recommended he put shelves in his closets in the parsonage.

Rather than point out the stupidity of such a suggestion, Mary had simply asked where, when he finally honoured some lady with his hand, would she hang her gowns and dresses.

Mr. Collins had looked rather confused for a minute or two until he finally arrived at the point where he was willing to admit his patroness's suggestion about shelves may not have been a good one. He told Mary he would write to his housekeeper with instructions for the manservant to remove the shelves from the two closets where they had been placed.

A good description of the parsonage, which had two floors and an attic, was imparted. On the first floor was a dining parlour, sitting room, small parlour, and Mr. Collins's study. The second floor had four bedchambers. On one side of the hall were the rooms for himself and the future Mrs. Collins and across the hall were two guest chambers.

Mary learnt in addition to the manservant, Mr. Collins kept a housekeeper, who was also his cook, and two maids of all work. The kitchen and scullery were in the cellar below the dining parlour. The fact if she married the man, she would have no maid dedicated to herself as her mother had at Longbourn was not something which bothered Mary. The two maids slept in rooms in the attics while the manservant and housekeeper-cook—who were married to one another—lived in a cottage in Hunsford.

Until recently when Mama sent Sarah to assist her, Mary had always managed on her own without any issues. The couple spoke until Hill announced the midday meal was served.

After everyone ate (which included Kitty and Lydia) and just before they rose from the table, Elizabeth cleared her throat.

“A note arrived informing me the latest volume of Byron’s poems has arrived at the bookseller’s store. Who would like to walk into Meryton with me?” Elizabeth invited.

“Me!” Lydia immediately piped up.

Kitty had the good sense to look at her parents and said nothing. Bennet looked to his wife as they communicated silently. It was something new and rather disconcerting to their daughters, especially the youngest.

“Kitty may join her sisters; she is but months away from coming out after all. You, Lydia, will remain at home,” Fanny stated.

“Why may Kitty go and I may not?” Lydia demanded as she stood. “I am the lively one, I want to see the officers.” She stamped her foot to emphasise her point.

“This kind of behaviour is the exact reason you are not allowed to join your sisters,” Bennet stated firmly. “Would you like to have more allowance taken from you?” Lydia closed her mouth with a clack. Bennet looked to his second-to-youngest daughter. “Kitty, you will remain next to one of your older sisters at all times and there will be no chasing or flirting with anyone, much less officers. If you contravene my restrictions, you will be in for another year and if you are good, I may take you to a review at the end of your additional year.”

“You have my word, Mama and Papa, I will be a good girl,” Kitty vowed.

Lydia glowered at Kitty and so much wanted to demand she remain home and not go into Meryton if she could not, but she was not willing to risk the loss of more allowance.

“I would like to join you,” a fully recovered Jane added.

Mary looked to Mr. Collins who nodded. “Mr. Collins and I will join the walking party as well,” Mary stated.

After donning their outerwear, the five walkers set off to cover the mile into Meryton at an easy pace. Jane, Elizabeth, and Kitty walked ahead while Mary, who had

accepted his arm when it was offered, walked with Mr. Collins a little behind her three sisters.



Denny, Wickham, and one more man who had been recruited to join the regiment alighted from the post carriage at the Red Lion Inn in Meryton. Denny hailed Captain Sanderson who led the other man to the encampment while he showed Wickham the town.

As he walked next to Denny, Wickham noticed the market town was no different than several he had visited—and in which he had left debts behind him—in England. It looked to be somewhat smaller than Lambton, which was only five miles from the entrance to Pemberley.

Anytime Pemberley's name came up in his thoughts, Wickham could not but scowl. Damn that prig! By an accident of birth, he got everything while he, who in his estimation was much more deserving, got nothing!

What had all of his fawning over the late Robert Darcy purchased him? Not a satellite estate, or a significant sum. No, a paltry one thousand pounds and a recommendation to the Kympton living *if* he took Orders.

The last thing he wanted to do in the world was to take Clerical Orders or take orders from anyone else. He would not suffer as a curate for one year so he could qualify, and besides, he had no taste for making sermons and caring for the welfare of others.

Darcy had paid him three thousand pounds for the living, and Wickham had foolishly signed a document decrying any further claim to said living. With four thousand pounds burning a hole in his pocket, for just over two years Wickham had lived well until he lost the last of the money.

He was not to blame. The cards had not gone his way and the men guarding the hells he gambled in were too astute for him to successfully cheat. He had heard the incumbent at Kympton had passed away not long after all the money was gone.

He wrote to the prig claiming the living old Mr. Darcy had meant for him as a way to pressure the son into paying him more for the living. After all, another five or ten thousand pounds would be nothing to his former friend.

But no, the damned bastard had refused, citing the inconvenient document Wickham had been tricked into signing. Luckily, Karen Younge had taken him in and when he saw the advertisement for a companion for Miss Georgiana Darcy, the plan to acquire her dowry and revenge himself on Darcy had been hatched. However, other than a broken nose and a punch in his belly for his troubles, it had come to nothing.

It was all Darcy's fault he had to run from those after him and been reduced to enlisting in the militia. If only he would be able to see Darcy, how he would issue a well-deserved set down.

"You see Wickham, there are pretty girls here," Denny stated as he cocked his head toward Maria Lucas walking with her older sister.

"The younger one is pretty, I will grant you, but the other one is old and plain," Wickham replied softly.

"Come, allow me to introduce you," Denny offered and Wickham nodded.

"Miss Lucas, Miss Maria, how do you do?" Denny stopped in front of the Lucas sisters and executed a bow.



The four Bennet sisters and Mr. Collins were about to split up, when Elizabeth spied Charlotte and Maria speaking to an officer and another man not in uniform. Having not seen her friend for some time, she directed the group of walkers over to where the Lucas sisters and the two men were standing and talking. When they neared, Elizabeth saw the man who was not an officer was rather handsome, he was tall, almost as tall as Mr. Darcy, with light brown hair, and had slate blue eyes.

“Well met,” Charlotte stated. “Jane, are you well again?”

“I am very well, thank you,” Jane averred. “Charlotte, would you introduce the gentlemen to us, please.”

Wickham could not believe the array of beauty before him. Yes, they were older than he preferred, guessing the youngest was around sixteen, but for such beauty, he would make an exception.

Charlotte performed the office of introducing the Lieutenant and Mr. Wickham to the Bennet sisters, and in turn, Jane introduced their cousin to the Lucases and the two men.

Charlotte, who at seven and twenty was considered firmly on the shelf, did not miss the closeness between Mary Bennet and their cousin. ‘*Pity,*’ Charlotte told herself silently. ‘*If I had met him before he formed an attachment to a Bennet sister, he may have been my way out of Meryton.*’

“Mr. Wickham is to take a commission in the regiment,” Denny shared.

Wickham turned his attention to the youngest of the Bennet sisters, hoping she was naïve enough to give him what he wanted. She was prettier than the insipid Miss Maria.

“Miss Kitty, it would be nice to have a native show me the town,” Wickham stated.

Rather than gush all over him, the young lady moved away from him without saying a word. Mary felt an immediate distrust and said, “My sister is not yet out. If you have questions about Meryton or the area, I am sure your soon-to-be fellow officers will be able to answer them for you.”

Two ladies immune to his charms. This was definitely a first for Wickham. Before he could cogitate as to why, he spied two men riding towards them on very fine horses.



Darcy and Bingley turned onto Meryton’s main street and began the slow ride down the thoroughfare to the other end of the town and the turn-off to Longbourn.

“I see Miss Bennet over there,” Bingley pointed, “in the group talking to the officer and those two other men.”

Following Bingley’s lead, Darcy directed Zeus towards the group. Bingley brought his mount to a halt just before he reached the Bennet and Lucas sisters. The two dismounted and Bingley flicked a lad a half-crown to look after the two stallions.

The two men approached the group, Bingley making directly for Miss Bennet. At that moment the taller of the two non-officers lifted his head. It took an instant for Darcy to identify his nemesis, that wastrel Wickham!

Elizabeth smiled as she saw how keen Mr. Bingley was to be in her older sister’s company. Something made her look up giving her a view of Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy as the two men saw one another.

The former went white from fear and the latter red with anger. Elizabeth had no way of understanding the dynamics between the men, but she was sure they knew one another.

Wickham did not know what to do. Of all of the bad luck he had ever had. What were the odds of encountering Darcy in this little nowhere town? He had to rely on the fact Darcy would not want to make a scene or do or say anything which would expose his precious sister’s reputation to scandal.

Although he tried to control his emotions, inside Darcy was as furious with Wickham as he had been on discovering the profligate libertine in Ramsgate with Giana. How dare Wickham stand next to and talk to Miss Elizabeth Bennet? Darcy schooled his features. He could not show any preference for her, not only was it impossible for him to act on it, but if Wickham detected an interest, he would aim all of his so-called charm and attention at her.

Seeing Darcy would not do or say anything, Wickham recovered and insouciantly touched his beaver, inclining his head in Darcy’s direction. Darcy turned on his heel and was back on his horse’s back in a single motion after he took the reins from the lad.

Bingley was busy confirming Miss Bennet's wellbeing when Miss Elizabeth interjected. "Mr. Bingley, it seems Mr. Darcy had to return to your estate," she informed the man.

"May I take this opportunity to solicit the first and supper sets from you at the ball Friday a week?" Bingley requested of his angel.

"They are yours, Sir," Jane happily granted.

Bingley bowed and made his farewells and was soon riding after his friend.

"Did I hear the name Darcy? Is that Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley?" Collins asked rather excitedly.

"The same," Elizabeth responded.

"What good fortune! He is my patroness's nephew and is engaged to the rose of Kent, Miss Anne de Bourgh, the heiress of Rosings Park and de Bourgh House," Collins stated as he rocked on the balls of his feet in excitement.

"I am sure you will be able to be introduced to him soon enough," Mary pointed out to her unofficial suitor.

Before Collins could respond, Jane spoke. "Charlotte, Maria, and gentlemen, please excuse us, we have errands to run."

Before Wickham volunteered to accompany them, he remembered the one sister's admonition of his person. He remained mute and Denny led him towards the encampment.

Having completed what they needed to in the town before encountering the two men, the two Lucases were about to take their leave and return to Lucas Lodge when Mrs. Philips hailed the group.

"Nieces, Miss Lucas, Miss Maria, how do you do today? Who is the gentleman? Is it the heir who will be the master of Longbourn one day when my brother Bennet goes to his final reward?" Hattie Philips burred.

Jane made a quick introduction, highlighting the fact Mr. Collins was the heir presumptive, not the heir. It was a

distinction neither their aunt nor the man in question could grasp so Jane did not mention it again.

“Finding you here saves me walking to Longbourn. I am holding a card party on the morrow, everyone in the Bennet and Lucas families are invited, you too of course Mr. Collins,” Hattie extended to all standing before her.

“Will you invite some of the officers?” Maria asked before she realised it had been a rude presumption to suggest who Mrs. Phillips should invite to her soiree, and blushed up to the roots of her hair while Charlotte looked at her censoriously.

“You are not speaking out of turn, Maria dear,” Hattie smiled. “I intend to invite a few officers. Unfortunately, my parlour and sitting room combined are not limitless in size.” She looked around realising one sister was missing. “No Lydia?” she asked.

“Lydia is back in, as is Kitty,” Jane revealed. “Talk to Mama when you see her next.”

“You girls will inform your parents of my invitation, will you not? I am sure your father will not want to attend. Please arrive by seven,” Hattie conveyed.

“As long as Mama and Papa do not require us to remain home, we will be happy to attend, Aunt Hattie,” Jane spoke for her younger sisters. “Before you ask, Lydia will not be present, and possibly not Kitty as well.”

The Lucas sisters promised to convey the invitation to their mother and after farewells, took off walking in the direction of Lucas Lodge. The Bennets and Mr. Collins visited two other stores in addition to the bookseller.

Once the errands were completed, the group of five began to walk towards Longbourn.

Chapter 14

As she walked home, Elizabeth was trying to interpret what she had seen pass between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham. There was obviously bad blood there, but the question was who was the cause of it and was it something into which she should be delving?

There was no getting around the way Mr. Wickham became frightened when he saw Mr. Darcy and how that man appeared angry at seeing the former. Before his apology to her, Elizabeth was sure she would have automatically assumed Mr. Darcy to be in the wrong and the handsome stranger the aggrieved party.

When she looked at the interaction with an objective eye, the only logical conclusion was Mr. Darcy had been severely wronged by Mr. Wickham in some way. It seemed he had been wronged to such an extent that Mr. Wickham had feared some instant retribution from Mr. Darcy. Only when Mr. Wickham noted Mr. Darcy would neither physically attack him nor expose whatever it was between them, did the man relax.

The more Elizabeth replayed the incident the more she came to the conclusion Mr. Wickham's actions were somewhat cowardly. There was no doubt in her mind Mr. Darcy was the fitter of the two. He had broader shoulders, and if Elizabeth was to guess, he was not one who sat idly by while others did the work.

Elizabeth began to realise if there was not such a disparity in their relative positions of wealth, connections, and standing in society, she may have hoped Mr. Darcy would be interested in her as more than someone with whom to talk.

It was then she remembered what her cousin had said about Mr. Darcy being engaged to his cousin. That knowledge instantly killed any fanciful thoughts she may have had regarding herself and the handsome man from Derbyshire.

She shook her head to evict any residual romantic thoughts regarding Mr. Darcy from her consciousness. Next, she considered what she had observed with regard to Mr. Darcy and the mask he wore, the one he presented to the world, especially to those like Caroline Bingley who chased him relentlessly.

It struck Elizabeth that Mr. Wickham also wore a mask. His was one of outward charm which she had seen slip when he saw Mr. Darcy. She had been watching when his fear had subsided and a look of envy or hate, or mayhap somewhere in-between had been seen. As soon as the man noticed her observation, his charming mask had slipped back into place.

She wondered if Mr. Wickham had a reason to not show the world his true self. It was not a conundrum she could solve without much more information.

‘If he is at Aunt Hattie’s card party, mayhap I will learn more about him,’ Elizabeth guessed silently. *‘I must be careful around him and not allow myself to be isolated with the man. If I am able to speak to him, it will be in plain view of everyone else at the party.’*



“Darcy! **DARCY!**” Bingley yelled to gain his friend’s attention. Bingley caught up to him on the outskirts of Meryton, just before Darcy was about to turn Zeus loose and urge him into a gallop. He would have much preferred to remain in Miss Bennet’s company, but he could tell his normally stoic friend was angry about something.

“What!” Darcy bit back before he caught himself. “Sorry Bingley, my anger is not directed at you, in fact, some of it is directed inward.”

He hated losing control, but seeing the miscreant who almost absconded with Giana angered him to such an extent he had to remount Zeus and ride away. If not, he would have followed his urge to pummel the man right there in the street.

The statement about some of the anger being at himself made Bingley wonder. He was aware no matter how exacting Darcy's standards were for others in his life, he was hardest on himself and had a tendency to take things as his responsibility which were not. At the same time, his friend was an extremely reserved man who would not lay his private concerns bare for others to see unless there was no choice in the matter.

"Darcy, what is going on? I know you dislike that Wickham person with a passion, but why would he discompose you in such a fashion?" Bingley probed.

"There are things about which I cannot speak," Darcy replied as he calmed himself. "There are others who would be hurt if knowledge of certain events were ever known."

"I will not force a confidence if you do not desire to share with me," Bingley assured Darcy. "Just know I will support you in any way you need."

"Thank you, Bingley," Darcy averred gratefully. "You are a true friend."

"If I were that good of a friend, I would not have you staying in the same house as my younger sister," Bingley quipped as he attempted to inject some levity to raise Darcy's spirits.

"There is that," Darcy reacted as the corners of his mouth almost turned up.

As different as they were—he a landowner and his friend the son of a tradesman—Bingley's ability to lift him out of dark moods was one of the many things Darcy appreciated about their friendship. Over the years since meeting at Cambridge, their friendship had deepened and strengthened. So far, it was strong enough for him to put up with Miss Bingley's machinations. Now that he had Bingley's blessing to set his sister down if need be, Darcy still hoped against hope it would not be necessary.

As they rode, Darcy admitted to himself his anger had been further fuelled by the seducer standing so close to Miss Elizabeth. Although he knew there was nothing he could allow

himself regarding the enticing woman, the last thing he would countenance was Wickham imposing on her.

With thanks to Bingley, Darcy had calmed down. Hence rather than gallop, he kept Zeus at a comfortable canter. His friend urged his own stallion forward so they were riding parallel one to the other and a few feet apart.

“Bingley, will you invite the militia to the ball you are holding next week?” Darcy enquired.

“I had intended to, but if you are worried about Wickham being there, I will not,” Bingley offered.

“He has always been a coward, I am sure once he knows I am in residence he will find an excuse, more than likely blaming it on me, for not attending,” Darcy opined.

“If he does attend, he will be watched all of the time,” Bingley assured his friend. “I suppose if we invite the officers and specifically exclude him it may raise some questions better left unasked.”

Darcy, not for an instant, suspected Bingley would not keep his secret if he told him about Giana and Ramsgate. He decided not to as he was relatively sure Bingley would call Wickham out. Like Richard, his friend could be a hothead at times. Given Bingley considered Giana a younger sister, Darcy had no doubt his knowing what the profligate wastrel had attempted would have set him on a path of revenge.

There were times he questioned whether he had done the right thing by stopping Richard from hunting Wickham down after Ramsgate. Darcy convinced himself it would have been disrespectful to his beloved father’s memory if he acted against his godson in that manner.

“At least, I gained Miss Bennet’s consent to partner me for the first and supper sets,” Bingley stated happily once he had pushed thoughts of George Wickham from his head.

“Are you not worried you will raise expectations if you open the ball and then dance the supper set with her?” Darcy probed.

“What of it, she is an absolute angel, and before you say I have fallen in and out of love with alacrity in the past, never have I had the depth of feelings for any of those ladies which I have for Miss Bennet.”

“With her lack of fortune and her connections in trade, she is beneath you,” Darcy stated without thinking. As he said what he had, he realised he was verbalising his own thoughts about why he could not offer for Miss Elizabeth.

“Do I not have more than enough money already? Unlike some,” Bingley gave his friend a pointed look, “money is not an incentive for me to marry. You sound much like Caroline! I am the son of a tradesman and she is the daughter of a gentleman, so she is in fact a step up for me.”

He could not refute what his friend said. He had echoed sentiments Miss Bingley had spouted. Darcy felt rather ashamed of himself. He said nothing and simply looked ahead.

For the remainder of the ride back to Netherfield Park, the two friends rode on without further conversation.



“Lizzy, where were you, I called your name twice before you responded,” Jane enquired as she took her sister’s arm. “You have been in your own world since we departed Meryton. Are you enamoured with Mr. Wickham who is to join the militia? Have you caught Lydia’s affliction of partiality to men in uniform?” Jane’s teasing snapped Elizabeth out of her deep thoughts about Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham and what she had seen pass between the men.

“Janey, did you notice what occurred between Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham, or was your attention solely focused on your Mr. Bingley?” Jane’s cheeks bloomed with a deep blush.

“He is not my mister anything,” Jane protested weakly.

“Yet,” Elizabeth added.

“I suppose I was rather inattentive to anything else once Mr. Bingley was before me,” Jane acknowledged, the

colour of her cheeks deepening. To which Elizabeth asked, "Do you love him?"

"As I have never been in love before, I cannot say for sure. However, my feelings for him are extremely tender and I am never happier than I am when in his company. He is everything I could hope for in a young man."

"It does not hurt he is handsome and rich as well," Elizabeth teased. "I give you leave to like him. I think you two would be very well matched."

"It is up to him to speak and until he does there is little I can do," was Jane's response.

"Do you remember the day Charlotte told us it is her belief if you like a man, you must show him in some way so he has no doubts his regard is returned? At the time I disagreed with her, but now I am not so sure."

"Of what do you speak, Lizzy?"

"Jane, you are my dearest sister so do not take offence to what I am about to say."

"You know you can tell me anything you desire."

"I, who have known you all of my life, have a hard time discerning your true feelings. Mr. Bingley's acquaintance is of a relatively short duration. How is he to tell you care for him when your face shows no more than it does when you are in the company of any others?"

Jane cogitated on her sister's words before she made a reply. "Lizzy, you know I would not cross the lines of propriety."

"Which is *not* what I am advocating."

"Then what?"

"When you are with him, make sure your smiles are for him alone and not like you offer to anyone else. Also, you could hint at your esteem without being improper. I am not advocating standing up in a room and announcing your preference. Mr. Bingley is an intelligent man, he will understand your meaning and it will give him the

encouragement he needs. To me, he seems like a modest man who would not proceed unless he was assured of the success of his application.”

Jane was silent for some moments again. “I suppose I could do something like that without crossing any lines of propriety.”



Mary and Mr. Collins had been walking with Kitty but the latter sped up and joined Jane and Lizzy. “Miss Mary, you seemed concerned when I spoke of introducing myself to my patroness’s nephew,” Collins stated quizzically.

“Based on what I have seen of Mr. Darcy, he would not be well pleased with your introducing yourself,” Mary opined.

“But I am his aunt’s clergyman and am well favoured by her. Why, I dine at Rosings Park above twice a week,” Collins puffed up with pride.

“That may be true, but how does that make you an intimate of Mr. Darcy such that you would approach him without his requesting to know you? What would Lady Catherine say if Mr. Darcy reported what he would see as your rudeness? Did you not say he is supposed to marry her daughter?” Mary posed.

The very last thing Collins wanted was to fall out of favour with his beneficent patroness. The worry produced some beads of sweat on his forehead, which he mopped up with his handkerchief.

“Yes, Lady Catherine often speaks of the engagement,” Collins confirmed. “But I must thank you, Cousin Mary, for warning me and stopping me from committing a *faux pas* which would have angered my patroness. Your good sense and sensibilities only highlight why you would make an ideal parson’s wife.” Collins paused as he marshalled his thoughts. “Miss Mary, I know we have not known one another for very long, but may I request permission from your father to address you in private on a delicate subject?”

Already having resolved to accept him if he asked, Mary smiled. “Yes, Mr. Collins, you have my permission to make that request of my father. I thank you for the courtesy of doing so.”

Collins beamed. She was not the most beautiful of the three eldest Bennet sisters, but she had all of the attributes he would ever want in his future mate, and more importantly, he was sure Lady Catherine could not but approve of her.

It was with a much lighter step William Collins walked the rest of the distance to Longbourn.

Chapter 15

No sooner had the walkers who had been in Meryton been relieved of their outerwear did Collins make his way to the study door and rapped thereon.

Bennet put the ledger he had been working on down and called out, "Enter." His eyebrows raised when he saw his cousin respond to his call. "Mr. Collins, did we have a meeting set for today?"

"No Cousin, we did not. I have come to see you to gain your permission to address Miss Mary in private," Collins requested.

"Have you gained Mary's permission for such an interview?" Bennet queried. As advantageous a match it would be with regards to the estate, he wanted to be sure Mary was choosing of her own free will.

"That I have. We spoke on this subject on the return from the town," Collins confirmed.

"In that case, I have no objection. You may use the small parlour opposite the drawing room and Collins—the door will *not* be fully closed," Bennet insisted. "As the parlour is across the hall from the drawing room and its door is open, I will not require a maid to be seated outside of the room."

A beaming Collins gave his cousin a low bow and headed for the drawing room where he knew Miss Mary was seated with her mother and sisters. He stood at the door of the room, caught Mary's eye, and nodded.

Mary stood and started to leave the drawing room. "Mary, to where are you off?" Fanny enquired.

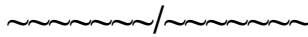
"Mr. Collins has gained Papa's permission to have a private interview with me, one to which I agreed as well," Mary informed her mother.

As hard as it was for her to restrain her desire to loudly proclaim her approbation, Fanny simply nodded her

permission. "You do not have unlimited time," was all the Bennet matron stated.

Silently she was giving thanks to on high that it seemed the threat of the hedgerows was about to be permanently removed and more importantly, one of her daughters would be mistress of the estate after her. The estate would remain in the family.

Jane and Elizabeth both smiled at their younger sister. Separately and together, they had canvassed the subject of William Collins with Mary and they had been convinced no one had pressured her into accepting him. If he offered for her, she would reply in the affirmative.



Per his cousin's conditions, Collins left the door partially open. Mary waited for him in the centre of the parlour. "You must know why I have requested leave to speak to you," Collins began.

"Not being one who likes to presume, I do not," Mary averred.

"My dear Miss Mary, your modesty, so far from doing you any disservice, rather adds to your other perfections. You would have been less amiable in my eyes had there *in fact* been complete confidence of the subject of my addresses. As you know, I did seek and receive your father's permission to speak with you.

"You can hardly doubt the purpose of my discourse. However, your natural delicacy may lead you to doubt; my attentions have been too marked to be mistaken. Almost as soon as I entered the house, I singled you out as the companion of my future life. Before I am run away with my feelings on this subject though, perhaps it would be advisable for me to state my reasons for marrying and—moreover—for coming into Hertfordshire with the design of selecting a wife—as I certainly did."

Mary knew he had been directed to her after first discovering Jane and Lizzy would not suit his purposes. That

knowledge did not weaken her resolve. Collins continued:

“My reasons for marrying are, first, I think it a right thing for every clergyman in easy circumstances (like myself) to set the example of matrimony in his parish; secondly, I am convinced it will add very greatly to my happiness; and thirdly—which perhaps I ought to have mentioned earlier, it is the particular advice and recommendation of the very noble lady whom I have the honour of calling patroness.

“Twice has she condescended to give me her opinion (unasked for too!) on this subject; and it was but the very Saturday night before I left Hunsford—between our pools at quadrille, while Mrs. Jenkinson was arranging Miss de Bourgh’s footstool—that she charged me to find a wife from among my cousins.

“Allow me, by the way, to observe, my fair cousin, that I do not reckon the notice and kindness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh as among the least of the advantages in my power to offer. You will find her manners beyond anything I can describe; and your wit and good sense, I think, must be acceptable to her, especially when tempered with the silence and respect which her rank will inevitably excite.

“Thus, much of my general intention is in favour of matrimony. It remains to be told why my views were directed towards Longbourn instead of my own neighbourhood, where I can assure you there are many amiable young women. The fact, however, is that being as I am to inherit this estate after the death of your honoured father—who may live many years longer, I could not satisfy myself without resolving to choose a wife from among his daughters—especially as Lady Catherine recommended I do so. That way the loss to you and your sisters might be as little as possible, when the melancholy event takes place—which, however, as I have already said, may not be for several years.

“This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem. And now nothing remains for me but to assure you in the most animated language of the violence of my affection. To fortune I am perfectly indifferent and shall make no demand of that nature

on your father, since I am well aware he could not comply with it; and that one thousand pounds in the four per cents, which will not be yours until after your mother's decease, is all you may ever be entitled to bring to a marriage. On that head, therefore, I shall be uniformly silent; and you may assure yourself no ungenerous reproach shall ever pass my lips when we are married."

It was absolutely necessary to interrupt him now. Yes, he was verbose and used ten words when one would do, but he was at heart a decent man. In addition, Mary had already proved more than once how much she would be able to manage the man and redirect his unhealthy obsession with his patroness.

"You are too hasty, sir," Mary cried. "As yet, you have spoken about your reasons to marry, but have not asked me the all-important question, hence I have nothing to which to reply."

"I beg your pardon," replied Mr. Collins, with a formal bow, "it was an oversight. Miss Mary, will you please accept my hand and agree to become my wife."

"Yes, Mr. Collins, I will marry you," Mary agreed.

"You have made me the happiest of men, thank you Miss...may I call you Mary?"

"In private, I have no objection to your doing so. As soon as you speak to my father, have his permission, and our engagement becomes official, then you may use my familiar name in public as well."

"Allow me to go to your father now," Collins approached her.

Mary was both worried and hopeful he was about to bestow her first kiss on her, but he rather bowed over her hand and kissed it lightly. "I must go to my mother," Mary stated to hide her disappointment he had not kissed her lips. The thought she was disappointed he had not, frightened Mary and made her feel somewhat wanton, but she pushed it from her head.



“Mary, are you sure this is your free choice to be accepting my cousin?” Bennet verified.

Collins had come to see him, informing Bennet his middle daughter had agreed to accept his hand in holy matrimony. Bennet had given his conditional consent and asked to see his daughter.

“Yes, Papa, it is my choice and my choice alone. Just like she agreed not to when we first spoke of this possibility, Mama has not attempted to influence me in any way regarding Mr. Collins and his suit,” Mary assured her father. “I am well aware my fiancé has deficiencies, but he is not vicious, he is a respectable man, and is well able to provide for me. In addition, if you and Mama are not blessed with a son, then one day I will be mistress of this estate, thus making sure it will remain with our family. Not only that, if I am given a son by God, then I will convince my husband his family name should be Bennet to continue the Bennet line here.”

“Do you know before an argument some generations back; the Collins branch of the family were Bennets?” Mary shook her head. “His great-grandfather, I believe that was who did it, changed his family name to Collins in protest of not being named heir of Longbourn and that is when my ancestor instituted the entail.”

Mary looked thoughtful. Mayhap I can help William... Mr. Collins decide to change his name back to what it was always meant to be,” Mary mused.

“If you choose to suggest that, I would not be unhappy,” Bennet responded. “Ask your fiancé to come see me again, please. I have not heard any excited utterances from the drawing room. Have you not told your mother yet?”

“I was about to when I was summoned hither,” Mary explained. “She will hear the news ere long. I assume you will make an announcement after you speak to him?” Bennet allowed it was so. “In that case, I will say nothing and allow you the honour.”

“Off with you,” Bennet waved his newly engaged daughter away.

A very excited Collins entered Bennet’s study. He reminded Bennet of a pointer pup, wagging its tale furiously. “You have my full-throated permission and blessing to wed Mary,” Bennet told the ebullient man.

Before Collins was able to launch into a soliloquy, *undoubtedly*, he would mention his patroness a time or ten, Bennet raised his hand. “Come, Collins, let us go inform your future mother-in-law and sisters.”

Collins followed his father-in-law-to-be obediently.



Darcy was torn about what to do with regard to Wickham. If he did nothing, then it would not be long before the libertine would be up to his old tricks, running up credit, starting to seduce young girls, and signing debt of honour markers he never intended to honour.

As much as he wanted to warn the populace, none more so than Miss Elizabeth, he could not take a chance. If the miscreant thought Darcy had moved to curtail his activities, he would make sure Giana was ruined. Surely, his first obligation was to his sister? He could not allow her to be harmed, he had failed once already by employing Mrs. Younge, so not again.

As much as he did not desire to be in the shrew’s company, he knew good form dictated he spend some time with his hosts in the drawing room before dinner. If Miss Bingley had any sense, she would take his hints her company was undesirable and steer clear of him.

It did not help that Darcy still felt guilt over his outburst imputing his own concerns regarding a Bennet sister who had bewitched him body and soul as his reasons for Bingley to recede.

At the same time, Darcy understood the implied rebuke in Bingley’s words. He soothed himself by telling himself not having grown up in his circle of society, Bingley could not understand the pressure on him to make a brilliant match.

He scolded himself for allowing maudlin thoughts. Darcy was not sanguine with anything which made him feel weak. He had his valet assist him in changing for dinner and made his way downstairs to brave the lioness's den.



“Mr. Bennet, Mr. Collins, there you are, it is time to go into dinner,” Fanny admonished when the two men joined them in the drawing room.

“If you please, Fanny, I beg your indulgence as I have an announcement to make,” Bennet stated. “Mary, join us please.”

Fanny watched as her daughter joined her husband. She knew Mary had a conversation with Mr. Collins, but as yet, had no clue if he had requested a courtship or engagement, and what Mary's reply had been.

If it were the former, she was sure it would not be long before it became the latter. “We are all ears, Mr. Bennet,” Fanny responded.

“It is my pleasure to announce our Mary is engaged to our cousin, William Collins. He proposed earlier this afternoon and I have bestowed my permission and blessing,” Bennet informed his family.

“But I wanted to marry first!” yelled Lydia as she stamped her foot and pouted.

“Which is the reason you find yourself back in and why you will have your dinner in the schoolroom.” Seeing Lydia was about to unleash her vitriol, Fanny looked at her husband who nodded as she raised her hand. “It is as good a time as any to tell you your Aunt Maddie has found a companion-governess for you and Kitty. Mrs. Cara Buxton will arrive in two days.”

“Now, unless you would like to lose more of your allowance, take yourself up to the schoolroom as your mother ordered,” Bennet said in support of his wife.

Lydia loosed a scream of frustration as she stamped her way out of the drawing room and up the stairs culminating in

the slamming—as hard as she was able—of the schoolroom’s door.

Bennet escorted his newly engaged daughter into the dining parlour while Collins had the honour of offering his arm to his soon-to-be mother-in-law. The other three sisters followed, with smiles on their faces. It was hard not to when Mary looked so very contented with her change of circumstances.

While the soup course—the soup had been a hearty vegetable soup, ideal for a cold early December evening—was cleared away, Mary leant over towards her fiancé who had come to sit next to her after helping Mama to her seat.

“William, did you know if it had not been for our long-dead relatives fighting, your name would have been William Bennet?” Mary asked innocently.

“Really, I knew that not,” Collins replied. “Is it sure?”

“Yes. Papa has the history in his study and I read it. You had a great-grandfather Ignatius, did you not?” Mary enquired.

“Yes...come to think of it, there are no Collinses in our line before him and his family name in the family bible is struck through many times and Collins written next to it,” Collins recalled. “Do you know how this all came about?”

“Yes, there were twin brothers, the older was Thomas and Ignatius was less than ten minutes younger. Evidently, as he got older, he refused to accept he would not inherit Longbourn for being born ten minutes after Thomas,” Mary related. “They both attended university and after graduating, Ignatius demanded Thomas be disinherited in his favour. Their father refused and that is when your great-grandfather left Longbourn. He married a woman named Collins and took her name rather than keep the name Bennet.”

“But that is not right! A lady takes her husband’s name, not the other way around,” Collins insisted.

He had always been proud of the name Collins but now he remained unsure. How could he honour a name which his

ancestor should not have adopted? He would wait to talk to Lady Catherine. He was sure she would have wise counsel for him.

Normally loquacious at meals and in the drawing room thereafter, this night Collins was deep in thought as evidenced by his furrowed brows.

Chapter 16

Caroline Bingley had no compunction refusing the invitation to attend the card party at Mrs. Philips's home. She would not even relate the fact they had received an invitation to her brother as she was sure he would have insisted they attend.

There were two main reasons Miss Bingley would not be seen dead in the woman's home. Firstly, she was married to a tradesman, the town solicitor, and if that were not bad enough, she was the vulgar sister of Mrs. Bennet. That led to the second and much worse offence—the lady was aunt to Miss Eliza Bennet. That meant the Bennet chits would be present, thus putting the insipid Miss Bennet in her brother's company and even worse, Mr. Darcy would be able to admire Miss Eliza's *fine eyes* once again as he seemed to do whenever in company with the Bennets.

She was not worried Miss Eliza, with her non-existent dowry and terrible connections, would be real competition for her becoming the mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House. However, it was better not to put the hoyden in Mr. Darcy's path so she could use her arts and allurements on him.

Making sure no one was observing her, Miss Bingley consigned the invitation to the fire. Someone as vulgar as Mrs. Philips did not even deserve a refusal from one as high in society as she was.

That done, she began to plan entertainment for that evening which would play to her strengths and present her in the best possible light so Mr. Darcy would have no choice but to be impressed.



After her walk followed by breaking her fast that morning, Elizabeth made her way into her father's study. "Welcome Lizzy, do you want to play chess this morning?" Bennet welcomed his second daughter.

“No thank you, Papa,” Elizabeth responded. “I wanted to speak to you about a *gentleman* we met yester-afternoon in Meryton.”

“Make yourself comfortable child, you know I will listen to anything you have to say.” Bennet indicated one of the chairs in front of his large oak desk.

Elizabeth seated herself. “We saw Charlotte and Maria in Meryton and they introduced us to an officer and another man. Before you ask, it was not Kitty who demanded we greet the officer...” Elizabeth related what she had noted when Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy arrived. “Due to the things I observed, I feel we need to be wary of Mr. Wickham. If he will share with me, which he should not to a brand new acquaintance, I would like to learn what I can about the animosity between him and Mr. Darcy.”

“I agree with your assessment,” Bennet nodded. “Mr. Darcy can seem proud and disagreeable, but I think he is very reserved, similar to our Jane. Further, I have never in the times we have been in company together seen anything which would cause me to doubt his honour. I will keep an eye on you and if as you suspect this Mr. Wickham wants to tell you his tale, I will be close at hand.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Elizabeth stated gratefully. She stood and walked around the desk and kissed her father’s cheek before he waved her away.



Much to Lydia’s consternation and traitorous Kitty’s acceptance, she and her next older sister were excluded from the group which travelled into Meryton to the card party at her aunt’s and uncle’s home.

It was not fair! There would be officers there and as yet Lydia had not seen, never mind met, a single one. Earlier that day Maria Lucas had called and been allowed to spend some time with Kitty and Lydia between the reading of the passages they had been forced to study by their father.

Maria had extolled the handsomeness of some of the officers, especially the newest one, who she claimed was an Adonis. Lieutenant Wickham was an officer who had only joined the regiment the previous day.

With the unwanted woman who would be her gaoler arriving on the morrow, Lydia felt today was her last chance to get to see the officers. She had to find a way to escape Longbourn and make her way to her aunt's house.

Her problem was how to affect her escape. The Hills were watching over them. That was it! Neither were young, so Lydia was sure one or both would doze off before it was time to be returned to the schoolroom where she would be expected to be sleeping.

With a plan in place, all she had to do was wait for the inevitable and then escape.



Being family, the Bennets arrived at their relatives' house a little before the time the rest of the invited guests would begin to join them. Both Philipses were greatly surprised to see their brother Bennet with his family. Neither could remember the last time he had accompanied them to a soir e like this one at their home.

Of course, the first news Fanny shared with her sister was Mary's and William's—as he had asked to be called—engagement. Hattie and Frank Philips were effusive and sincere in their wishing the couple happy. As was his wont, Collins was equally as loquacious in his response to his future aunt and uncle's good wishes.

“Mrs. Philips, your rooms here remind me of the small breakfast parlour at my esteemed patroness's magnificent estate of Rosings Park,” Collins stated as he looked around the two rooms with the sliding doors pushed back making a single room for the night's festivities.

One side was the dining parlour, the other the sitting room. There was a buffet set out on a table which was pushed against the wall in the former room with chairs placed for

guests to sit and relax while enjoying the offerings. Like her younger sister, Hattie Philips set a good table.

In the room which was normally the sitting room, the settee, divan, and armchairs had been pushed against various walls while in the open centre of the room were a half dozen card tables with four to six chairs around each. The game to be played at a particular table dictated the number of seats available.

Mary did not miss the moue of distaste her Aunt Hattie had after the principal rooms in her house were likened to a small breakfast parlour in Lady Catherine's home. Before her aunt could speak, Mary placed a calming hand on her arm.

"Mr. Collins meant no harm, Aunt Hattie," Mary assured her aunt, "In fact he was paying you the highest form of compliment he knows."

"What do you mean, Mary dearest?" Hattie responded, feeling the anger bleed out of herself.

"To William, Rosings Park is the best of all places. His comparing your rooms to any part of his patroness's abode is high praise indeed."

Hattie Philips was of mean understanding, but in the terms Mary explained it, she accepted the man was complimenting not denigrating her home. As soon as she realised that, her feelings towards Mary's betrothed warmed significantly.

The guests began to arrive shortly thereafter. The Lucases and Longs arrived together. The former without their two sons and the latter with their two nieces who were their wards. Not long after, a group of invited officers including Lieutenant Wickham—Philips had called on him and extended the invitation—arrived.

Wickham had been keen to attend. He wanted to make sure to correct the impression one Bennet sister seemed to glean from observing the greeting between Darcy and himself. That was not something—as true as it was—Wickham wanted

known in a new town where he needed to gain credit and insinuate himself into the lives of the locals.

He was happy to see three of the four sisters he had met the previous day talking to the older, plain lady who had introduced them. He put on his best charming smile and greeted the party of ladies. Maria Lucas and the two Long nieces standing next to the group the handsome officer was greeting, would have preferred he shower them with his attentions.

The card games soon began, and Jane, Elizabeth, and Charlotte sat at a table for lottery tickets where they were joined by Mr. Wickham. Bennet and Maria Lucas filled out the numbers at the table. Jane introduced her father to the officer on the former's request.

At the end of the game, Elizabeth stood and made her way to the settee pushed against the one wall. Maria Lucas—with batted eyelids—entreated Mr. Wickham to join the next game she was playing as there was an opening at the table. Much to Maria's and the Long sisters' disappointment, Mr. Wickham informed her that he did not intend to play any other card game that evening.

This allowed Mr. Wickham to seat himself near Miss Elizabeth. In order to see her better, he had turned slightly towards her and away from the space next to the settee on the end where he was seated. Bennet unobtrusively seated himself in the armchair placed in that space.

Wickham felt they could talk at leisure, and she seemed very willing to hear him. He knew he needed to tell her a version of the history of his acquaintance with Mr. Darcy, one which would explain what she had seen the previous day.

Elizabeth had no need to raise the subject. It seemed the Lieutenant was more than willing to do so as he began the subject of his relationship with Mr. Darcy unprompted. "How far is Netherfield Park from Meryton?" he enquired. He had been informed the estate was where the prig was residing in the area.

“The estate is about two miles west of Meryton, Sir,” Elizabeth responded.

“H-how long has Mr. Darcy been staying there?” he queried hesitatingly.

“A few weeks,” said Elizabeth; and then added, “He is, I understand, a man of very large property in Derbyshire.”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Wickham, “his estate there is a noble one. A clear ten thousand per annum. You could not have met with a person more capable of giving you certain information on that head than myself, for I have been connected with his family in a particular manner from my infancy.”

Elizabeth feigned a look of surprise. ‘*Let us see what you are willing to tell about this subject,*’ she told herself silently while she looked past the officer. There sat her father giving her the confidence to maintain the charade of interest in what she was being told.

“Miss Bennet, you may well be surprised at such an assertion after seeing, as you probably did, the very cold manner of our meeting yesterday. Are you much acquainted with Mr. Darcy?”

“As much as I ever wish to be,” cried Elizabeth very warmly. “I have spent four days in the same house with him, and I thought him very disagreeable.” Her father nodded his approval. She was sure it was exactly what Mr. Wickham wanted to hear. She was proved correct as he launched into his version of the tale of his connection with Mr. Darcy.

“I have no right to give *my* opinion,” said Wickham, “as to his being agreeable or otherwise. I am not qualified to form one. I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge. It is impossible for *me* to be impartial.”

“On his first arriving here he was not at all liked in Hertfordshire. Everybody was disgusted with his pride. You would not have found him favourably spoken of by anyone.” Elizabeth told the truth; it was how he was thought of then.

She felt no need to mention her improved opinions of the man, or for that matter, those of the rest of the neighbourhood.

“I cannot pretend to be sorry,” said Wickham—either not hearing, or ignoring the past tense in the young lady’s statement, “that he or any man should not be esteemed beyond their desserts; but with *him* I believe it does not often happen. The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners, and sees him only as he chooses to be seen.”

“I thought him at first meeting to be an ill-tempered man.”

Wickham only shook his head. “I wonder,” said he, at the next opportunity of speaking, “whether he is likely to be in this country much longer.”

“I do not know, but I *heard* nothing of his going away when I was at Netherfield Park nor have I since. I hope your plans in favour of the Derbyshire Militia will not be affected by his being in the neighbourhood.”

“Oh no! It is not for *me* to be driven away by Mr. Darcy. If *he* wishes to avoid seeing *me*, he must go. We are not on friendly terms, and it always gives me pain to meet him. I have no reason for avoiding *him* but what I might proclaim before all the world, a sense of very great ill-usage, and most painful regrets at his being what he is. His father, Miss Bennet, the late Mr. Darcy, was one of the best men that ever breathed, and the truest friend I ever had. I can never be in company with this Mr. Darcy without being grieved to the soul by a thousand tender recollections. His behaviour towards me has been scandalous; but I verily believe I could forgive him anything and everything, rather than his disappointing the hopes and disgracing the memory of his father.”

Elizabeth found her interest of the subject increasing and listened carefully as was her father, unbeknownst to Mr. Wickham. She had no need to prompt the man further as he freely spoke now.

“It was the prospect of constant society, and good society,” he added, “which was my chief inducement to enter

the Derbyshire Militia. I knew it to be a most respectable, agreeable corps, and my friend Denny tempted me further by his account of their present quarters, and the very great attentions and excellent acquaintances Meryton had procured them.

“Society, I own, is necessary to me. I have been a disappointed man, and my spirits will not bear solitude. I *must* have employment and society. A military life is not what I was intended for, but circumstances have now made it eligible. The church *ought* to have been my profession—I was brought up for the church, and I should at this time have been in possession of a most valuable living, had it pleased the gentleman we were speaking of just now.”

“Indeed!” Elizabeth shook her head in put on sympathy. ‘*If you took your orders, what are you doing in the militia?*’

“Yes. The late Mr. Darcy bequeathed me the next presentation of the best living in his gift. He was my godfather, and excessively attached to me. I cannot do justice to his kindness. He meant to provide for me amply, and thought he had done it; but when the living became available, it was given elsewhere.”

“Good heavens!” cried Elizabeth; “but how could *that* be? How could his will be disregarded? Why did you not seek legal redress?” Something did not ring true. Elizabeth saw the scepticism written on her father’s face as well.

Wickham had to think fast. He was not expecting to be questioned. “There was just such an informality in the terms of the bequest as to give me no hope from law. A man of honour could not have doubted the intention, but Mr. Darcy chose to doubt it—or to treat it as a merely conditional recommendation, and to assert I had forfeited all claim to it by extravagance, imprudence—in short anything or nothing. Certain it is that the living became vacant two years ago, exactly as I was of an age to hold it. That it was given to another man is no less certain. I cannot accuse myself of having really done anything to deserve to lose it. I have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may have spoken my opinion

of him, and to him, too freely. I can recall nothing worse. But the fact is we are very different sort of men, and that he hates me.”

‘Do you know nothing of the law. You said it was a bequest, which meant it had to be in late Mr. Darcy’s will. As soon as I suggested legal redress you blanched and then it became informal.’ For effect, aloud she said, “This is quite shocking! He deserves to be publicly disgraced.”

“Some time or other he *will* be—but it shall not be by me. Til I can forget his father, I can never defy or expose *him*.”

Elizabeth had to fight to school her features, as she saw her father doing. Did the man not realise he was doing the exact thing he claimed he would not do? What was his aim if not to blacken Mr. Darcy’s name; so much for caring for his late godfather.

“But what,” said she, after a pause, “can have been his motive? What can have occurred to induce him to behave so cruelly?” To herself she silently said, *‘Let us see what you weave to explain his motivations. This should be very brown.’*

“A thorough, determined dislike of me—a dislike which I cannot but attribute in some measure to jealousy. Had the late Mr. Darcy liked me less, his son might have borne with me better, but his father’s uncommon attachment to me irritated him, I believe, very early in life. He had not a temper to bear the sort of competition in which we stood—the sort of preference which was often given me.”

“I had not thought Mr. Darcy so bad as this. The picture you paint is of one who should be despised by his fellow creatures in general, one who descends to such malicious revenge, such injustice, such inhumanity as you have portrayed here.”

After a few minutes’ reflection, however, she continued, “I *do* remember his saying one day that he has an unforgiving temper. His disposition, according to you, must be dreadful.”

“I will not trust myself on the subject,” replied Wickham; “I can hardly be just to him.”

Elizabeth was again deep in thought. To herself she said, ‘*You are a young man whose very countenance may be mistaken for your being amiable. I can see you try and use your charm to make people blind to your lies.*’ She contented herself with, “It seems from what you have said you were his companion from childhood, connected together, as I think you said, in the closest manner!”

“We were born in the same parish, within the same park; the greatest part of our youth was passed together; inmates of the same house, sharing the same amusements, objects of the same parental care. *My* father began life in the profession which your uncle, Mr. Phillips, appears to do so much credit to—but he gave up everything to be of use to the late Mr. Darcy and devoted all his time to the care of the Pemberley property. He was most highly esteemed by Mr. Darcy, a most intimate, confidential friend. Mr. Darcy often acknowledged himself to be under the greatest obligations to my father’s active superintendence of his estates, and when, immediately before my father’s death, Mr. Darcy gave him a voluntary promise of providing for me. I am convinced he felt it to be as much a debt of gratitude to *him*, as of his affection to myself.”

“How strange!” cried Elizabeth. ‘*How dishonest and abominable! I wonder at your pride in your ability to spin a yarn that you think me simple enough to believe this story. As of yet, I cannot discern your motives for telling me this tale of woe, but I am sure most of it is dissembling—for dishonesty I must call it.*’

“It *is* wonderful,” Wickham continued, “for almost all his actions may be traced to pride; and pride had often been his best friend. It has connected him nearer with virtue than with any other feeling. But we are none of us consistent, and in his behaviour to me there were stronger impulses even than pride.”

“Can such abominable pride you accuse him of ever have done him good?”

“Yes. It has often led him to be liberal and generous, to give his money freely, to display hospitality, to assist his tenants, and relieve the poor. Family pride, and *filial* pride—for he is very proud of what his father was—has done this. Not to appear to disgrace his family, to degenerate from the popular qualities, or lose the influence of the Darcys of Pemberley, is a powerful motive. He has also *brotherly* pride, which, with *some* brotherly affection, makes him a very kind and careful guardian of his sister, and you will hear him generally cried up as the most attentive and best of brothers.”

“What sort of girl is Miss Darcy?”

Wickham shook his head in supposed sadness. “I wish I could call her amiable. It gives me pain to speak ill of a Darcy. But she is too much like her brother—very, very proud. As a child, she was affectionate and pleasing, and extremely fond of me; and I devoted hours and hours to her amusement. But she is nothing to me now. She is a handsome girl, about fifteen or sixteen, and, I understand, highly accomplished. Since her father’s death, her home has been London, where a lady lives with her, and superintends her education.”

“I am astonished, based on your description of him, at his intimacy with Mr. Bingley! How can Mr. Bingley, who seems good humour itself, and I really believe is truly amiable, be in friendship with such a man as you described? How can they suit each other? Do you know Mr. Bingley?”

“Not at all,” Wickham stated before thinking. He ignored the fact he had met the man at Cambridge.

“He is a sweet-tempered, amiable, charming man. Surely he would not be friends with Mr. Darcy if he is as bad as you have indicated.” She shook her head sadly. ‘*Mr. Bingley’s roots are in trade, so if anything you said about Mr. Darcy was true, he would not befriend the son of a tradesman!*’

“Probably not; but Mr. Darcy can please where he chooses. He does not want for abilities. He can be a conversable companion if he thinks it worth his while. Among those who are at all his equals in consequence, he is a very

different man from what he is to the less prosperous. His pride never deserts him; but with the rich he is liberal-minded, just, sincere, rational, honourable, and perhaps agreeable—allowing something for fortune and figure.”

Before Wickham could spin more of his yarn, Bennet stood and cleared his throat. Wickham turned a little white not knowing how long Miss Elizabeth’s father had been near him, hoping he had not heard the whole of what he had told her. If what he said reached Darcy’s ears...

“I-I must away. Honour and duty call.” Wickham stood, gave a perfunctory bow, and took off as fast as he was able.

“We will talk about this work of fiction on the morrow,” Bennet told his daughter. “The card party is almost at its end, help me call the attention of your mother and sisters and we will make for home.”

Ten minutes later, the Bennets were on the way home. On arriving they could hear Lydia’s caterwauling emanating from the window of the cellar.

Chapter 17

“What on earth is that ungodly racket my youngest is making?” Bennet demanded on entering his house.

“Lydia attempted to escape from the house, Papa,” Kitty shared.

“It was as we expected,” Bennet looked to his wife.

“Oh Thomas, I am so sorry,” Fanny bemoaned. “She is so ungovernable because I never took the time to correct her behaviour, and in fact, to my shame, I encouraged it.”

“Fanny, the blame rests with both of us, but knowing that will not correct the here and now,” Bennet assured his wife. He turned to the Hills. “Please tell us what occurred.”

“We feigned sleep like you suggested, Master,” Mrs. Hill began.

“Miss Lydia called our names a few times and then she tried to convince Miss Kitty to join her in going to Meryton to see the officers,” Mr. Hill continued.

“Much to Lydia’s distaste, I refused Papa. Life has been so much more pleasant since I have been behaving as I should,” Kitty related. “She tried to cajole me, but after a few minutes gave up as she was worried the Hills would awaken. I told her it was unwise to disobey you and Mama in that way, but she ignored me. She collected her outerwear and then slipped out of the kitchen door.”

“That is where Jim was stationed,” Mrs. Hill told. “We knew Miss Lydia had been recovered when we heard her screaming for Jim to release her or she would sack him.”

“Like you instructed, she was locked in the cellar, and there, as you heard when you arrived home, she remains,” Hill completed the recitation.

“You both did very well. Please tell Jim to bring my wayward daughter to the drawing room and then you may retire for the night,” Bennet instructed. Once the Hills had

departed the drawing room, Bennet turned to his second to youngest daughter. "I...we are all very proud of you, Kitty."

Kitty glowed with pleasure. Since the changes her parents had begun to implement at Longbourn, it had not taken Kitty long to learn positive attention was far more gratifying than the negative kind she had received with her coughing and blindly following Lydia around.

Lydia, always far more forceful than Kitty, had railed against her next older sister calling her a traitor, and many, many other things far worse. As she was resolved to follow her own path and not Lydia's any longer, nothing Lydia had said caused Kitty to waiver from her chosen course.

"I hate you all!" Lydia blurted out when led into the drawing room. "All I wanted was some fun with the officers." She stood defiantly, her arms akimbo staring unflinchingly at her parents.

"SOME FUN!" Bennet thundered.

The defiance deserted Lydia. She had never seen her father so angry before and it scared her. Mayhap she had pushed things too far this time.

"A child," Bennet began and glared at his youngest menacingly when she was about to protest his use of the word child. "As I was saying, a *child*, running into the night, unchaperoned, to go to see officers. If you had not been caught you would have been *ruined*, and by extension, your sisters would have partaken in your shame."

"Lydia," Fanny shook her head sadly, "I am so sorry I ever spoke of Colonel Millar and his regiment to you. It is that I am sure which set you on this dangerous obsession with officers." Fanny paused. "You like fine clothing, do you not?"

"You know I do!" Lydia bit out.

"What about ribbons, fripperies, bonnets, balls, and the rest?" Fanny pushed.

"All of that!" Lydia returned, some of her prior defiance rearing its head.

“Then please explain how you will have *any* of that if you were shackled to a Lieutenant who barely earns two pounds a month? Out of that, he would have to live, how much do you think would be left for you? You would have no pin money, *maybe* one dress a year would be more than you would receive, and if you went to one ball every year or two, I would be surprised,” Fanny informed her youngest.

Lydia stood her mouth opening and closing, but no sound issuing forth. “B-but I would still have an allowance from Papa,” Lydia claimed in a much subdued voice.

“No you would not. If you ruined yourself and were forced to marry, to save the rest of my daughters from the stain of your behaviour, you would be cast out from the family,” Bennet told his horrified daughter. “Even if you married honourably, at that point your husband would be responsible for you and your needs. If you marry imprudently to a man who is unable to provide for you as needed, then Lydia, you will have no one to turn to in order to correct your error.”

By now, all of Lydia’s confidence in her prior position was gone and tears were streaming down her face as the picture of her suffering ruin could be vividly imagined.

“Everything we are doing is in service of your *not* having to suffer such a fate,” Fanny took over. “Your father used the word child because that is what you are. Are you tall and have a womanly body? Yes, you are and you do. However, marriage is final and you having this irrational desire to marry before your older sisters is nonsensical. Do you think you would be happy in a style of living far below the one we enjoy?”

Lydia shook her head tearfully.

“Then why do you want to marry so young?” Fanny prodded.

Before she answered Lydia took her father’s proffered handkerchief and dried her eyes. “It was unfair my older sisters get to do things before me. I wanted to do something before them,” Lydia explained childishly.

“Lydia dear, that is the natural order of things,” Fanny stated gently. “My biggest mistake was pushing you girls out at fifteen.” Fanny looked at each of her daughters in turn. “Regardless of how you look externally, no girl of that age is ready for the rigours of society and possible marriage. Why do you think that seventeen sometimes, and mostly eighteen is the age accepted by almost all in society as an appropriate age for a girl to come out. You were taught about the fun aspects of being out, but I am afraid the responsibilities were not imparted to you as they should have been.”

“For my part I should have never agreed to allowing you girls being pushed out at such a young age,” Bennet agreed. “Before you ask me why you and Kitty are back in when your older three sisters were all out at fifteen think on this. The past cannot be changed, but that does not mean we ignore current wrongs because of the past. Also, all three of them had far more maturity at fifteen than you have demonstrated.”

“Lyddie, do you know how we envy you,” Jane spoke for her next two youngest sisters.

“You envy me?” Lydia responded incredulously.

“For two reasons,” Elizabeth explained. “All three of us would have loved to have until eighteen before we came out,” she smiled at their father, “even if Papa said we were more mature. In addition, we would have enjoyed having a governess to teach us accomplishments.”

The Bennet parents looked ashamed as Elizabeth spoke, knowing it was the poor decisions they had made which had denied their daughters a much better education.

What her parents had said began to sink in, but Lizzy telling her that she, Jane, and Mary were sad they did not have the same education which she and Kitty were about to receive went the furthest to convince Lydia the time to change was at hand.

“Lydia, until we know you are willing to behave with propriety and decorum, you will remain in the schoolroom. The duration of that stay will be governed by your behaviour,”

Bennet pronounced. "A good start will be an apology to the Hills and Jim the next time you see them."

"Yes, Papa." Lydia averred succinctly. "Mama and Papa, I beg your pardon for the way I have been behaving." Lydia wished everyone a goodnight and took herself up to the schoolroom.

There was no huffing, screeching, stamping of feet, or slammed doors. It seemed progress had been made that night.



Wickham was not sure if Miss Elizabeth's father had heard all of his tale, but if so, was Darcy known to him? It was a worry which made him debate whether it was time to move on or remain with the militia and replenish his needs from the credit the merchants would extend and the favours he would claim from young ladies in the area.

He had only met four, well three, of the Bennet sisters. One had not been introduced as she was not out and her sister had objected to him trying to be friendly to Miss Kitty. Very much wanting to please him, Miss Maria had mentioned a fifth sister who she had indicated would have been competition for officers were she allowed out of the house.

This could only mean the youngest unnamed Bennet would have been easy to seduce. It was a pity she was not free to meet him. He imagined how he would enjoy plucking her virtue before he snapped himself out of his fantasy.

None of that answered his question of whether it was safe for him to remain in Meryton. Wait, had Miss Elizabeth not told of how unpopular Darcy was and was thought of as being rude and aloof? In that case, the chances were there was no connection between Darcy and the Bennets, so the odds of Mr. Bennet speaking to Darcy about what he had heard, if he had heard anything, were low to none.

The realisation allowed Wickham to relax and begin to breathe easier. Besides, a few words from him in well placed ears and precious Georgiana Darcy would be ruined. In the back of his mind, Wickham knew if he took that step, he

would have to have the means to escape the country as Richard Fitzwilliam would hunt him down.

That was a last resort. In his opinion, Darcy loved his sister too much to provoke him to have to retaliate. Rather than worry about his nemesis, Wickham began to plan which merchant he would gain credit from first and who would be his first conquest.



Unfortunately for Elizabeth, who loved to walk out in the mornings, it had been raining for three days straight. She knew Jane was equally as disenchanted with the weather as it had not allowed Mr. Bingley to call on her.

Along with Jane and Mary, Elizabeth was seated in the drawing room. Their mother was meeting with Mrs. Hill and then she intended to rest; rainy days were not her favourite. The two youngest Bennets were with the companion-governess in lessons.

Mrs. Buxton had arrived as planned and was an integral part of the household now. Elizabeth liked the nonsense lady. She was somewhat taller than herself and if Elizabeth had to guess she would have said the lady was above thirty summers in age.

Without the ability to ramble over the estate's paths or to her favourite destination, Oakham Mount, Elizabeth sat in on one of the companion-governess's lessons. She had been impressed on two fronts.

Firstly, Lydia was attentive and seemed keen to learn and secondly, the woman was a good teacher who had an extensive breadth of knowledge. Having the latter did not always make one good at being the former.

Her rumination was disturbed when Mary's fiancé entered the drawing room. "Mary dearest dove, I received a letter from Lady Catherine this morning, what an honour," Collins exclaimed.

"Is everything well in Kent?" Mary enquired.

“It seems it is, except Miss de Bourgh has been ill of late,” Collins related sadly. “There are two things of importance for us,” he reported as he brightened again. “I had told my patroness of my good fortune of securing your hand in marriage and Lady Catherine says you sound just like the type of lady she would have imagined as a parson’s wife. She looks forward to your waiting on her when we return to Hunsford subsequent to our joining in holy wedlock in the sight of God and His holy church.”

“Did you tell her we are to marry on the twentieth day of this month?” Mary questioned.

“I did, but sadly she cannot condescend to join us, especially with her daughter’s indifferent health,” Collins averred.

Elizabeth leaned so her mouth was close to Jane’s ear. “And this sickly woman is the *Rose of Kent* he told us is engaged to Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth whispered. “It sounds like an interesting pairing.”

“*Lizzy*,” Jane hissed and playfully swatted at her sister’s arm.

Collins did not seem to notice what had passed between the two eldest Bennet sisters and if Mary did, she ignored the smiling pair. “The other is of equal import,” Collins stated with puffed up pride. “Remember you told me about my great-grandfather Ignatius changing his family name when he married?”

“Yes. Did you research the subject in Papa’s study?” Mary asked.

“Indeed I did. Bennet showed me the family bible where my ancestor was named as Ignatius Bennet. It also showed his wedding day and the date he changed his name to Collins, as you correctly reported,” Collins responded.

“So, you accept without that event, your name would have been William Bennet?” Mary verified.

“That is certain,” Collins confirmed. “Once I saw the bible, I wrote to Lady Catherine and she and I are of one mind

on this. Ignatius should have never changed his name to take that of his wife's, so that means I am a Bennet."

"Are you to have your name changed?" Jane queried.

"I am, only I do not know how to go about it," Collins worried.

"You met our Aunt Hattie and Uncle Frank, did you not?" Mary reminded her fiancé.

"Yes, of course. Mr. Philips is a solicitor is he not?" Collins recalled. "Is it certain he will be able to assist me.?"

"Uncle Frank is a very good lawyer, and I believe he will," Elizabeth stated.

"It is a pity this rain restricts us to the house," Collins mused.

"If you write a note telling our uncle what you are looking to do, a groom will deliver the missive. His oilskins will keep him and the letter dry," Elizabeth suggested.

Liking the suggestion, Collins hurried to the study to write his note. A half hour later, a Longbourn groom, covered in his oilskins was on his way riding to Mr. Philips's office.

Chapter 18

After the third day of rain, it ceased and began to clear up the afternoon of the day before the ball to be held at Netherfield Park. Even though she wanted to demonstrate her abilities to Mr. Darcy, Miss Bingley was not happy the rain was ending. It would allow for more than a full day for everything to dry out.

It would have been better had none of the local mushrooms been able to arrive, especially not the two Bennet chits. One, the hated Eliza Bennet had the temerity to use her arts and allurements to turn Mr. Darcy's head while the older sister had used her own to attract her brother.

She would never allow Charles to marry a country nobody. He was meant for the mousy Georgiana Darcy and her thirty thousand pounds. She, Caroline Maleficent Bingley would do whatever was needed to achieve both aims: Charles would marry the sister and she would capture the brother as her prize.

To that end, a plan was formulating in Miss Bingley's mind. Charles had mentioned he needed to go to London the day after the ball to meet with his solicitor and man of business in Town. It would be quick work for her to convince Mr. Darcy and the Hursts to follow her brother to London and then she would gain their assistance in convincing Charles not to return to this benighted neighbourhood ever again.

Once they were all safely in Town and away from anyone named Bennet, she would implement her plans for her future. If she needed to compromise Mr. Darcy, so be it.

One thing which frustrated her greatly was the fact that, other than times at dinner and in the drawing room briefly before and after the meal, she was not in Mr. Darcy's company nearly as much as she needed to be to induce him to offer for her.

Even forcing herself to rise early in the morning and enter the breakfast parlour at an inelegant early hour did not

help. After the first time she arrived at that hour, Mr. Darcy was absent thereafter. Much to her disgust she was told he liked to take early morning rides so he broke his fast at an even earlier hour.

Unfortunately, Miss Bingley hated horses unless they were being used to pull the coach she happened to be in. She had been too afraid of the huge beasts to learn and had told one and all she disliked the dirt and smell of the horses hence she *chose* not to ride.

Given that fact, she had no way of joining Mr. Darcy for a morning ride which left her with the problem of being severely restricted in the times she was able to demonstrate her suitability for the post of mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House. It was rather perplexing, even these last three days of rain, when Mr. Darcy did not go out and ride, she had not seen him any more than days when the weather was good. She could not understand how that was.

Seeing the sun break through the thinning cloud cover, Miss Bingley was positive there would be no excuse to cancel the ball. As that was the case, she would turn it to her advantage as much as possible.

Being secure in her superiority to anyone in this armpit of society called Meryton, Miss Bingley was confident her fashionable ball gown would give Mr. Darcy no choice but to request the three significant sets from her. How enjoyable would it be to see the moment Mr. Darcy beheld the difference between her own excellent fashion sense and that of Miss Eliza's who Caroline was certain would arrive wearing a dowdy, very much outdated gown. The pleasure she would garner would be immeasurable while Miss Eliza sat along the wall mournfully, slighted by other men, and she would be standing up with Mr. Darcy for the first set.

Even though he had never danced the first with her, or any single non-family member lady before, Miss Bingley was supremely confident as the hostess she would have that honour on the morrow. Her triumph occurring with the hated Eliza Bennet looking on, would make it that much sweeter.



Wickham was not happy the rain had ceased. The clearing weather meant the damned ball would go ahead and now he needed to find an excuse to miss it. Mr. Bingley had invited all of the officers and not excluded him as he had hoped would be the case. If it had been so, Wickham would have had another excuse to cry persecution by Mr. Darcy, but no, it was not to be. Why had he made that statement to Miss Elizabeth asserting Darcy, not he, would need to be the one to withdraw.

Thinking of Miss Elizabeth, who would have been so much more attractive to him had she been five or six years younger, Wickham could not understand why his well-woven and believable story had not been repeated among the populace of the area.

That fact only added to his bad run of luck, and he was not only thinking of the fact he had already issued many vows for debts of honour, but in addition, the merchants had politely told him their policy was to provide credit only to local residents who had lived in the community for more than a few years.

As much as he wanted to blame Darcy for this change in his fortunes, he could not. Not only had Darcy not been seen in the town since that first day Wickham ran into him, but he would not have warned the merchants off all officers. Richard Fitzwilliam was after all an officer which supported Wickham's hypothesis about Darcy doing nothing to hurt all officers.

He saw Captain Carter, Colonel Forster's adjutant, walking across the parade area with purpose. "Captain, you look like you are in a hurry," Wickham observed after giving what was meant to pass as a salute.

"I need to find someone to ride to London in order to deliver a dispatch to militia headquarters on the morrow," Carter related.

"Would the man be able to remain in London overnight and return the following morning?" Wickham enquired.

“Correct. Now excuse me. I must be on my way,” Carter began to turn when Wickham stopped him.

“Do you have a preference for who should carry the dispatch, or will I fit the bill?” Wickham asked hopefully.

“I did not relish taking too long to seek someone for the task while neglecting my other duties. Are you volunteering to pass up a night of dancing?” Carter verified.

“Most certainly, I am.” Wickham found relief. Now he would miss the infernal ball with a legitimate reason for doing so.

After wishing the Captain farewell and agreeing to meet in the Adjutant’s office just after sunrise on the morrow. A much happier Wickham took himself off in the direction of Meryton’s Red Lion Inn.



The morning of the ball, Elizabeth woke before the sun rose. There had been no rain since yesterday so she was eager to walk out on her favourite paths. She knew the ground would still be moist and would leave her clothing muddier than even the day she had walked to Netherfield Park to be at Jane’s side. At least if she walked out this day, Mr. Darcy would not be there to see her dishevelment. Even though she thought better of him, and believed he was an honourable man, Elizabeth still felt he looked down on her family and those who lived in the neighbourhood.

As she sat and contemplated who she would or would not like to see, at the top of the latter list was one Lieutenant Wickham. She was proud of the fact she and her father had come to the conclusion he was not to be trusted, and not just with respect to his tale of woe regarding Mr. Darcy. The night they had arrived back at the estate Elizabeth had been summoned to her father’s study after he had dealt with Lydia.

She could still remember the conversation as if it were occurring at that moment.

“Sit Lizzy, would you like me to call for something hot to drink?” asked her father.

“No thank you, Papa. Notwithstanding having to listen to Mr. Wickham’s prevarication, I was able to drink and eat enough at the Philipses,” she replied.

“It is that dishonest man I would like to discuss,” her father stated.

“He must be used to holding sway over those who will not analyse his statements too closely. I would venture he thinks his handsome countenance and charm stops anyone from parsing his statements too deeply.”

“I think you have the right of it, Lizzy. I lost count of the number of contradictions in his speech, never mind that he would share something so personal with one he barely knew.”

“That, Papa, I believe was the point.” Papa had looked quizzically. “Do you agree most people would never share anything like that with a new acquaintance unless their aim was...”

“To have the information disseminated to blacken someone’s name and reputation while keeping their own hands clean. Did you not say when the two men met in Meryton Mr. Wickham seemed afraid of Mr. Darcy?”

“That I did. You, Jane, me, or any other decent person would never make a disclosure like he made unless the person was an intimate friend, and then it would be made in a very private setting, not at a card party when anyone who cared to could have heard.”

“You will not hear me dispute what you said.”

“The man thought he had found in me a dupe, one who would do his work for him and spread the story far and wide. He could not have been further from the mark! Anyone who knows me is aware of my abhorrence of gossip.”

“We are of one mind as far as Mr. Wickham and his ill intentions go.” Papa had gone quiet and stared at the blackness outside his window. “Could you imagine one like that and the damage he could have wrought on Lydia and our family through her if we had not decided to take her in hand?”

“I shudder to consider us all being ruined because of something like that.”

“Back to what I wanted to ask you Lizzy. In my mind, as we have determined he is a dishonest man who is not to be trusted, we should warn both other families in the area to be wary and the merchants not to issue credit.”

“With one caveat, I agree with you.”

“What would that be?” Papa had enquired with raised eyebrows.

“Rather than name him specifically, in case we are wrong about his intentions, we should warn the merchants and families in the area we have heard that some among the militia are untrustworthy and it would be better for the former not to issue credit to any of the members of the regiment, other than the Colonel and the latter something similar. Based on the general intelligence we gleaned, it would be a good idea to keep their daughters close at hand.”

“You have proposed a very sensible solution which will achieve our aims without defaming any one man in particular. You will accompany me in the morning to speak to the leading merchants who will then make sure the information reaches all the rest. I will visit Sir William after. Once I have spoken to him, it will not be long before word will be passed throughout the community.”

Elizabeth snapped herself out of her reverie. They had done what they planned the next morning and it soon became known not a single tradesman in Meryton would extend credit to anyone in the regiment other than the Colonel.

The strategy of telling Sir William worked just like Bennet and his second daughter knew it would. Lady Lucas was not the only member of that family who vastly enjoyed gossiping.

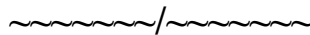
Unlike the lying Lieutenant, Bennet and his daughter knew who to speak to in order to have information spread about, the difference being, they did it for good.



The morning of the ball was cloudless and somewhat warm for an early December day. By the time Elizabeth struck out for Oakham Mount, the paths—for the most part—were no longer muddy. She made a concerted effort not to step in any patches still a little wet as contrary to the belief of some—namely Miss Caroline Bingley—Elizabeth did not relish being covered in mud.

After just over three days of being confined to the house, Elizabeth walked at a very fast pace on her way to the mount. Thanks to a weak sun at that time of the morning, Elizabeth untied her bonnet strings as she walked. After removing the garment, she retied the strings so she could easily carry it in one hand.

Without the bonnet to restrain her curls, many escaped her ineffectual attempt to pin her tresses in place. Being on her father's land combined with the time of the morning, Elizabeth did not think she would be observed so she made no effort to try taming her free-flowing locks.



Having been trapped for three days complete in a house where Caroline Bingley resided, Darcy was up at the crack of dawn. Not ringing for his valet, he dressed on his own and was soon in the stables tacking Zeus himself.

A groom approached him but Darcy waved him off. When he had the time, he preferred to do this with his own two hands. It was not a matter of not trusting the grooms, rather it was a bonding experience with his stallion he had enjoyed since the first day Father had presented the horse to him on his sixteenth birthday.

Zeus hungrily munched on the apple Darcy proffered him. Once his horse had completed his treat, Darcy led him out of the area of the stables into an adjacent field. With one fluid motion with his foot in the stirrup, Darcy was on his horse's back.

He patted his mount's flanks and could feel his muscles rippling in anticipation of what was to come. He first walked the animal, then a trot, and then a canter. Darcy hardly touched

Zeus with the heels of his boots before the horse surged into a gallop.

Without paying too much attention to where he was, horse and rider sailed over a few fences. By the time he brought his horse back to a trot, he was close to the only hill in the area. He had never been near it before and, if memory served, he had heard one of the stable hands mention the eminence was on Longbourn's land. He hoped the Bennets would not object to his riding on their land. It was then he saw *her*. She looked like a wood nymph. His heart almost seized at the beauty he was seeing before him.

Miss Elizabeth was skipping along a path which, if Darcy guessed correctly, led to the hill. Her bonnet was off, held in her left hand, and her hair was practically free of restraint as it flowed behind her.

It was obvious she had not seen him as she broke into a run. Her tinkling laugh reached his ears as she ran freely. Never had he met another, man or woman, with her *joie de vivre*.

His first instinct was to ride to her, pull her into his arms and declare his love for her there and then. As it always did, his head reminded him regardless of his infatuation with her, she was not an appropriate person to become the wife of Darcy of Pemberley.

Darcy thanked goodness she had not seen him. Had she, he would have had to greet her and then who knew what he would have done—regardless of what his head was telling him.

She was truly magnificent, but she was not for him. Thinking that, he felt a stab of pain as if someone had just broken his heart in two.

Chapter 19

Delivery of the dispatches to militia headquarters had not taken very much time, so George Wickham found more time on his hands than he had planned. He would meet Karen Younge at her boarding house on Edward Street later that evening.

She was far too old for him, but thanks to him talking her into forgiving him for her grievances from his last stint in London, he would—as he had in the past—pretend he was attracted to her and bed her in order to have a free night at her home, thus saving the stipend he was given for his night's stay as funds for the tables.

He made his way over to Grosvenor Square to see Darcy House, which in his mind should have been bequeathed to him and not to that prig Darcy. He wondered if little Georgiana was in residence.

He still smarted from his plans to elope with her and claim her dowry of thirty thousand pounds being thwarted because that bastard Darcy decided to visit Ramsgate earlier than expected. He tried to ignore what Darcy had told him about the terms of the release of her dowry. As much as he had not wanted to believe the dowry would have been forfeit, one thing he did know was Darcy did not prevaricate, the idiot abhorred disguise. Though he would not have gained the funds he wanted, he would have still exacted revenge on Darcy. As he thought of his failed plan, having forgotten his derisive words about her before he departed Ramsgate, Wickham wondered if Miss Darcy still held him in tender regard.

Just then he noticed the door at Matlock House across the square open and out stepped none other than the subject of his ruminations. She was not alone. She was accompanied by the pretty Fitzwilliam cousin, Tiffany, Wickham remembered, two older ladies, and two rather large Fitzwilliam footmen.

As he watched, he saw them enter Hyde Park via the Grosvenor Gate. He followed at a distance. To determine if

there was any chance he might be able to work on Miss Darcy, Wickham decided a *chance* encounter was in order.

He noted the direction his quarry and her party were walking. He took off at speed to circle around so he would place himself ahead of them on the path walking towards them.

Tiffany and Giana were having a pleasant walk and did not pay attention to the man in uniform who approached them. That was until Giana heard the voice of the man she never wanted to see again.

“Why if it is not little Miss Darcy,” Wickham greeted in his best charming voice.

Rather than feel fear, Giana felt a rage build within her. The temerity of this reprobate to approach her. Without thinking, she stepped forward and pulled her right arm back. Wickham was pleased when he saw Georgiana step towards him, right up until a mighty slap connected with his cheek.

Never in her life had she ever struck another person, but Giana put all the anger and feelings of betrayal she had into the force of her arm as she brought it forward as fast as she was able.

Her hand stung where it had connected with the black-hearted man’s cheek, but it was satisfying, nevertheless.

“How dare you approach me? Did my brother not warn you never to do so again?” Georgiana hissed. “Leave now without a word or I will have them,” she inclined her head towards the two large footmen who were now very close to where the confrontation had occurred, “force you to do so.”

Wickham had his answer. Miss Darcy had no residual tender feelings for him. One of the large men would have pummelled him, never mind two of them. His only option was to retreat.

With his cheek paining him considerably, to save what little dignity he had, Wickham doffed his hat and with all haste gave Miss Darcy and her party a wide berth and made towards the nearest exit from the park with all speed.

As soon as the blackguard was out of sight, Giana broke into tears. “Why would *that* man try to approach me?” she wailed.

Thankfully, there were few people in the park as it was not close to the fashionable hour, so there were no witnesses outside of their party to what had occurred.

Tiffany pulled her younger cousin into a hug while Mrs. Annesley and Tiffany’s companion were making sure Miss Darcy was well. “Giana, you were so brave,” Tiffany told her cousin softly.

“W-was I-I n-not brash in my a-action?” Georgiana stammered between tears.

Mrs. Annesley handed her charge a square of linen. “In my opinion, Lady Tiffany has the right of it and you stood up for yourself. I know not why that libertine approached you, but I am confident he will never do so again.”

“Did you note your handprint forming on his cheek?” Tiffany pointed out.

Giana dried her tears which had ceased now the tension had been released from her body. “My slap was rather hard, was it not?” Georgiana smiled for the first time since the man attempted to talk to her.

“That it was,” Tiffany agreed. “He deserved that and so much more!”

“I will have to tell my brother, will I not?” she checked with her companion.

“Yes, you will,” Mrs. Annesley agreed. “It is my belief rather than censure you; Mr. Darcy will be proud of the way you stood up for yourself.”

“Mrs. Annesley has the right of it,” Tiffany stated. Her own companion nodded her agreement. “Come we should return to Matlock House so we may inform Mother and Father, who I am sure will acquaint Richard with the happening.”

The group of walkers reversed their direction and headed back towards Matlock House.



Caroline Bingley stood admiring her form in the mirror after her maid had completed her task of preparing her mistress for the ball. To her eye, in her burnt orange ensemble with the matching dyed turban and ostrich feathers—also coloured to match—she was the epitome of fashion and class which would be required of her when she became a leader of the *Ton* once she was Mrs. Darcy.

She would ensure she and her husband would not spend much time in the country at all. Yes, she always boasted about Pemberley, not because she enjoyed being there and so far from London society, but because of the wealth the estate and its huge mansion represented.

A few months at the estate in the summer issuing the most sought after invitations to the balls and house parties she would host was more than enough. That is after all why Mr. Darcy had a steward. She would make sure he did not sully his hands with the day-to-day operation of the estate and just sit back and rake in the enormous income.

Of course, she would convince him to raise the rent on the peasants who were his tenants so she would have that much more available to her to redecorate at least once a year and purchase a new wardrobe every few months. She would expect to be covered from head to toe in jewels, as her right, and not just the old pieces that made up the Darcy jewels, but many new items her husband would purchase for her.

By then of course Charles would be married to Georgiana Darcy and her plan to raise herself to the heights of society would be complete. There was only one small problem with her plans for the night...Mr. Darcy had yet to request a single set from her, even though she was certain she would be opening the ball with him.

Miss Bingley was sure as soon as he saw her descend the stairs in her fashionable outfit, her hair done just so, and her copious jewels draped around her neck, he would not be able to resist her. She applied some more of her specially

blended French scent, and then to make sure, she added even more.

Again, she admired herself in the mirror and what she saw assured her that *her* Mr. Darcy would be blinded to that hoyden Eliza Bennet and only have eyes for herself.

As much as she wanted to be fashionably late, this was one occasion she knew she needed to be on time. She was part of the group making up the receiving line. Even though she did not desire to give consequence to the yokels, she knew it was expected of her. Mr. Darcy would not be impressed if she was late or eschewed her duties as hostess.

She had her maid reposition one of the four long feathers held up by her turban and glided as graciously as she could out of the mistress' suite. Caroline was hoping Mr. Darcy would be waiting for her in the hallway to escort her downstairs.

In the hallway, Miss Bingley stopped and looked around, but other than a footman on duty, there was nobody else. She huffed her annoyance but soothed herself with the knowledge Mr. Darcy would be waiting for her at the base of the grand staircase so he would be in the best position to admire her as she regally descended the stairs.



“Jane,” Elizabeth tried to garner her sister’s attention. She approached Jane and her dreamy faraway look and shook her shoulder as gently as she could.

“Lizzy, I beg your pardon, I was thinking about the ball with a great amount of pleasure,” Jane stated as her cheeks pinked.

“Could it be you have been missing a certain gentleman from Scarborough who was unable to come calling during the days of rain,” Elizabeth teased. The dreamy look returned to Jane’s face as soon as Elizabeth alluded to Mr. Bingley. “Jane, are you in love with Mr. Bingley?”

“I am not sure...no that is not the truth. Yes, Lizzy. Yes, I am,” Jane admitted. “I once asked Aunt Maddy how I

would know when I was truly in love.”

“And?” Elizabeth pressed impatiently.

“Our aunt told me when I am not in the man’s company, I would be missing him all of the time and wanting to be with him as if a piece of my heart would be absent without him near me,” Jane revealed. “Also, she said when I imagined my future if there was no version I envisioned without him in it, then I was in love.”

“Let us hope Mr. Bingley appreciates the gift beyond any value you have granted him,” Elizabeth stated happily. She cogitated for a second remembering an earlier conversation. “Janey, have you indicated your changed feelings to Mr. Bingley so he has no doubt of them? You remember our discussion.”

“Since we spoke on that subject, I have not seen him, however...” Jane blushed deeply before she was able to say the words.

“You intend to give him an indication this very evening, do you not?” Elizabeth surmised.

Not able to say the words, Jane simply nodded—vigorously. “Remember Lizzy, as much as I want to think he returns my regard, Mr. Bingley has not said anything to me on that subject as yet and, as far as I can see, his honour is not yet engaged.”

“Even a blind person would be able to see the feelings are mutual; regardless of how much his sisters, especially Miss Bingley, do not look upon your union with an approving eye,” Elizabeth opined.

“Do not worry about me being fooled by Miss Bingley’s false friendship. I am now well aware of her true feelings,” Jane assured her sister.

“It pleases me your eyes are open, and you are able to see things as they are,” Elizabeth responded. “On a different subject, how pleasant was preparing for the ball when Mama was not allowing her nerves to rule and not demanding lower necklines with much, much more lace?”

“Ever since our parents have had a change of heart, life has become so much more pleasant at Longbourn,” Jane agreed.

“Never did I think I would see the day Lydia was sanguine about remaining home rather than attending a ball. In the short time she has been here, Mrs. Buxton has done wonders.”

“You have the right of it, Lizzy dearest. The cessation of Lydia’s caterwauling has been a blessing. We no longer need to stuff cotton fluff in our ears at night to go to sleep.”

“Come, Jane, it is almost time to join Mama, Papa, and Mary downstairs.”

“Do you think Mr. Darcy will request a set from you tonight?” Jane put her hand on her sister’s arm to stop her from opening the door.

“Only he can tell you that. He is sometimes very hard to read. At times he seems pleasant and friendly, and at others, he looks so foreboding and seems to be staring at me with a critical eye.”

“Lizzy, you are too intelligent to believe a man wastes his time looking at a woman as much as Mr. Darcy looks at you, to be critical.”

“He is so far above us in society. Even if you are correct, I cannot allow myself to think of anything between us as it will only lead to heartache when nothing comes of it. Besides which, did you forget our future brother told us he is engaged to Miss de Bourgh.”

“I forgot he told us that.” Jane hugged Elizabeth. She opened the door and made her way into the hall. After a few moments as she contemplated the motivation of the tall, dark, and handsome—extremely handsome—man from Derbyshire and his intentions towards her, Elizabeth followed her older sister.

As they reached the top step, they met Mary who was on her way up. “There you two are. Mama sent me to call you; it is time to depart,” Mary informed her older sisters.

“I cannot remember ever seeing you so pleased to attend a ball before,” Elizabeth teased her next younger sister.

“William has requested the first, supper, and final sets from me,” Mary blushed lightly with pleasure. “He told me he is not the best dancer, but I am still in anticipation of standing up with my fiancé.”

“As you should be,” Jane opined. “If dancing is too tedious for him, you can always suggest sitting out and talking.”

“That is what I plan to do, if needs be,” Mary smiled smugly.

Soon enough the *six* Bennets were on their way to the ball. That very morning it became official. Mary’s betrothed was now William Collin Bennet, his new middle name for his former surname.

Chapter 20

Her nose pointed high in the air; Miss Bingley descended the grand staircase as regally as she was able. She had expected the sound of a deep breath from Mr. Darcy when he beheld her magnificence, but there was silence save for the butler talking to some of his footmen.

Caroline lowered her nose and peeked towards the base of the stairs where she expected to see Mr. Darcy waiting for her. He was not there! No one was standing and waiting to admire her!

She was at a loss to understand how this could be. She had been so sure he would be waiting for his first glimpse of her in her new gown and the rest of her ensemble. Miss Bingley heard voices coming from the drawing room and relaxed somewhat.

‘I will have to admonish Charles,’ Miss Bingley told herself silently, *‘he must have invited his friend to have an aperitif before we have to welcome the nobodies to our home. Being the gentleman my Mr. Darcy is, he could not very well refuse an entreaty from his host.’*

Having an answer for Mr. Darcy’s absence allowed Miss Bingley to calm herself considerably. She was able to maintain her equanimity until she entered the drawing room. Charles was there as she expected, as were Louisa and that lout of a brother-in-law of hers, Hurst.

However, no matter where she looked, there was no Mr. Darcy. How could this be? Had Charles sent him away from the drawing room? If so, why would her brother do something like that if not in order to sabotage her budding relationship with her intended.

“Where is Mr. Darcy,” Miss Bingley screeched.

“We have not seen him downstairs yet, Caroline,” Mrs. Hurst tried to soothe.

“You must have told him not to come and admire me,” Miss Bingley stated accusatorily to her brother.

“Caroline, how many times have you been told he does not admire you? Further, neither the Hursts nor I have seen him since he retired to dress,” Bingley stated firmly. “Do you really think Darcy would give in to my whims if I told him not to join us?”

“In that case, I must go make sure he is well. It is unlike him not to be in the drawing room with his hosts,” Miss Bingley started to turn when she felt her brother’s hand restraining her. “Let me go, he may be ill.”

“Darcy is as well as anyone else in this house,” Bingley stated in an even voice with an edge to it. “He told me he would only come downstairs just before the ball begins. You know he does not enjoy standing about with those with whom he is not familiar.”

“But he is our friend...” Miss Bingley began and stopped when her brother raised his hand.

“He is not part of the receiving line regardless of your inviting him to be. Yes, Caroline, he told me about that. It is the main reason he is remaining in his chambers for now. I tried to spare your feelings,” Bingley explained, “but I begin to worry about you, Sister. How can you be so delusional about a man who at best, *tolerates* your company as the sister of his good friend. *I* am his friend, not you.”

Miss Bingley looked from her brother to her sister and back again. She refused to accept what they were saying. She would be silent for now, but she would show them soon enough. They would never be invited to Pemberley or Darcy House once she was mistress.

“It is time to form the line to cast pearls before the swine.” Miss Bingley lifted her nose and with a swish of her gown, led the way to where they would line up.



As affable as Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam normally was, when he was angered, it was a fearsome thing to see. At

the moment he was furious, and a certain miscreant was very fortunate Richard did not know how to find him right then.

For not the first time he turned to those who had seen Wickham in the park earlier that day. “Tiffany, Giana, ladies, you are sure all you could see was he was a Lieutenant in the militia, not the battalion or the regiment of which he is part?” Richard interrogated again.

He had spoken to the two footmen who could not tell him anything beyond the fact the man was an officer in the militia. The companions and his cousin could not identify the rank. Thankfully though, from seeing him start as a second lieutenant and his subsequent merit-based promotions, Tiffany could identify the ranks of men in uniform.

“No Rich, as we told you beyond recognising he was not in the regulars and his rank, we can tell you no more,” Tiffany told her brother patiently.

“Richard, you are not disappointed with me for losing my composure and striking him, are you?” Georgiana verified.

“No Giana, not at all. I am sure William will also be as happy as I am that you did. Do not forget his own reaction in Ramsgate,” Richard assured her. “It is not something I would recommend you repeat, but if anyone deserved it then that bas...reprobate did.”

Tiffany gave her younger cousin an *I told you so* look. Giana had been nervous about her guardians’ reactions, and although she still needed to write a letter to William telling him what occurred, after Richard’s assurances, she felt far more confident.

“Richard, it is just as well you do not know where he is this night,” Lord Matlock stated stoically. “You would have done something rash and we do not want to see you arrested because of something you did to that brigand.”

The Colonel had to acknowledge the rectitude of what his father said. He would not begin this night, but he would begin to look for Wickham. He should never have allowed William to stop him from dealing with the profligate wastrel

after Ramsgate. In the Colonel's mind, Wickham made a fatal error as soon as he approached Giana again.



Darcy stood in his bedchamber, a little behind the half-drawn curtains. His window looked down over the drive so he had a good view of the carriages as each one stopped and disgorged its occupants.

With his opinion regarding Mrs. Bennet pushing her daughters at any eligible man in place, Darcy was very surprised the Bennets were not one of the first families to arrive. By the time he saw Mr. Bennet and a man he had not met yet alight and turn to begin handing out the women, more than twenty conveyances had already emptied themselves of their passengers.

He watched with fascination—telling himself he was simply interested in the tableau in front of the house—as Mr. Bennet handed out his wife, and then his eldest daughter. The other man, who from his outfit Darcy could see was a parson, handed the middle Bennet out of the carriage. Just when Darcy feared Miss Elizabeth had remained at home, her father leaned into the cabin one more time and handed out his second daughter.

The light from the nearby torches reflected off her hair pins. Her gown was a simple light green and seemed to compliment her complexion perfectly. Her shoulders were hidden under a heavy pelisse but from what he could tell, she wore ivory elbow length gloves.

Miss Elizabeth was even more beautiful than he remembered and without knowing it, Darcy had been pulled to the window like a moth to a flame. It was at that moment Miss Elizabeth looked up at him. At first, he did not move but after a few beats, Darcy jumped back as far into his chamber as he was able. He felt his cheeks burn with embarrassment at being seen staring at the object of his fascination by none other than the lady herself.



Elizabeth had been seated on the forward facing bench next to Jane who was in the centre while her mother was on Jane's other side, while Father and Mr. Collins sat on the rear facing bench with Mary between them.

She was the final one to be handed out of the carriage before Papa closed the door and the coachman followed the torches to the field where conveyances were being parked for the duration of the ball.

They were about to climb the stairs to the front doors when she felt the sensation of being watched by someone. She lifted her eyes to the second floor of the mansion and there stood Mr. Darcy, doing what he often did, staring at her.

She could not but smile when she saw the way he disappeared as soon as he realised she had seen him looking at her so intently. *'What could Mr. Darcy mean by the way he always looks at me?'* she asked herself in her head. *'Could Janey be correct? Is it admiration and not disdain in his looks? Surely not, he would have no interest in me, the dowerless daughter of an insignificant country squire, not to mention he is engaged.'*

Jane dropped back so she was next to Lizzy while her parents led the way followed by the engaged couple. When they passed the doors, Mr. Nichols was directing a cadre of footmen who were relieving the guests of their outerwear.

Bennet led his wife to the receiving line. There were cold, but polite, greetings and welcomes from Mr. and Mrs. Hurst. Miss Bingley made thinly veiled disdainful comments and Mr. Bingley was as affable as always.

Bennet wondered if the three siblings had been born of three different mothers; they were so dissimilar. He saw the instant Mr. Bingley spied Jane. His whole countenance lit up with pleasure. Bennet followed his eyes and there was Jane returning his look. He had never seen his eldest show so much emotion in public before.

Just as Jane and Elizabeth reached the Hursts behind Mary and her fiancé, Mr. Darcy arrived in the entrance hall, the other side of the line. Elizabeth had to contain her laughter

when she saw Miss Bingley attempt to leave her place next to her brother to make for Mr. Darcy. Mr. Bingley had to physically restrain his sister.

Even though Charles stopped her from going to Mr. Darcy's side, Miss Bingley was aware he was looking at her intently. That was until she noted his eyes were following the hated Eliza Bennet as the hoyden moved.

Elizabeth greeted Miss Bingley who pointedly ignored her so she moved on to the brother. "Allow me to apologise for my sister's rudeness," Bingley stated contritely.

"You are not the one who needs to do so, Mr. Bingley, although the gesture is much appreciated," Elizabeth allowed graciously.

"Welcome, Miss Bennet," Miss Bingley managed before Jane moved on to stand opposite Mr. Bingley.

Bingley had not missed the look he had received from Miss Bennet. It was not her normal placid smile, rather it was a smile full of love and promise. He was in love with the angel, not only because of her outward beauty, but if it was possible, she was even more so on the inside.

Until that moment he had been unsure of himself regarding declaring himself to Miss Bennet. Not knowing if she returned his regard had made him unwilling to say anything yet. After seeing the way she looked at him, and especially now as she stood before him, he knew it was time to move forward.

"Miss Bennet, you are most welcome," Bingley stated as he bowed over his angel's hand. "I am looking very forward to the first set."

"As am I, Sir," Jane replied while holding his eyes. "In fact, never have I looked more forward to a dance."

Jane felt very daring, almost wanton. First, she had given him a look which reflected her feelings and now she had spoken out so boldly. All she could do was hope and pray he did not find her too forward.

Darcy waited for a few moments before he followed the Bennets and the gentleman into the ballroom. He did not miss the way the man seemed to want to speak to him, but held himself back as they had not been introduced yet.

His traitorous feet took him to where the Bennets and Lucases were standing and conversing. "Good evening, Mr. Bennet, your family is well, I trust," Darcy bowed to him. "Same with you, Sir William." Another bow.

"We are all well, especially with our Mary lately engaged," Bennet replied.

It gave Darcy an opening to discover who the man bouncing on the balls of his feet excitedly was. "Would you mind introducing me to your daughter's fiancé," Darcy requested.

"Mr. Darcy, allow me to introduce Mr. William Collins Bennet, the rector of the Church at Hunsford in Kent. Mr. Bennet, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire."

"You are my aunt's parson," Darcy stated.

"Indeed I am, Sir. I am the recipient of your noble aunt's beneficence and it is my distinct honour to inform you both your aunt and cousin were in good health when I left my home almost a fortnight previously," William Bennet bowed low with one of his signature greetings.

"When are you and Miss Mary to marry?" Darcy enquired.

"The twentieth day of December this year. My beneficent patroness has granted me leave away from my parish until then," Collins bowed again.

To save having a long conversation with the loquacious man, Darcy turned to Miss Elizabeth without thinking about his words before they were spoken.

"Miss Elizabeth, would you honour me by dancing with me for the opening set?" Darcy requested.

Elizabeth was shocked to be so singled out. She wordlessly handed Mr. Darcy her dance card to allow him to

write his name in. To cover for his error in asking Miss Elizabeth for the opening set, he engaged Miss Bennet, Miss Lucas, Miss Mary, and Miss Maria for the next four sets.

From a resolution not to dance, Mr. Darcy was engaged to dance every set prior to the supper set. One resolution he intended to keep—he would not dance with Miss Bingley—ever again. She read far too much into things he did purely for his friendship with her brother.

Darcy bowed to the members of the two families and made his way to the other side of the ballroom to await the time to collect Miss Elizabeth.

Not having seen Charlotte for some days, Elizabeth was rather surprised to see Charlotte's countenance light up when the officers—sans Mr. Wickham she noted—entered the ballroom.

Colonel Forster made directly for their party and bowed before Charlotte. For the rest of the time, he remained steadfastly by Charlotte's side. Elizabeth gave her friend a questioning look.

Charlotte mouthed 'on the morrow' back. The Bennet and Lucas sisters always met the day after a ball to discuss it. Elizabeth felt there would be much to learn from her friend on the morrow.

Chapter 21

Jane Bennet glowed with happiness as Mr. Bingley, his receiving line duties completed, came to collect her for the first set. He bowed over her hand and then led her to take their place at the head of the line.

Had Bingley not already been sure of Miss Bennet's feelings towards him, thanks to her reaction on seeing him when she arrived, the way she lit up with pleasure as he approached her to claim the first dance with his angel, would have convinced him. Miss Bennet was normally stoic and demure making it very hard to discern her feelings. That seemed to be in the past.

In that instant, he made a decision, one which would irrevocably change the course of his life for the better. "Miss Bennet," Bingley said softly so only she could hear, "if you will hear me, I would like to find some time between the sets to have a private interview with you."

"It would be my absolute pleasure to hear *anything* you have to say to me," Jane replied while steadily holding Mr. Bingley's eyes with her own so he could see such a conversation was more than welcome to her.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth stood on the side of the dance floor watching Jane walk to her place in the line with Mr. Bingley. Never had she seen her older sister be so demonstrative with her feelings. She could feel nothing but happiness for Jane. If her allowing Mr. Bingley to see her true feelings for him produced her heart's desire, so much the better.

She felt ambivalent about her upcoming dance with Mr. Darcy. On the one hand, she looked forward to dancing with him having seen how well he danced—regardless of his expressed disdain for the exercise. On the other, she was sure it was no more than a dance. To that end, she reminded herself he was engaged, so this was just an interlude between indifferent acquaintances.

For his part, Darcy had not been able to quiet the voice in his head screaming that his singling Miss Elizabeth out for the first set had done the opposite of what he intended—raising expectations he could never fulfil. Yes, he had asked all the ladies around her for sets, but that did not change the fact he was about to dance the first with the enchanting lady.

His head had demanded he withdraw for the night claiming a headache, but Darcy had rejected that option no sooner than it had been considered. He was a man of honour, and he would not renege once he had requested and been granted dances by Elizabeth—Miss Elizabeth—or any of the other young ladies. His resolve not to dance with Miss Bingley remained firm.

The aforementioned lady saw her prey—her future husband—standing on the side as he was wont to do at these detested events. She was sure the only reason he had not solicited her hand for a set as of yet was due to her having been busy welcoming the country nobodies to her home.

She glided over to where Mr. Darcy stood to give him a chance to make the expected request for the set which was, of course, hers. No matter how close to him she stood, he looked forward steadfastly and moved away each time she moved.

It was time to engage him in conversation. “What a tedious way to spend the evening having to host these country mushrooms. At least there are those of *our* level of society with whom to dance.” Miss Bingley batted her eyelids in the most coquettish way she knew how.

At first, Darcy did not respond to the orange monstrosity’s inanity. Then he heard the musicians signalling the formation of the lines for the first set. “If it is so *tedious* for you to be in present company, I suggest you retire to your bedchamber,” Darcy stated icily and then made his way towards Miss Elizabeth.

Miss Bingley stood as if frozen. Not only had Mr. Darcy not asked her to dance, he had told her to withdraw

from the ball. Surely, they were of one mind regarding these savages?

Her thoughts were arrested as she saw Mr. Darcy approach none other than the hated Eliza Bennet and lead her to the line for the first dance of the night.

This was completely unacceptable! Here she was, the most elegant and fashionable lady in the room with a dowry of twenty thousand pounds, standing on the side like a wallflower as no gentleman, not even her brother had approached her to dance, while *her* Mr. Darcy was dancing with that hoyden.



“Welcome George, please pardon the fact I could not receive you earlier,” Karen Younge stated when her paramour entered her sitting room. It was then she spied the red welt on his left cheek. “What on earth happened to you?”

Being far too embarrassed to admit the truth, Wickham laughed it off. “I tripped and slammed my face into a door.”

Karen Younge could clearly see the imprint of a hand on her lover’s face but knew how much he hated being called out on his lies. “Have you seen any of the Darcys of late?” she asked instead.

At first, he started thinking she somehow knew about his ill-advised approach to Miss Darcy in Hyde Park, but then he calmed himself realising she had no way of knowing that. “Of all the luck in the world, that damned bastard Darcy is visiting friends in the same neighbourhood where the Derbyshire Militia is encamped,” he reported.

“You have seen one another? He did not punch you like he did in Ramsgate, did he?” Karen enquired.

“No, and I explained he cowardly took me by surprise before I could defend myself,” Wickham stated churlishly. “We saw one another in public, and he will not want to cross me if he wants his sister’s reputation to remain unsullied.”

It was not hard to see the bluster in the statement. Again, Karen did not challenge what he said. He was a reasonably good lover, even if the size of his member was

somewhat lacking, and she looked forward to having her bed warmed that evening.

“Just you wait! I will get my due one day and then the prig will pay all he owes and so much more,” Wickham boasted.

“Of course you will,” Karen placated. “Come George it is time for us to retire.”

Mrs. Younge extinguished the candles in the sitting room and then led her paramour to her bedchamber.

As much as he would have preferred to be bedding a much younger girl, Wickham knew he had no choice this night. He had a run of bad luck at the tables and all of his coin had been lost. As it was, he would have to *borrow* some coin from Karen to purchase his post ticket back to Meryton in the morning. As he followed her into the room, he told himself that he had to keep her happy only as long as she was useful to him.



Elizabeth’s opinion regarding Mr. Darcy’s abilities on the dance floor was quickly confirmed. As tall and broad as he was, he moved through the steps rather gracefully. She was aware he preferred to speak as little as possible, so for the first while she gratified his preference for silence. Then she decided she desired some conversation more than he disliked it. She searched her mind for a topic that would be acceptable to her dance partner.

“Miss Bingley has done admirable work in decorating the room and organising the ball, and is this not an invigorating dance?” Elizabeth began when the steps of the dance brought them back together.

Mr. Darcy remained silent, looking as haughty as ever. “It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. I talked about the decorations and the dance, and *you* ought to make some sort of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples.”

“I am at your service, Madam, I will say whatever you require of me.” Darcy gave a half smile as he spoke.

“Very well,” Elizabeth responded archly. “That reply will do for the present. Perhaps by and by I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones. But *now* we may be silent.”

“Do you talk as a rule while you are dancing?” Darcy queried.

“Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together; and yet for the advantage of *some*, conversation ought to be so arranged, as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible.”

“Are you consulting your own feelings in the present case, or do you imagine you are gratifying mine?”

“Both,” replied Elizabeth with an arched eyebrow, “for I have always seen a great similarity in the turn of our minds. We are each of an unsocial, taciturn disposition, unwilling to speak, unless we expect to say something that will amaze the whole room, and be handed down to posterity with all the *éclat* of a proverb.”

“This is no very striking resemblance of your own character, I am sure,” said he. “How near it may be to *mine*, I cannot pretend to say. *You* think it a faithful portrait undoubtedly.”

“I have not been in company enough with you to know how accurate it is.”

He made no answer, and they were again silent until they had gone down the line and returned to stand opposite one another. “Do you and your sisters very often walk into Meryton?”

“We do,” Elizabeth responded and then added, “When you saw us there the other day, we had just been forming some new acquaintances, one of them rather unfortunate.”

The effect was immediate. A look of anger overspread his features, but he said not a word. Darcy replayed what she

said and then heard the word *unfortunate*. Could it be Miss Elizabeth with her intelligence had been able to see past Wickham's charming façade?

Eventually and in a constrained manner Darcy spoke. "If you refer to Mr. Wickham, you should be aware he is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his making friends—whether he may be equally capable of retaining them, is less certain."

"He told a rather *unbelievable* tale of woe of how he lost your friendship," averred Elizabeth, "my father and I found it wholly incredible."

Darcy made no answer, as he reflected on the fact he had indeed been correct in his assumption. Wickham had not fooled Elizabeth Bennet. Before he could speak again, Sir William Lucas was about to pass through the set to the other side of the room. However, on seeing Mr. Darcy, he stopped with a bow of superior courtesy and began to compliment Darcy on his dancing and his partner.

"I have been most highly gratified indeed, my Dear Sir. Such very superior dancing is not often seen. It is evident you belong to the first circles. Allow me to say, however, that your fair partner does not disgrace you, and I must hope to have this pleasure often repeated, especially when a certain desirable event, my dear Eliza," he looked pointedly at her sister and Mr. Bingley, "shall take place. What congratulations will then flow! But let me not interrupt you, Sir. You will not thank me for detaining you from the bewitching converse of that young lady, whose bright eyes are also upbraiding me."

The latter part of this address was scarcely heard by Darcy. Sir William's allusion to his friend seemed to strike him forcibly, and his eyes were directed with a very serious expression towards Bingley and Jane, who were dancing up the line from him and Miss Elizabeth.

Shortly after Sir William moved on, Darcy turned to his partner, "Sir William's interruption has made me forget our previous conversation."

“The subject of our discourse may be better left for a private location. Sir William could not have interrupted us at a better juncture as we both forgot where we were. We have tried two or three subjects already without success, and what we are to talk of next I cannot imagine.”

“What think you of books?” Darcy offered smilingly.

“I love books. However, it is not a subject for a ball. Besides, I am sure we have never read the same books but if we have, it was certainly not with the same feelings.”

“If that be the case, there can at least be no want of subject. We may compare our opposing opinions.”

“At another time possibly, but not when my head is full of music and dancing,” Elizabeth riposted.

“I see your younger sister seems pleased with her fiancé,” Darcy inclined his head to where Mary and the newest Bennet were dancing. “Did I hear he took the name Bennet?”

“He did...” The dance separated them again and when they came back Elizabeth explained in a few words how the change had come about.

“My Aunt Catherine agreed he should change his name, extraordinary.”

“Mentioning your aunt, I should wish you happy on your engagement to Miss de Bourgh.”

If anything, his face showed more anger than when she had alluded to Mr. Wickham. “Why would you think me engaged to my cousin or any other? I am not now, nor have I ever been betrothed to anyone.”

“In that case, I beg your pardon, my cousin, soon-to-be brother, had it from your aunt and informed us.” Seeing this was not a subject which pleased Mr. Darcy she changed to another. “At Netherfield Park, you told us about your implacable resentment against those who cross you. I assume you never allow yourself to be blinded by prejudice?”

“As far as I know, I do not. What others may say, I cannot control,” Darcy responded tightly.

“It is particularly incumbent on those who never change their opinion to be secure of judging properly at first.”

“May I ask to what these questions tend?”

“I am merely attempting to sketch your character,” Elizabeth smiled to shake off her gravity. “I am trying to make it out.”

“And what is your success?”

“I believe you an honourable man, but you are not an easy character to sketch.”

“It pleases me you can tell I am honourable,” Darcy replied gravely. “You will let me know when you have come to a conclusion regarding my character?”

“If I manage such while you are in the neighbourhood, I will do so. However, once you leave, I doubt we will see one another again,” Elizabeth returned.

Darcy did not reply, his mind was too full of what Sir William had intimated regarding the general expectation his friend would offer for Miss Bennet. As the first dance of the set ended, he looked around and did not see either Bingley or Miss Bennet so he assumed they had gone to get some refreshments between dances.



Watching Eliza dance the first set with her Mr. Darcy was bad enough, but they seemed to be having a deep conversation with one another as they danced. Miss Bingley was near apoplectic when she saw Mr. Darcy smile more than once at the hated hoyden.

She was so focused on that particular pair she forgot to keep watch on her brother in case he did anything precipitous at the ball. As such, at the end of the first set, Miss Bingley did not see when her brother led Miss Bennet out onto one of the three balconies that overlooked the formal gardens.

When Mr. Darcy finally asked her for a set—the supper set she supposed—she would remonstrate with him

about lowering himself in such a way as to dance with Eliza Bennet.

Chapter 22

Bingley was grateful none of his family, especially his younger sister, had noticed when he and Miss Bennet slipped past the billowing curtains onto the balcony closest to where they had ended the first dance of the set.

“Miss Bennet, if I misread the signals incorrectly, please say so at once and we will return inside. If it as I surmise that you have fallen in love with me, then I will proceed,” Bingley said in a low voice.

“Please proceed, Mr. Bingley,” Jane encouraged as her cheeks turned a deep shade of pink. With the light streaming through the gap in the curtains, Bingley saw the colour rise in his angel’s cheeks, which only made her look much more beautiful to him.

He dropped onto one knee. “It has been some time now since I have been hopelessly in love with you. As it seems you are in love with me...”

“Yes, I am irrevocably in love with you,” Jane interjected turning her cheeks scarlet.

“In that case, I find the need for a courtship superfluous. Jane Bennet, I will love you with my all until I draw my final breath on the mortal coil. Will you make me the happiest of men and agree to be my wife? Jane, will you marry me?”

“You are correct in your assertion regarding a courtship. That said, yes, yes, yes, YES! I will marry you Mr. B...”

Charles,” Bingley corrected.

“Charles,” Jane repeated as she caressed his name with her tongue.

They heard the strains of the first bars of the music for the second dance. “Come Jane, before we are missed.” Bingley lowered his head and brushed his fiancée’s lips. He

was gratified as Jane let out a sigh of pleasure after their lips touched. “We will talk during the dance.”

The newly engaged couple took their places just in time and thankfully they were not noticed by anyone as they emerged from the balcony. As soon as they came together, Bingley leaned towards Jane. “I must to London in the morning. It was planned some days ago before I knew I would propose...” they danced down the line.

“You understood my messages?” Jane enquired when they were back together.

“As clearly as the morning sun is bright,” Bingley responded. “As I was saying, given the time of my departure, I will not be able to see your father on the morrow, unless you think I should speak to him here?”

“Before supper would be good...” the dance separated them again. They soon came back together. “...but please ask my father not to make a public announcement until you return from Town.”

“Perfect,” Bingley responded after another brief separation. “That way by the time I see my solicitor to have him draw up the marriage contracts, it will be official.”

For the rest of the dance the engaged couple did not speak, they were lost in one another’s eyes and smiled the whole of the time.



Darcy and Elizabeth did not speak during the second half of the first set either. Darcy decided to watch Bingley and Miss Bennet closely while Elizabeth was watching him and did not miss the object of his attention.

He was distracted with the closeness of Miss Elizabeth and her delectable lavender scent, so Darcy had not noticed when Bingley and Miss Bennet re-joined the line. As he observed them now, all he saw was what he had noted in the past—Miss Bennet smiling—smiling too much in his opinion. As far as he could see, it was the same smile she smiled regardless of who was opposite her, nothing special meant just

for his friend. All he could hope was Bingley's honour was not engaged yet.

Elizabeth did not miss the way Mr. Darcy was studying her sister and Mr. Bingley so intently. There was nothing she could say or ask. It would have been a show of ill-breeding to ask him why he was looking at them so. Unless he raised the topic, she could not.

When the music ended with a flourish, Darcy bowed to Miss Elizabeth and then led her to where her parents and the Lucases were seated. He noticed the younger Mr. Bennet lead his fiancée back to her family as well.

"Mr. Bennet, the younger, a word if you please," Darcy requested curtly.

"Of course, anything for Lady Catherine's nephew," the parson responded.

Darcy led the man into a corner away from his family. "Mr. Bennet, it has come to my attention you have erroneously, and publicly, spoken of my being engaged, specifically to my Cousin Anne. Is this correct?"

"Yes, I did tell my family that. But I am confused Mr. Darcy, Lady Catherine never told me the engagement was of a secret nature," William Bennet confessed confusedly.

"That is because, regardless of how many times my aunt repeats it, there is not, nor has there ever been, an engagement between my cousin and me." Darcy saw the clergyman was about to protest and he raised his hand. "It is no more than a wish on my aunt's part. My uncle, Lord Matlock, holds proof from my parents that they never agreed to an engagement of any kind. As one of the principals, you must own I would know if I had ever proposed marriage to anyone, would you not? In addition, if you ever see my cousin away from her mother, ask her. She has no desire to marry me or any other."

William Bennet was in a state of pure confusion. He had always held whatever his patroness said as rote, but he could not refute Mr. Darcy's words. If he stated there was no

engagement there could not be one. The fact he gave leave to speak to Miss de Bourgh only bolstered his claims.

“I beg your pardon, Mr. Darcy. I had no reason to question Lady Catherine’s word. I will inform my family I was wrong in my assertions,” William Bennet bowed to Mr. Darcy.

“You did not have all the facts so I forgive you. I would wager your family has been apprised of the truth of the matter as I informed Miss Elizabeth while we danced. Now please excuse me, I need to collect Miss Lucas for the next set.” Darcy gave a half bow and made his way to where Miss Lucas was standing next to Colonel Forster.



Rather than ask her to dance, Mr. Darcy was dancing with Miss Lucas, the plain, old spinster. Miss Bingley felt the rage building within her, but she knew if she vented it in this setting Mr. Darcy would not be impressed. For that reason alone, she pushed down her fury.

Her plan to leave this benighted neighbourhood took on a new sense of urgency. She had originally planned to wait for a few days before having the house closed and following Charles to London. That would no longer do. It would have to be on the morrow. She would not—could not—remain an hour longer than was absolutely necessary.

Thankfully, Charles would be departing at an ungodly hour in the morning. If Mr. Darcy kept to his routine, he would ride out at about the same time Charles was to depart. While Mr. Darcy was out riding, she would order the house closed. What cared she if a bunch of servants had to be sacked. By the time he returned, it would be a *fait accompli*. She was sure Mr. Darcy would not object to returning to London, after all he would be able to see that insipid Miss Darcy who was to be Charles’s intended.

She could not approve of how close brother and sister were, but until she became Mrs. Darcy, there was naught to be done about it. One of her first actions would be to pack the brat off to some boarding school, preferably one which operated all year.

As the second set drew to a close, Miss Bingley prepared herself as surely Mr. Darcy would approach her for a set now. She watched as he walked the spinster back to her friends. Rather than walk towards her, he led the malleable Jane Bennet to the floor. What was happening? This could not be true! Surely, he would not snub his hostess.

She soothed herself with the fact there were many more sets to go.



Darcy came close to asking Miss Bennet about her feelings *vis-à-vis* Bingley, but he discarded the notion as being far too intrusive and ungentlemanly. As he danced, he noticed Miss Bennet smiled at him the same way he estimated he had seen her smile at Bingley and other men.

Now the question became, should he say something to Bingley or wait until—if he did—Bingley asked his advice? At that very moment, the emerald-green fine eyes of Miss Elizabeth intruded on his consciousness as they were often wont to do. Darcy realised he would need to find an opportunity to speak to Bingley as much for himself as for his friend.

If Bingley married Miss Bennet, then Darcy would be thrown into Miss Elizabeth's company. One thing he was sure of, there was only so long he would be able to stay the course and not give in to his heart regarding the enticing woman.

After this set, Darcy was committed to dance with Miss Mary Bennet and then Miss Maria Lucas. Once he had discharged his obligations, he would ask Mrs. Hurst to dance the set after supper—then he would retire for the night. If he did not remove himself from the field, it would be almost impossible to not ask Miss Elizabeth to stand up with him again.

There was no missing the hatred being sent to anyone he danced with from Miss Bingley's eyes. She never had any fashion sense, but this night she looked laughable. He was certain he had noticed not a few people snicker behind their

hands at the outfit Miss Bingley thought the epitome of high fashion.

Possibly he should have told Bingley he would not dance with his younger sister at the ball, but based on their conversations about her unrelenting and doomed chase of his person, Darcy was sure Bingley would not be angry with him.

He planned to enter the card room for the supper set as he was positive the virago would approach him and make what she thought were witty comments and drop hint after hint about him standing up with her for the set.

While he had been in conversation with Miss Elizabeth during the first dance of their set Darcy had seen the venom Miss Bingley was directing at his partner with her looks. He did not know whether Miss Elizabeth noticed Miss Bingley or not, but of one thing he was certain—Miss Bingley did not intimidate the feisty second Bennet sister in the least.

Given the orange monstrosity's obsession and delusion, Darcy was concerned Bingley would have to commit his younger sister to an asylum one day.

His thoughts moved on to the Bennets as a family. He knew not what had occurred, but ever since, and including, her visit to Netherfield Park, he had never again seen the vulgar, fortune-hunting woman he had met in the form of Mrs. Bennet. Each subsequent time he had been in company with her, she had acted with decorum and had not pushed her daughters at anyone. In addition, it seemed the youngest two, especially the youngest and most crass Miss Bennet, had not been seen socially since the assembly.

This confused him greatly. One of his arguments he planned to use if, or rather when, he dissuaded Bingley from Miss Bennet was the behaviour of her mother. As much as he hated disguise, he knew he would have to refer to her behaviour in the past and make it seem current, to make his criticism of the Bennet matron's behaviour relevant to the task at hand. Darcy was not proud of the arts he would have to employ, but it was what needed to be done.



Bennet was on his way to supper when Mr. Bingley requested a few minutes of his time. He followed the younger man back to his study.

“You asked to see me?” Bennet enquired.

“Yes Sir, I did. Earlier this evening, I asked your eldest daughter for her hand (Jane had warned him to be specific to cut off an avenue for her father to tease him) and she has done me the supreme honour of accepting me and agreeing to become my wife.”

It was impressive. Mr. Bingley had not left him an opening to rib him. “I get the idea your sisters, especially the younger one, do not look on this match with favour. How will you protect Jane from Miss Bingley’s vitriol?” Bennet pushed.

“Jane...Miss Bennet will be my first priority. If my sisters are not able to treat her with the respect and kindness she deserves, they will not be welcome in my home,” Bingley stated firmly.

There was no doubt in Bennet’s mind the younger man was absolutely sincere. “Jane is of age; you know you need not my permission.”

“Yet, we would like it, along with your blessing,” Bingley averred.

“Done, you have both. Would you like the engagement announced at supper?”

“No Sir...” Bingley explained about his departure and Jane’s request.

“I will honour your requests, what about a notice in the papers? Also, I will inform my wife on the morrow,” Bennet responded.

“With your permission, a notice will be delivered to the papers before I depart to return to Hertfordshire, that way it will appear the day after I return, and return I will, wild horses will not keep me away from the woman I love.”

“Welcome to the family, Son,” Bennet extended his hand which Bingley grasped and shook vigorously.

The two men returned just as the guests were sitting down for supper.

Miss Bingley was too busy watching Mr. Darcy to notice her brother had been away and returned with Mr. Bennet. Her Mr. Darcy went to sit at the table with Charles and a smiling Miss Bennet. Eliza and her partner, some man named Goulding were at the same table.

Bingley asked Miss Bennet if he could fetch her a plate, she nodded smilingly.

“Bingley, I noticed you entered the supper area with Mr. Bennet, a little after the rest of us arrived,” Darcy quizzed.

“We had to discuss some mutual estate business,” Bingley stated. ‘*It is close to the truth,*’ Bingley told himself. Jane had asked for him to wait to announce his engagement, and wait he would. If he told Darcy, he would not be able to stop himself from broadcasting the news far and wide.

Darcy was sceptical of the reason for the two men to talk, but as he was sure Bingley had not offered Miss Bennet a courtship, or even worse, an engagement yet, he did not push the issue.

While the men were away at the buffet tables, Elizabeth turned to her glowing sister. “Janey, something has changed has it not?”

“I can never keep secrets from you, Lizzy, we will speak in our room tonight,” Jane promised.

Never had Elizabeth seen such unadulterated joy pouring off Jane in waves. She was sure that somehow she had spoken to Mr. Bingley. She just could not think of when as she was sure it was not before the ball.

Suddenly she remembered neither her sister nor Mr. Bingley had been seen during the break between dances of the first set. Elizabeth knew she was speculating so she would wait to speak to Jane later.



At the end of supper, to impress Mr. Darcy, Miss Bingley had exhibited far longer than was polite, she saw her efforts being rewarded as Mr. Darcy approached where she was standing with the Hursts. He requested Louisa to stand up with him and led her away with nary a word to herself. At the end of the dance, he brought Louisa back, and just when Miss Bingley was certain he was about to solicit her hand for a set, he wished them good evening and retired for the night.

Miss Bingley tried to present a face which said 'all was well' to those in the ballroom while nothing was! She had been so sure.

Never mind, she would lead them to London on the morrow and then this place and what had occurred here would become a distant and irrelevant memory.

Chapter 23

“Jane Bennet!” Elizabeth exclaimed as her sister sat on the bed they shared and dreamily sighed for the fifth time in a row. “What occurred tonight? You promised to speak to me at home. Do not think I did not see you and Mr. Bingley disappear during the break in the first set and then he and Papa met before supper.”

“Oh Lizzy, I do not deserve to be so happy! He loves me, Lizzy! Charles loves me,” Jane gushed as she had never done before. “We are engaged.”

“Of course he loves you. Tell me all! Did he go down onto one knee? Was it romantic? Did you have your first kiss?” At the last question, both sisters blushed, Jane more so than Elizabeth.

“As you noted...” Jane told of the proposal, her acceptance, and the chaste kiss they had shared. “I would have been happy with more, but Charles correctly pointed out the second dance was about to begin and it would not do for the host to be missing. If only I could see you so happy.”

“Until I have your goodness, I do not deserve your happiness,” Elizabeth responded. “I assume Papa bestowed his permission and blessing?” Jane nodded happily. “Do you know when he will make the announcement to the family?”

“He will tell everyone when we break our fasts, but by my request, no public announcement will be made until Charles returns from London.” Jane saw Elizabeth’s quizzical look and explained an unavoidable trip to Town had been planned for the morrow. “He will send the announcement to the papers before he returns to Netherfield Park. He gave Papa his direction and we have permission to correspond with each other.”

“Do not allow me to hear such codswallop about you not deserving to be so happy. You are due more happiness than any other I know.”

“Thank you, Lizzy. I am, I am overjoyed. I love him so very much. He is the perfect man for me. At dinner, he told me he assured Papa his sisters would be sent away if they did not treat me as they should.”

“Good! The last thing you need is Miss Bingley as part of your household trying to countermand every order you issue and doing everything she can to be the *de facto* mistress of the house.”

Jane cogitated for some moments. “If she thinks me so weak as to allow that, Caroline Bingley will be in for a rather big surprise. She will behave once I am mistress of Charles’s—our—house or I will support him fully in evicting her.”

“Brava, Janey! I have never heard such an unforgiving speech from you. It is very good you have had a change of heart and saw the truth of certain peoples’ intentions and not what you hoped them to be.”

“You will not always be with me to defend me, Lizzy. I have to be willing to stand up for myself.”

“Yes, I will. I will be the spinster aunt to your ten children who will teach them to play the pianoforte very ill!”

Jane swatted playfully at her sister’s arm as both then dissolved into giggles. Soon enough they were ready for bed and Elizabeth blew out the candle.



At the end of the morning meal, Bennet announced the engagement of Jane and Mr. Bingley. He explained that no public announcement would be made until Mr. Bingley returned from his business trip to London.

As could be expected, wishes for a felicitous future flowed freely. Fanny and the rest of the family all agreed to abide by the secrecy until Jane’s fiancé returned.

Fanny hugged her daughter. She was about to make a comment about Jane’s beauty being the reason for her being engaged, but she thought better of it. “You will be a very happy woman, Jane dear.”

“Of that I have no doubt Mama,” Jane agreed as she returned her mother’s hug.

Bennet made his way to his study, the oldest two sisters to the small parlour. Normally after a dance and once Charlotte arrived, the friends would walk in Longbourn’s park. Given the drop in temperature the last days since the rain had abated, the two eldest sisters elected to wait for their friend in the parlour with a fire roaring in the grate. The rest of the family withdrew to the drawing room.

Not many minutes later, the two Lucas sisters arrived at Longbourn. Charlotte and Maria Lucas had come to visit their respective friends. Maria was shown into the drawing room while Hill directed Charlotte to where her two friends were awaiting her.

“You have been very sly Charlotte Lucas!” Elizabeth exclaimed as soon as their friend was shown into the small parlour.

“I know not of what you talk,” Charlotte replied with put on hauteur performing her best Miss Bingley impersonation, right down to her nose pointed at the ceiling.

“Charlotte!” Jane admonished with a smile.

“I did indicate I would share today, did I not?” Both Bennet sisters present nodded vigorously. “Do you remember we met the advanced party of the Derbyshire Militia that night at Lucas Lodge?” Charlotte reminded her friends who nodded again. “It was there Colonel Forster and I began to speak. He is a very well-read and intelligent man. We managed to converse on many subjects at other events we both attended. Not long after he returned with his full regiment, he came to see me and requested a courtship. We have been courting ever since.”

“Do you love him?” Elizabeth probed.

“Jane and Eliza, you know I am not a romantic like the two of you. I am much more like Mary who looks at the practicalities,” Charlotte explained. “He is an honourable man who can well afford a wife. If he proposes, we will not always

follow the drum, he has a small estate in Derbyshire and has leased out the property. He has notified his tenants he will not renew the lease again. I may not love him, but I like and respect him very much. We are compatible on many levels.

“At seven and twenty I never expected to marry, but that is not why I would accept him—at least not the only reason,” Charlotte admitted. “If he proposes and we unite in marriage, I will no longer be a burden to my parents or to Frank one day when he inherits.”

“Surely your family does not think you a burden,” Jane blurted out alarmedly.

“They would never articulate such,” Charlotte responded. “But you know Lucas Lodge earns less than half of Longbourn’s income. In addition, you are aware we do not keep as many servants which is why Maria and I assist around the house as needed.”

“From that perspective, it is a very prudent match,” Elizabeth owned. “If the Colonel is sensible enough to offer for you, I—we—will be first in line to congratulate you.”

“Thank you, Jane and Eliza.” Charlotte looked at Jane pointedly. “Do you mayhap have any news to share?”

“I do, but please do not repeat it...” Jane shared she was engaged to Mr. Bingley and the fact there would be no announcement for some few days.

This time it was Charlotte’s turn to share her approbation with her friend. When she discovered her advice about allowing the object of one’s affection to see that fact had helped speed up the happening, it pleased Charlotte inordinately.

The friends spoke for a time about various subjects, one of which was teasing Elizabeth about Mr. Darcy. Elizabeth huffed and pointed out she and Mr. Darcy were too far apart in wealth and connections to be a reality.

Now that Elizabeth was aware Mr. Darcy was not engaged, her traitorous heart had started murmuring about their compatibility. She did her best to ignore it.



“But Caroline, Charles said nothing to me before he went to bed about us closing the house and following him to London,” Mrs. Hurst protested weakly.

“*You* are not the mistress, *I am!* Hence, he spoke to me,” Miss Bingley dissembled. “You do not want him to attach himself to that insipid Jane Bennet and tie us to that disgusting family any more than I do.”

“You have the right of it, I do not. But will Charles not be angry with us?” Mrs. Hurst worried. If her brother no longer allowed her and her husband entrée to his homes then her husband would be most put out at having to fund their lifestyle from his own money.

“Come now Louisa, you know how Charles is, and how easy it is for me to direct him to the right course, do you not?” Mrs. Hurst nodded without much enthusiasm. “Now that he is in Town, he will not want to leave it so soon. While he was here he seemed fixed, but he feels the same when he is in London. Let us face it, the society is far superior there.”

‘*And Mr. Darcy will be away from a certain fine-eyed Miss Elizabeth,*’ Mrs. Hurst told herself silently. Caroline thought she was being subtle, but Louisa was certain being away from the younger Bennet sister was a much higher priority than separating Charles from Miss Bennet.

“As you have readied the house to be closed, there is no choice now,” Mrs. Hurst said aloud. She made her way to see her husband and inform him of the change of plans.

While she was waiting for Mr. Darcy to return from his ride, Miss Bingley sat at the escritoire and scribed a letter to Miss Jane Bennet. Once it was satisfactory, she wrote a final copy, allowed it to dry, and then sealed it. As they would be away in an hour or two, Caroline saw no reason not to send a footman to deliver the missive right away.

When that was accomplished, she had a maid summon her sister. She needed to speak to Mr. Darcy and she was

aware of how fastidious he was so Louisa had to be with her in order for him to enter the drawing room and speak with her.

She heard the sound of Mr. Darcy's hessians on the marble of the entrance hall. "Mr. Darcy," she cooed seductively from the doorway, "would you join my sister and me in the drawing room please Sir."

Darcy could not politely refuse, and as the sister was present, he could not use being alone with the shrew as his excuse to demure.

"Mrs. Hurst, Miss Bingley," Darcy gave a proper bow in greeting on following the woman into the room. He was much relieved she had not prevaricated about her sister being within. It was not something he would put past Miss Bingley. "How may I be of service?"

Miss Bingley decided not to beat about the bush. "The house is being closed up and we are following my brother to London," Miss Bingley reported.

"Your brother said he will return in three to four days at the most. Is he aware of your plans and did he approve?" Darcy demanded.

"He did provide me his permission," Miss Bingley replied dishonestly, "and in addition, it is what must be done to save him from himself."

Darcy had a very good idea to what Miss Bingley referred. As much as he hated agreeing with the harpy about anything, her desire to separate Bingley from Miss Bennet aligned with his interests, even if it was for very different reasons. Darcy did feel a pang of guilt. His desire, just like Miss Bingley's was driven more by self-interest than what was good for Bingley.

'At least,' he soothed himself silently, *'this is ultimately for Bingley's benefit.'* He decided he must at least pay lip service to his friend's right to choose for himself.

"Surely as your brother is his own man, we should allow him to make his own determination," Darcy stated weakly.

“Come now Mr. Darcy, you know how quickly Charles falls in and out of love,” Miss Bingley cried. “I—we—cannot allow him to connect himself to one from such a low family. They have no wealth, no class, and no connections.”

Darcy heard his own words he had used to himself to justify his not following his heart being repeated back to him by Miss Bingley and they rang as hollow now as they did when he said them to himself.

That was not the point. This was his chance to once and for all escape the hold Miss Elizabeth wielded over him. As she had said on the dance floor, who knew if they would ever be in company together again.

“I will assist you. Give me an hour or two to bathe, change, and pack and we will be away,” Darcy stated purposefully. It was done and done for the best.



On arriving in London, Bingley’s first call was the *Times of London*. He dropped off an announcement of his engagement with instructions to publish it in the upcoming Thursday morning edition.

From the newspaper office, he made for his solicitor to leave instructions for the marriage settlement to be prepared. Before he went to his house on Curzon Street, Bingley headed to his man of business to briefly discuss the pending issues with him. One of them Caroline would hate: the curtailment of her spending habits.

The sooner he completed everything, the sooner he would be back at his fiancée’s side.



The family was sitting and relaxing in the drawing room when Hill delivered the note from Netherfield Park addressed to Miss Bennet. Jane took it seeing the finely pressed light pink paper which led her to believe it was from Miss Bingley or Mrs. Hurst.

She opened it and began to read. Her family was taken aback as she began to laugh at the words on the page. “Allow

me to read this work of fiction to you and you will understand my mirthful reaction,” Jane stated when she had brought her amusement under control.

After a nod from her father, she cleared her throat and began to read.

8 December 1810

Netherfield Park

My friend, Miss Jane Bennet:

I do not pretend to regret anything I shall leave in Hertfordshire, except your society, my dearest friend; but we will hope, at some future period, to enjoy many returns of that delightful intercourse we have known, and in the meanwhile may lessen the pain of separation by a very frequent and most unreserved correspondence. I depend on you for that.

When my brother left us this morning, he imagined the business which took him to London might be concluded in three or four days; but as we are certain it cannot be so, and at the same time convinced when Charles gets to Town he will be in no hurry to leave it again, we have determined on following him thither, that he may not be obliged to spend his vacant hours in his home on his own without our warm company.

Many of my acquaintances are already there for the winter; I wish I could hear that you, my dearest friend, had any intention of making one of the crowd—but of that, I despair. I sincerely hope your Christmas in Hertfordshire may abound in the gaieties which that season generally brings, and your beaux will be so numerous as to prevent you feeling the loss of those of whom we shall deprive you.

“Jane dear,” a calm Fanny called, “am I to assume your Mr. Bingley did not inform the other residents of Netherfield Park of his engagement to you?”

“No, Mama, he did not. They were to be told when the public announcement was made,” Jane responded.

“Miss Bingley, and I wager Mrs. Hurst, are in for rather a shock when they read the announcement in the

papers,” Bennet stated with a sardonic smile. “The impudence of that woman to try and order her brother’s life as she sees fit.”

“You already suspect she is not a true friend, now you have absolute proof,” Elizabeth pointed out.

“It has been some time since that woman was able to fool me. Allow me to finish reading, if you thought that was fiction, just wait,” Jane asserted and her family all nodded for her to continue.

Mr. Darcy is impatient to see his sister; and, to confess the truth, we are scarcely less eager to meet her again. I really do not think Georgiana Darcy has her equal for beauty, elegance, and accomplishments; and the affection she inspires in Louisa and myself is heightened into something still more interesting, from the hope we dare entertain of her being hereafter our sister.

I do not know whether I ever before mentioned to you my feelings on this subject, but I will not leave the country without confiding them, and I trust you will not esteem them unreasonable.

My brother admires her greatly already and has been unofficially courting her, with her brother’s full-throated approbation, for some months before we arrived in your neighbourhood. While in London he will have frequent opportunity now of seeing her on the most intimate footing. Her relations all wish the connection as much as his own and a sister’s partiality is not misleading me, I think, when I call Charles most capable of engaging any woman’s heart.

With all these circumstances to favour an attachment, and nothing to prevent it, am I wrong, my dearest Jane, in indulging the hope of an event which will secure the happiness of so many?

Please do write to me, I will await your letters with great anticipation.

Your friend,

Caroline M. Bingley

“Anticipation of consigning them to the fire,” Lydia chirped.

No one disagreed with her.

“How can she fabricate that nonsense about Miss Darcy while intimating her brother was only trifling with you? Is not Miss Darcy around Lyddie’s age and not yet out?” Elizabeth huffed angrily. Elizabeth turned to her father. “Papa, you have Mr. Bingley’s direction in London do you not?”

“Yes, Papa, Lizzy has the right of it, we need to send this work of fiction to Charles,” Jane agreed wholeheartedly. She turned to Elizabeth. “Charles has told me more than once how he sees Miss Darcy as a younger sister. The supposed match is made up of whole cloth and is another of Miss Bingley’s delusions.”

Bennet stood and took the disgusting missive. He wrote a cover and then sealed Miss Bingley’s lies within. A groom was sent to the Red Lion Inn and an express rider engaged.

The express had been on its way to London for well over an hour before the remainder of the Netherfield Park party was on the road. The letter arrived at Curzon Street before they had reached the halfway stop.

Chapter 24

Fanny was grateful Jane was so confident in her fiancé and the letter of lies Miss Bingley had sent out of spite in an obvious attempt to hurt her daughter had not had its intended effect.

Without having to worry about Jane's equanimity, Fanny turned her attention to the wedding of her middle daughter in less than a fortnight. Mary had been rather insistent about not wanting a showy event. Before the changes at Longbourn began, Fanny knew she would have imposed her will and planned the wedding she wanted while ignoring her daughter's wishes.

She had reconciled herself to the fact it would be family, including the Philipses and Gardiners, and one or two local families—the Lucases and the Longs—with whom Mary had a close connection.

Also accepted was the fact the couple would depart for Hunsford almost right after the ceremony with the briefest of appearances at their wedding breakfast. Her future son-in-law had insisted on an early departure due to his extended absence from his parish, and of course, he wanted to be able to present his wife to Lady Catherine de Bourgh on the same day as the wedding.

All Fanny could hope for was Jane and her Charles would desire a more lavish wedding. However, as she had with Mary, Fanny would defer to Jane's wishes.



After an hour with his man of business, Charles Bingley arrived at his home on Curzon Street. Caroline had not been sanguine about the fact the house was not in Mayfair, but she had ceased her complaints when he had indicated she was free to live elsewhere. Regardless of his younger sister's pretensions, the house suited him very well and he was sure it would suit Jane as well. Unlike Caroline, Jane did not have a pretentious bone in her body.

Before he was able to head for his chambers where his man was supervising the filling of the bathtub, the butler handed his master an express which had been delivered minutes before his arrival.

Bingley entered his study and after closing the door, he sat behind the desk. He broke the seal with urgency seeing it was from his future father-in-law. His worry was some ill had befallen his angel.

He opened the letter which looked rather thick. When he unfolded it, he noticed there was another letter contained in it—a letter of pink pressed paper, the kind he had purchased for Caroline. His suspicions were screaming that his sister had done something she should not have.

He read the cover letter first.

8 December 1810

Longbourn

Bingley,

The enclosed note was sent to Jane by your sister this morning. It speaks for itself. Allow me to assure you Jane is well and is more than confident in what you have between you that she believed not a word contained within.

You will soon understand why, not only you, but your friend Mr. Darcy needs to be made aware of what was written as well.

The whole of my family sends their wishes of happiness to you and Jane. Per Jane's wishes, the engagement will not be announced until you return to Hertfordshire.

Regards,

Bennet

He unfolded the letter written by Caroline. Even had she not signed the despicable missive with her name, he would have recognised both her script and her signature scent detectable on the paper. By the end of the reading, Bingley was as furious as he had ever been.

As he was now aware, his family and Darcy were on their way back to Town. He would wait to hear what his sisters had to say for themselves before he informed them he knew the truth.

One thing confused him. Why would Darcy cooperate with his sister? Unless of course, his friend was still waiting for him at Netherfield Park. Bingley had been clear with Darcy of his intention to return to Netherfield Park as soon as may be.

He realised his sister would have ordered the house closed. He took time to write a note to Mr. and Mrs. Nichols reversing his sister's orders and informing them his sister was no longer mistress and would never be again. Also, he would write one to Bennet.

He smiled as he wrote, not because of the situation, but because Darcy thought he was not able to write legibly. He only did that in missives to that particular man because he knew it kept his friend on his toes and it was a way of ribbing Darcy by making him decipher his letters.

In the second missive, Bingley made sure he expressed his outrage at his sister's perfidy and reiterated his commitment to his fiancée. He also related how happy he was no one at Longbourn had believed his sister's lies.

As soon as the expresses were ready, Bingley instructed his butler to send the courier to Netherfield Park and then on to Longbourn. The man was to be instructed to wait at Longbourn to see if a reply would be forthcoming.

With that done, Bingley made his way up to his bathing room where the hot bath was awaiting him.



As much as he was able, Darcy ignored Miss Bingley's chattering—most of it vitriol aimed at the Bennets. Miss Bingley was calling Miss Bennet—a lady she had called her *dear friend* in the near past—a fortune hunter. Darcy did not see—he did not want to admit he saw—any affection for his friend, but as far as he was concerned none of the Bennets

could be accused of being fortune hunters. That could not be said about the over-dressed, over-scented woman sitting opposite him. Not only was she a fortune hunter, but in addition, an inveterate social climber as well.

Until the first stop about halfway to London, Darcy had looked out of the window on his side of the coach, even if he was not seeing anything. He had rebuffed every attempt from Miss Bingley to pull him into her conversation with her sister. By the time they left the coaching inn, the feelings of guilt, which had begun the minute he had agreed to aid Miss Bingley and decided to prevaricate to Bingley, had filled him with dread. Was he risking his friendship if Bingley ever discovered the truth?

Then again, how would that occur? Darcy was cognisant of the fact his opinions and advice held great sway with his friend. It was what made him confident he would be able to convince Bingley to remain in London and not return as he had planned to do. This knowledge did nothing to assuage the feelings he was betraying Bingley's trust.

Since the departure from the stop and in order to keep from having to respond to the shrewish harpy, Darcy rested his head against the squabs in the corner and pretended he was asleep.

At least Giana and the Fitzwilliams would be aware of his coming. Just before they departed, he had given his courier a letter for his sister and requested she inform the Fitzwilliams of his imminent arrival.

Hurst did not keep a carriage, so with Bingley having taken his own into Town, there had been no choice other than having the Hursts and Miss Bingley in his coach.

He had roundly refused Miss Bingley's entreaties to call at Curzon Street when they arrived. He would give Bingley respite until Monday. The man deserved to enjoy the sabbath on the morrow without his illusions of future felicity being destroyed.

The only problem with feigning sleep were the emerald-green eyes which he could vividly see in his mind's

eye as soon as his eyes were closed. If nothing else, Miss Bingley's underhanded tactics had taken him away from the temptation represented by Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Another pang of guilt hit him. He had left the area without so much as a warning to anyone of the danger the serpent in their midst—George Wickham—represented. His feelings were only heightened when he admitted there was much he could have done without any risk of exposure for Giana. The one big regret he had was he had not completed the conversation with Miss Elizabeth regarding Wickham. He berated himself he did not visit Mr. Bennet during his ride that morning to impart enough information which would have protected the residents from Wickham's proclivities. He felt like a cad for saying nothing while using his protection of Giana as an excuse.

He was finally ready to admit to himself that the tired old excuse of not moving against Wickham because it would dishonour his late father who had stood godfather for the miscreant, was just that, an excuse. Could it be his hankering for better days when he and George had been young boys growing up at Pemberley had staid his hand?

Since Darcy had acknowledged that fact, he remembered when Richard had asked what his late Uncle Robert would have done had he been alive when the wastrel moved against Giana. There was no other way of seeing it. His father would have torn Wickham limb from limb. What was he holding over three thousand pounds of Wickham's debt markers for if he never intended to use them?

Unlike his error in not warning Giana about Wickham years ago, he would discuss the conundrum regarding his moving against Wickham with his sister. He and Richard would make the ultimate decision, but he would welcome his sister's thoughts on the subject and make sure she was aware Wickham may tell his tale regarding her if his freedom was threatened.

Darcy reckoned there was another hour to go before they reached London. Continuing to feign sleep was far more preferable to conversing with Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst.

For once in his life Darcy envied Hurst. He was asleep and had no need to feign it. His partner on the rear facing bench was snoring, and none too quietly.

“Mr. Darcy, are you sure you will not join us and come inside?” Miss Bingley invited after the coach had come to a halt at Curzon Street.

“As I stated before, I will join you on Monday and then we will speak to your brother. Tomorrow is Sunday and he will not be going anywhere on the sabbath,” Darcy refused again, for the fifth or sixth time.

No sooner had the numerous trunks been unlashed, Darcy re-entered his equipage and ordered his coachman to drive on to Darcy House.



“Does William say why he is returning to London before he had planned?” Tiffany enquired.

Giana had informed the Fitzwilliams about William arriving back at Darcy House that afternoon.

“No,” Georgiana responded after perusing the express one more time. “He just says he is arriving.”

“It could be Miss Bingley has finally grated on his last nerve and he needed to have some sanity,” Lady Matlock quipped.

“That woman could try the patience of a saint,” Richard opined. He had been at Matlock House since yestermorning having been granted a month’s leave from the Royal Dragoons.

Richard had recruited some former soldiers and an officer or two who would assist the Colonel in running Wickham to ground. When he saw William, he would inform him of his plans, but he neither needed nor would he request his cousin’s permission. The Earl, who saw Giana like a daughter, had agreed to fund the venture.

Her being welcomed at any of our houses will never be gratified,” Lady Matlock insisted.

“Mama, have you heard from Cilla and Andy? Did they arrive at Hilldale safely?” Tiffany asked to distract her mother from the subject of the social climbing virago which invariably soured her mother’s mood.

“Yes, Dearest,” Lady Matlock responded, “This very morning. I intend to join Edith Carrington when she departs London in some weeks so we can be with Cilla when she enters her lying in.”

It was a very effective tactic by the youngest Fitzwilliam. The Countess loved speaking about her soon-to-arrive second grandchild so she was completely diverted.

“It is just as well I had not written to William about the *incident* in the park,” Georgiana mused. “This way we will be able to speak face to face.”

“It is a conversation in which I need to have a part,” Richard insisted.

Tiffany gave her brother a playful salute. “Yes, Colonel Sir,” she said playfully.

The teasing of Richard caused Giana to giggle. If only William would find someone to marry and give her a sister. She was hopeful the Miss Elizabeth that William mentioned at least once per letter, and more than that much of the time, was indicative of him finally having found a woman to love.

“I see William’s coach arriving at Darcy House,” Richard noted as he looked across the green in the middle of the square.

“Allow him some time to wash and change before you accost your cousin,” Lady Matlock suggested.

“Yes Mother,” Richard replied. He was within a year of being thirty and his mother could still make him feel like a young errant schoolboy. He would give Darcy an hour and then if his cousin did not call, he and Giana would call at the Darcys’ house.

Chapter 25

“Wickham, what on earth happened to you?” Denny asked amusedly when he noted the clear marks of a handprint on his fellow officer’s left cheek.

He knew he could not use the excuse he had tripped and hit something as Wickham had seen how easily the mark on his face could be seen for what it was—a dainty handprint. He was still smarting at the humiliation Miss Darcy had meted out to him—a second Darcy against whom he now needed to avenge himself. His best lies were always those sprinkled with a sliver of truth, so Wickham decided to keep to that formula.

“When I was in London, I saw Miss Darcy in Hyde Park. I greeted her and for no reason, she quite unexpectedly slapped me,” Wickham related. “Evidently her brother has been spreading lies about me, to his own young sister no less, which resulted in her action.”

“What will you do? Your honour has been impugned,” Denny enquired.

Soon after his return, Wickham had heard the residents of Netherfield Park had decamped to London, therefore he was free to speak without fear of retribution.

“When I see that bastard Darcy in the area, I will challenge him, of course,” Wickham blustered.

“You will need to find him somewhere else,” Denny revealed.

“Why is that?” Wickham asked innocently.

“He, along with the rest of the party departed before noon today. Mr. Darcy is no longer in the neighbourhood,” Denny explained.

“It is both a pity and a good thing. I cannot reclaim my honour until I see him but it is good for everyone around the area that he is no longer present,” Wickham stated. “Have the merchants relented regarding credit?”

“No, same rules. The Colonel is too busy courting his lady to change anything at the moment,” Denny lamented.

“It is good to be back,” Wickham stated. With Darcy gone, he was free to share his tale with impunity. He would add the bit about being slapped to it. That should engender him sympathy with the local ladies who had so far, seemed to be immune to his charms.



“Why are you in London and not at Netherfield Park like you ought to be?” Bingley demanded when his sisters and brother entered the house.

“Caroline, you told us you spoke to Charles and he approved of you closing the house and travelling to Town,” Mrs. Hurst stated. She knew her sister would be furious with her but she had to let her brother know she had not knowingly crossed him.

“I knew Charles would not want to return to that backwater, so here we are. I must check my correspondence and see what invitations we can accept to various events,” Miss Bingley stated unworriedly.

“Did Darcy return with you?” Bingley questioned with his asperity poorly hidden.

“Indeed, he did. You did not expect one such as he to want to remain in that nowhere place, especially without a hostess to take care of his needs,” Miss Bingley stated as if it was something a simpleton should have been able to divine. “He will join us on Monday to speak to you about an important matter.”

Seeing the triumphant gleam in his younger sister’s eye, Bingley felt sadness. It seemed Darcy had been recruited to participate in this scheme. His sadness was over the possible end of a friendship. If Darcy assisted with any part of Caroline’s prevarication, he could not see any way to continue being Darcy’s friend.

“What is it of so great an import you need to wait until Monday to discuss? Surely if it is such a critical issue, then it

should not wait until then,” Bingley pushed. He could not wait to see how much his sister intended to dissemble. He turned to his brother by marriage. “Hurst, do you know what this is all about?”

“Your sister was not good enough to include me in her schemes,” Hurst replied.

Miss Bingley gave the souse a murderous look. “There is no *scheme*, only some concerns, serious ones,” Miss Bingley bit out. “Although Mr. Darcy will only join us on Monday, it would be preferable to discuss this with you now.”

“Allow us to wash and change, and then we will join you in the drawing room,” Mrs. Hurst suggested nervously. She had seen a steely glint in Charles’s eye she had not noticed previously. It was something which gave her pause and she desired to talk to her sister before they rejoined their brother.

Hurst headed to his chamber while his wife followed Caroline into her chambers where her maid was already working on the unpacking.

“How dare you tell Charles what I said to you!” Miss Bingley screeched as soon as the door was closed. Her maid, who was hanging gowns in the walk-in closet, blanched.

“That is in fact what you told me,” Mrs. Hurst reminded her younger sister. “If you had shared more with me, I would have known what to say or not to say to Charles.

“As long as you assist me in turning him away from Jane Bennet, I will forgive your lapse,” Miss Bingley sniffed.

“Caroline, my advice is to rethink this whole plan of yours. I do not believe our brother is as pliable as you think he is,” Mrs. Hurst counselled.

“What nonsense,” Miss Bingley replied derisively. “Charles is as he has always been and will be like soft clay in my hands, ready for me to form at will, just as he has been in the past.”

“As much as I hate to disagree with you, Sister, I do. I saw something in his look today which worries me. I urge caution,” Mrs. Hurst insisted.

Miss Bingley waved her sister away. “Stuff and nonsense. Now allow me to change so I can set Charles on the correct path. Do not forget, I expect your full support.”

As much trepidation as she felt, Louisa Hurst knew her sister was set on her course and would not be deterred. She could only hope what she thought she saw in her brother’s looks was incorrect.



Once back at his London home, Darcy bathed and changed. Regardless of how much he scrubbed himself, he could not wash away the overwhelming guilt he felt. He was not a coward, yet his running away from Hertfordshire with his tail between his legs had been the action of one.

He felt worse than he had ever felt before, even more so than discovering Wickham with Giana in Ramsgate. He had always prided himself on his honesty and honour. Had Miss Elizabeth not told him just last evening she saw him as an honourable man? What would she say if she knew what he planned to do?

The evidence of her fierce love for her sister was clearly visible when Miss Elizabeth had walked the three miles to Netherfield Park, not caring for the condition of the ground, to come nurse Miss Bennet. Would she ring a peal over his head if she ever discovered he had actively hurt her most beloved sister?

If Darcy went through with this and his part ever became public—there was a better than even chance it would with Miss Bingley as a co-conspirator—even if society eventually forgave him, his family would not. Worse, his actions if brought to light or not, he would never forgive himself.

How would he look Giana in the eye again? He could only imagine her disappointment with a brother she revered when his part came to light. Seeing her look at him in that way would break his heart...almost as much as it was breaking now at having given up the woman he loved.

If—when—it did, would he lose his friendship with Bingley? He finally admitted to himself Bingley was not the same malleable fellow he had been. Especially in the last year, Darcy had seen his friend mature and his spine stiffen. He needed to think and come to a conclusion, not only about what he would say to Bingley, but also about doing something to hobble Wickham.

He was seated in his study ruminating on these weighty subjects. His elbows were on his desk and his head resting in his hands as the feelings of guilt weighed down on him like a millstone around his neck. Just then he heard the front door being opened. The knocker was down. Surely the shrew would not try to gain entry to his house. He had instructed his butler, Killion, he was not at home to any save for close family members.

The study door was pushed open and Richard sauntered in followed by Giana. Darcy stood and went around his desk opening his arms for his sister to fall into them. For that moment, seeing Giana and hugging her, his guilt was forgotten, but only in the instant.

“It is good to see you, Sweetling, and you too Richard,” Darcy stated in welcome. “No duty today?” he directed at his cousin.

“I am on leave until after Twelfth Night,” Richard shared. “The reason for which will become clear shortly.”

“Brother, I need to confess I did something rather imprudent yesterday,” Giana admitted.

“Come let us sit, and then we may talk,” Richard suggested as he led his ward to the settee which was placed against the wall between the two windows.

Once Darcy had seated himself in a wingback chair opposite the settee, he looked at his sister questioningly.

“On Friday I went for a stroll in Hyde Park with Tiffany, our companions, and two Matlock footmen,” Georgiana began.

“It pleases me you were well escorted,” Darcy interjected.

“We had not been walking for long when approaching us from the opposite direction was none other than...George Wickham...wearing a uniform.” Darcy wanted to spring from his chair and make sure his sister was truly well but he saw Richard give an almost imperceptible shake of his head. He sat back in his seat. “He greeted me like nothing had occurred in Ramsgate, turning on all of his sickening charm. I-I slapped him...hard,” Georgiana admitted as she dipped her head to look at the carpet.

“You are well, Giana?” Darcy verified concernedly.

“I am. My hand stung for some time, but I must admit something. I felt pleasure when I saw the red welt forming on his cheek,” Georgiana shared quietly.

“Georgiana! Look at me,” Darcy commanded. His sister lifted her head until she was looking him in the eye—almost. “The only thing I feel is pride in you. You had the strength to let the miscreant know exactly how you feel about him and the lies he told you. If you were worried I would be angry, I am not. I am glad you had the footmen there; Wickham is a coward, and I am sure he said nothing but turned tail and headed away from you at all speed. He likes his victims to be helpless...” Darcy paused.

It hit him that he was using words to describe Wickham that were clearly applicable to his actions, or lack thereof, in Meryton. He was so worried about his sister, and here she had demonstrated much more backbone than he had of late.

“Unfortunately, none of those who saw him could identify his regiment, I know he is in the militia and I intend to run him to ground,” Richard stated firmly. He saw his cousin was about to protest. “There is nothing you can do to stop me, the only way I will not do so is if our ward does not want me to act.”

“I do. I very much want you to make sure he cannot keep hurting those around him with impunity,” Georgiana

stated emphatically.

“It just so happens I know where he is and in what regiment of the militia he is enlisted,” Darcy reported.

“How is it you have that information, and why did you not write to me about him as soon as you became aware he was in the army?” Richard demanded.

“I admit to an error in judgement.” Darcy was gratified at the look of stupefaction on Richard’s face. Apologising was not something he had often done.

“Where is that bas...brigand?” Richard queried.

“In the market town close to the estate I was visiting. It is called Meryton in Hertfordshire. He is in a regiment of the Derbyshire Militia commanded by a Colonel Forster,” Darcy revealed.

“My men and I will be on the way to that town first thing on Monday morning,” Richard informed his cousins.

“Richard, I have enough of his vowels to have him consigned to debtors’ prison for the rest of his miserable life. They are being held by my solicitor. However, I have copies of them all here in my safe. Let me provide you with them and then let him rot in King’s Bench or Marshalsea for the rest of his days. He is not worth you being tried for murder,” Darcy pleaded.

Darcy well knew that look in his cousin’s eye, and he almost pitied Wickham once Richard got his hands on him.

Richard saw there was concern in his ward’s eyes too. “You have my word of honour that unless it is self-defence, I will not kill him,” Richard relented. “Retrieve the markers. I will take the copies which will be enough to have a bailiff join me and for the local magistrate to issue a writ of arrest, but we will need the originals for the court before he is sent to one of the prisons.”

“Sir William Lucas,” Darcy stated. He clarified when Richard looked at him questioningly. “The local magistrate. He lives at Lucas Lodge, barely a mile from the town.” He paused and decided he must be honest. “Wickham told some

story to a local lady and she saw through it. I should have warned them, but I hid behind my tired old excuses for a reason not to move against him and did nothing before I departed the area.”

“William, please do not tell me you used my reputation as an excuse,” Georgiana pleaded.

“I did,” Darcy admitted.

“Tiffany and I spoke about this. William think about it, who in society would believe anything he said?” Georgiana posed, and then added. “Especially as he is about to be sent to debtors’ prison. It would be seen as a prevarication by a blackhearted man trying to cause damage to the family who were sending him to gaol.”

“You and Tiffany have the right of it. I suppose I was looking for excuses not to do anything, but I see now I erred greatly in that,” Darcy acknowledged.

“The young lady in Meryton who saw through his story, was that Miss Elizabeth Bennet?” Georgiana asked innocently.

Darcy sat, his mouth open and no sound emanating for some moments. “How do you know that name? And yes, it was in fact Miss Elizabeth who detected his dissembling,” he responded once he regained the use of his tongue.

“William, you mentioned her in every letter from Netherfield Park, save the very first, in many letters more than once, and you related how intelligent she is. She seemed to be the logical choice for the one who would not be beguiled like I was,” Georgiana replied and then her eyes dropped to the rug once again.

“Giana, never forget you had two manipulators working against you. Mrs. Younge was supposed to protect you. There is no way you would have suspected her ill intentions,” Darcy soothed his sister. “Also, even though Richard urged me to tell you about Wickham a few years ago, I did not. In addition, I did not verify Mrs. Younge’s characters as I should have, so it was I who failed you.”

“Before I forget, you are expected for dinner tonight,” Richard told his cousin.

“You may tell your mother I will be there,” Darcy replied. “Go ahead, I have a few more letters to read and then I will follow you two.”

The three stood. Darcy hugged his sister and kissed the crown of her head. It was a pleasure to see how much she had recovered—not fully, but she was well on her way— which was expressed in the strength she had exhibited when she had struck Wickham. He shook hands with his cousin and then watched as his sister and cousin exited his study.

During his conversation with Giana and Richard, he had not thought about what to do regarding Bingley. Now he also needed to consider what to do with regards to Miss Elizabeth as well. He had not realised he had mentioned the enchanting woman once, never mind in almost every letter he had sent his sister.

Was it possible his heart and his head were not as diametrically opposed as he had thought they were? He had much about which to think.

Chapter 26

Bingley paced back and forth across the drawing room in his home while he waited for his sisters and Hurst to join him.

One thing he did not doubt was that whatever had been planned had been done by his younger sister. That Louisa only knew part of the truth and Hurst none at all was not in question in Bingley's mind. It was a sad, but true fact, Caroline would say or do anything, lie to whomever she felt she needed to in order to achieve what she felt was in her best interest.

He had to assume some of the blame for her belief she could manipulate him into doing anything she desired. In the past, it *had* been true. For many months now—the best part of a year—it was no longer the case, but Caroline refused to recognise that fact.

She had a singular ability to rearrange facts to suit what she wanted them to be. It was the reason she was able to delude herself she had a future with Darcy. Regardless of how many clear signals he gave her, she refused to see it. Bingley was sure even his friend not requesting a single set from her at the ball the previous day had been reordered in her brain and changed into some sort of positive sign of his regard for herself.

It could be he would need to have her committed to an asylum if her delusions became too powerful and dangerous either to herself or others. Bingley heard his younger sister's voice approaching so he stopped his pacing and stood waiting in the centre of the room.

“Please sit,” Bingley requested before his sister could, as was her wont, steer the conversation in a direction of her choosing.

The Hursts sat on a divan while Miss Bingley seated herself in an armchair. She straightened out the pleats of her dress and removed some imaginary lint as she sat looking at her brother with a sneer.

‘Just wait until you go and attempt to have anything invoiced to me. That sneer will be wiped from your face,’ Bingley told himself as he watched his sister. Immediately upon receiving the letter from Bennet, he had sent a note to his man of business to confirm his instructions to close every account Caroline used for her purchases and to overspend her allowance. He further instructed him to make all stores his sister would patronise aware that if they allowed her to open an account with them it would not—under *any* circumstances—be paid by him.

“Why would you need to prevaricate to Louisa about my giving permission to close up the house if you were so very sure it was what I, in fact, wanted?” Bingley asked pointedly as he looked directly at his younger sister.

“Oh Charles, let us not argue about semantics,” Miss Bingley waved her brother’s concerns away. “How many times have you not told us when you are in London you feel like you never want to leave the city again?”

“In the past, I did say something similar,” Bingley agreed. “However, you would have had to be wilfully blind to ignore the fact I was more than contented at Netherfield Park, and especially in my association with Miss Jane Bennet, who is, unless you were dissembling at the time, a good friend of yours.”

Mrs. Hurst heard something in her brother’s tone which told her there was a seething fury just below the surface. Yes, Charles had always been affable and had been somewhat malleable in the past. Their brother had grown up and Caroline was blind to the fact. She suspected Caroline was not going to be very happy with their brother’s new decisiveness.

Louisa recognised she was at a fork in the road. One direction was to keep blindly placating Caroline and experience the same wrath she suspected Charles planned to unleash on her younger sister. The other was to change her attitudes and her allegiances to her husband first and then her brother.

Seeing what Caroline obviously was not, it was the work of a minute for Mrs. Hurst to make her decision.

“I—we—have done you a favour,” Miss Bingley asserted.

“What pray tell is that?” Bingley responded with cold steel in his voice.

“Louisa and I agree...” Miss Bingley was somewhat shocked when her older sister interjected.

“Caroline, this was all you,” Mrs. Hurst insisted. “You made the decision to close up the house, you did not tell me the truth, and it was you who said those unflattering things about Miss Bennet and the rest of her family. I simply listened to you.”

“Louisa, I cannot believe you would not support your own sister,” Miss Bingley screeched. She took a beat or two to calm herself. “It matters not, I know for a fact Miss Bennet and her family only saw you as a way to ensure when they are thrown out of that pitiful hovel in which they reside that your fortune would save them. Look at their connections! They wanted to align themselves with a superior level of society they would never reach on their own.”

“Did you at least take your leave of the Bennets? I had told them I would return in a few days after all,” Bingley queried.

“We did not have time to see them, but I did write a letter to Miss Bennet explaining we were decamping for Town,” Miss Bingley related.

“Did you know about this letter, Louisa, Hurst?” Bingley asked the couple on the divan.

“Until my wife told me we were departing, I was unaware of any of this,” Hurst stated.

“The first I heard of a letter Caroline wrote was when she informed you right now,” Mrs. Hurst averred. To herself, she said: *‘I hope this is not another lie, Caro. If you did write it, I pray you did not say anything which will redound on yourself.’*

“So, you do not know if a letter was sent or not?” Bingley questioned his older sister.

“I do not,” Mrs. Hurst confirmed.

“I am telling the truth,” Miss Bingley insisted.

“You did not tell Louisa the truth, so why should I believe you sent the letter?” Bingley pushed. He was having fun, the letter was locked in his desk drawer, so he knew full well it had been sent.

“The footman I sent was one of the two who arrived back with the cart carrying the rest of our trunks,” Miss Bingley stated triumphantly. “Ask him if I had him deliver a missive to your precious Miss Bennet.”

“Which footman is it?” Bingley queried. He knew full well his sister would not be able to name the man.

“How am I supposed to know, he is a footman!” Miss Bingley returned in frustration. What did her brother care who the footman was.

Bingley rang for his butler and asked him to verify with the two footmen who had returned with the cart if Miss Bingley had sent one of them to deliver a note to Longbourn that morning. Not too many minutes later, the butler returned and nodded his head to the master.

“At least we know you were truthful in that. What did you tell her about why we had departed after my saying I would return?” Bingley demanded.

“I conveyed your best regards to Miss Bennet and told her we knew not when you would return to the neighbourhood, but I was sure you would return at some point,” Miss Bingley dissembled.

“If that is what you told her, then I wonder what she will make of your having closed the house,” Bingley asserted.

Mrs. Hurst did not miss how her sister’s face blanched. She had obviously lied about the contents of the letter and had been caught out. It was almost as if Charles knew what the letter contained already...no, that was impossible, was it not?

She was sure her brother was about to trap Caroline in another lie. Louisa was rather surprised when he changed the subject.

“So, what makes you think Miss Bennet is after my fortune?” Bingley asked calmly.

“Surely you know they have none of their own? They have but one thousand each, and that is only when that crass woman who is their mother dies,” Miss Bingley sneered. “The estate is entailed and they will be turned out as soon as the father is in his grave. Without you or some other rich fool, they will be living in poverty.”

“Louisa, Hurst, from the time she visited Netherfield Park when Miss Bennet was ill, did you notice Mrs. Bennet behave with anything but propriety and decorum?” Bingley looked at the couple on the divan. Both agreed they had not. “Were we not informed at the ball the heir is to marry the middle Bennet sister, Miss Mary?” The Hursts nodded. He looked back at his squirming younger sister. “Why would you think they would be turned out of their home when Mr. Bennet goes to his eternal reward? It seems to me their future is secured.”

Miss Bingley was flummoxed; she knew not how to answer. This was not going the way she determined it would. “Even if I have been abandoned by my traitorous sister,” Miss Bingley shot her older sister a venomous look, “at least wait for Mr. Darcy to share his opinions on Monday. Have you not told us many times how he never gives you bad advice?”

As he very much wanted to hear what Darcy had to say, it was no hardship to agree with his sister’s suggestion. The butler announced dinner. There was no more talk—much to Miss Bingley’s pleasure—of the Bennets or Hertfordshire for the rest of the night.



Dinner at Matlock House had not been enjoyable; the food had tasted like ash in his mouth. Darcy’s guilt was tormenting him. He had been poor company which had

prompted him to cry off soon after dinner telling them he was tired from a long day which included travelling.

It had not been a complete prevarication. He was tired, but mainly from the guilt eating at him. As soon as he returned to Darcy House, he closeted himself in his study. He took a tumbler from the tray on the sideboard and the decanter of brandy and fell back onto the settee where Richard and Giana had been seated earlier. He poured two fingers of the amber liquor into the crystal tumbler and placed the decanter on the low table next to his side of the settee.

He downed the contents of the glass in one gulp and felt the brandy burn on its way down to his stomach. Another two fingers were poured which followed the first just as fast. The same amount was poured again, but this time, rather than throw it down his throat, he sat rolling the tumbler between his fingers watching the candlelight reflected by the crystal and the contents within.

As he was looking into the brandy as if it would somehow provide an answer to his quandary, he lifted his eyes slightly, and there on the wall opposite was a portrait of his late parents. The likeness had been taken when he was ten, two years before Giana had been born. As he looked into his parents' eyes searchingly, Darcy swore they were looking back at him with disapproval.

His parents had both drummed the need to always act as an honourable, honest gentleman into him. Once his father had recovered somewhat from his mother's passing, he continued to stress those attributes to his son.

It was the reason he abhorred disguise of any form. At that, the shame of what he planned to do struck Darcy as if Zeus had kicked him with all his power in the centre of his belly.

For the first time, possibly since he had watched his mother's coffin being lowered into the family crypt, Darcy wept like a baby. If he followed the path he was on, his parents would not only be ashamed of him, but disgusted as well. He

was about to break every cardinal rule he had been taught. He would not—no he could not—do it.

When he saw Bingley on Monday, he would have to admit all, as humiliating as that would be. His honour and his friendship with Bingley were worth so much more than his discomfort about being in Miss Elizabeth's presence again.

He was able to admit two things to himself. He had not observed Miss Bennet and his friend enough—not even close to enough—in order to make an honest assessment of her feelings and from what he could honestly tell, Miss Bennet was somewhat reticent about showing her emotions to most, just like he was himself.

Miss Bingley could hang, he would not lie to his friend for anyone, especially not for her. As he made that decision, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders.

That left one major dilemma. What to do with regards to Miss Elizabeth. He placed the still untouched glass of brandy on the table next to the decanter. Over imbibing was not something he ever did. Again, he lifted his eyes to his parents.

“You two had the deepest love between you,” he told the portrait looking back at him. At least he no longer detected disapproval from the images of his parents staring back from the wall opposite. “And Father was socially inferior to you Mother, yet it was...love! It was love which determined your choices, not some arbitrary social norms.”

He heard his heart screaming ‘*At long last,*’ while at the same time, his head was not protesting.

There was still much on which to cogitate, and he would not be selfish, he would speak to Giana. He remembered when his sister had sat where he was now; when she had mentioned Miss Elizabeth it had been with enthusiasm.

One of the things he always believed was Miss Elizabeth would be an ideal sister to Giana. If she was half as dedicated to his sister as she was to Miss Bennet, she would be

far better with his sister than any woman he could find in the *Ton*.

Aunt Elaine and Uncle Reggie could object she was not a member of the first circles, but he was sure they would accept her as soon as they met her. If they did have any reservations, it would be expressed privately to him and never in public. However, of this he was sure, once he made his decision and they saw it was irrevocable, they would throw their full support behind the match thereby smoothing Miss Elizabeth's entry into the *Ton*.

His cousins would accept her without question. Andrew and Cilla as well as Richard would not care about her standing in society or lack of wealth. He supposed it was one of the things that marked a shift between some in his generation and that of his aunt and uncle.

He thought about his family's reaction if he made an effort to make Miss Elizabeth his wife. There was one aunt who lived at Rosings Park in Kent who would object. She would not care who he married, royalty or a commoner, if it were not her own daughter. He did not care about her opinion in the least.

In that she only saw and heard what she wanted; Lady Catherine was very similar to Miss Caroline Bingley. If she ever heard she was being compared to a tradesman's daughter, his aunt would have an apoplexy on the spot!

First, he needed to meet with Bingley. Thereafter he would decide how, and whether, to approach Miss Elizabeth.

The tumbler still containing the two fingers of brandy remained on the table next to the settee as Darcy left his study feeling much lighter in spirit than he had in a long time.

Who knew a change of heart could make him feel so much better.

Chapter 27

Monday dawned a cold and grey day. There had been a mist in the morning which had left a layer of moisture on the ground. It was not enough to form puddles, but more than sufficient to make the day unpleasant for those who dared to venture out of doors.

Bingley had an appointment first thing that day with his solicitor to review the marriage settlement which had been drawn up as quickly as the man's clerks were able. He saw nothing which he would want changed, so with his lawyer as witness, Bingley signed all four copies of the documents and sent one of his grooms to Longbourn. The man was clad in oilskins and the precious documents were under the layer of protection against wet weather in a sealed oilskin pouch of their own.

He smiled to himself as he departed the offices. By the time he met with his sisters, Hurst, and Darcy this afternoon, there would be a good chance the documents would be signed by Bennet and his copies on their way back to him.

His next meeting was with his man of business. Mr. Hodges had executed his instructions regarding Caroline's accounts to the letter. Not only had they been closed, but an acknowledgement had been signed by each merchant acknowledging Mr. Bingley would not be responsible for any credit they chose to extend to his sister.

With that out of the way, Bingley went over the reports from the carriage works in Scarborough as well as the steel foundries in Sheffield. Both showed better than expected profits which pleased Bingley.

Unbeknownst to his sisters and even Darcy, he was still actively involved in his businesses which had been left to him by his father. Even if he purchased an estate one day, he would never take a passive role in managing the empire his father had built.

His last call was to Gracechurch Street to meet with one of his local partners, Mr. Edward Gardiner. A clerk ushered Bingley into Gardiner's office, situated in what used to be a home. The office was near one of his warehouses. Gardiner owned three more and between them, they owned four ships.

"Bingley, welcome," Gardiner stood to shake the younger man's hand. "Until recently, I was not aware you are known to my family."

"Your family?" As far as Bingley knew he had never met any besides Mrs. Gardiner and the four Gardiner children.

"You hold the lease on Netherfield Park, do you not?"

"I do...wait are you the uncle in Cheapside my sister has been using as an example of the Bennets' poor connections?"

"That I am, except we both know, this is not Cheapside and only my first warehouse is *near* that neighbourhood. My nieces do not like to boast so they still say I live here rather than sharing we live on Portman Square. Truth be told, had we not outgrown this house, Maddie and I would have been happy to remain here. It is the reason I had it converted into my offices, we did not want to sell the house; it has too much sentimental value for us."

"Wait a moment, did you not tell me you had purchased an estate as an investment in the neighbourhood you grew up in...am I your tenant?"

"You are! I intended to share that today as it is the first time we are speaking since you took up residence. My brother Philips is used to keeping the name of the landlord to himself, and I had not told him to alter that. He is married to..." Gardiner told Bingley of his family in the Meryton area and how it was Philips who had taken over his late father's law practice after Gardiner had chosen a different path from his father's profession. "Jane and Elizabeth are our favourite nieces and the former may have mentioned *once or twice* her tender feelings for a certain tenant of my estate."

“Even when my sisters tried to wheedle information from Jane...Miss Bennet, she never mentioned Netherfield Park was yours.” Bingley shook his head. “Neither Mrs. Bennet nor Mrs. Philips breathed a word of who the owner was.”

“That is for the simple reason they do not know.” Gardiner paused. “Jane?”

“As I am assured of your discretion, at the ball Friday past, I proposed to your niece and she accepted me. Bennet gave his blessing.”

“Well in that case,” Gardiner sprung from his chair and came around his desk, his hand extended, “welcome to the family. You will not only be my nephew but we will continue in business together as well. I had heard not a word from Longbourn. With one of her daughters engaged, I would have thought to hear Fanny’s effusions from here.”

Bingley explained Jane’s request and the material changes he had noted in Mrs. Bennet. “I think you will find your sister a changed woman. On Thursday, the notice will appear in the papers. I will return to Netherfield Park on Wednesday.”

“As I am sure you know I keep no secrets from my Maddie, but until we see the announcement, I will not speak of the news to anyone else,” Gardiner assured his nephew-to-be.

Mugs of steaming coffee and some biscuits were delivered. Thereafter the two men discussed the business they needed to canvass before Bingley made his way back to Curzon Street and the coming confrontation.



Darcy arrived at Matlock House at the time he knew his family would be breaking their fasts. The butler informed him upon enquiry that his cousin had departed before first light with a group of men as he had planned.

Overnight he had all but decided to pursue Miss Elizabeth, if she was amenable to such, but he was determined to canvass Giana’s opinion first. He had an epiphany of sorts

last night before he allowed Morpheus to claim him. Any man who rejected his sister because of Darcy's wife being too low did not deserve his sister in the first place. That realisation made his need to speak to his sister more urgent.

"William, it is good to see you so soon after dinner yesternight," Lady Matlock welcomed her nephew.

"Thank you, Aunt Elaine, and a good morning to all of you," Darcy intoned cheerily.

"Who are you and what have you done with my taciturn cousin?" Tiffany teased.

"After making a series of decisions that may impact my future significantly, I feel much lighter than I have since before Mother was taken from us," Darcy announced.

Before anyone could respond to his cryptic statement, he went to the sideboard and filled his plate with poached eggs, bacon, and some sausages. He buttered two slices of toast and added them to his plate. With his food in hand, Darcy took a seat next to his sister who was looking at him quizzically, as were the Fitzwilliams present at the table. He indicated coffee to a footman who filled a mug and delivered it to him.

"William, will you not share what these decisions are?" Lord Matlock boomed.

"Once we have sated ourselves with this delicious meal, I will talk to my sister—in private—first. The results of that conversation will determine what I report to the rest of you," Darcy said before he put a forkful mixed with a piece of egg and toast into his mouth. It was followed by a small piece of sausage.

Knowing how hard it was—impossible actually—to wheedle information from William when he chose not to share, the rest of the meal passed with no further questions to him.

While he sipped his coffee, Darcy waited until his sister pushed her knife and fork together on the plate and drained her cup of hot chocolate. He stood and pulled his

sister's chair back for her. He offered her his arm and then looked at his aunt and uncle.

The Earl and Countess looked at one another communicating wordlessly as those who had been married well over thirty years were able to do. "Use my study," Lord Matlock offered gruffly.

He led his sister to the named room. First, he made sure she was comfortably seated in an armchair, then Darcy turned and closed the door firmly. He knew his aunt's and uncle's servants, like his own, would not spread gossip they overheard, but to be safe, he made sure the door to the servants' hall was securely closed as well. Once all was done, he sat in a chair facing his sister.

"Sweetling, you have already divined my fascination with Miss Elizabeth Bennet due to my unconsciously mentioning her in—it seems—almost all of my letters. I have decided to try to court her..." He held up his hand to stem the excited effusions he saw building in his sister. "There is a reason I needed to speak with you. She is the daughter of a gentleman, so in that we are equal. However, she has no fortune to bring to the marriage and connections to those in trade. You must know this could affect your prospects, hence my desire to speak to you. I could not be selfish."

"William, as much as I appreciate your consideration, I have one question for you, do you love her?"

"Yes, I do, I most certainly do. Lord knows I have tried to fight it, but I will no longer."

"As far as fortune and connections go, do we need more of either? Even I know the amount which is bandied about by the likes of Miss Bingley is barely a third of your income. Also, would that not be rather hypocritical to eschew connections to trade when your best friend is the son of a tradesman and a healthy part of your income comes from trade?"

"You do have the right of it, Giana. Until recently I was blinded by improper pride, but I have had a change of heart." Darcy paused. "As much as you revere me, you would

have been extremely disappointed with my behaviour in Meryton, and not only for remaining silent about Wickham.”

“Of what do you speak?” Georgiana enquired.

Darcy told his sister the unvarnished truth about the insult and the way he had behaved from that point on.

“William, at least you apologised. You should not have said the words in the first place, but you did make amends. I could tell from your letters Miss Elizabeth is exactly the kind of woman I would love as a sister. All I can do is offer prayers of thanks she is not like Miss Bingley, or worse, Miss Bingley herself. As far as what you intended to tell Mr. Bingley, you changed your mind before you risked your friendship.”

“I will see my friend at two this afternoon. I hope he will be as understanding as you think he will be.” Darcy paused. “As you have no reservations, I will have to find a way to be in Miss Elizabeth’s company again. Bingley may return to Hertfordshire, and then I...”

“We!” His sister interjected. “Before you mention that seducer, with Richard and his men there today, George Wickham will not be there to bother me or anyone else.”

“*We* will accompany him if Bingley is sanguine with that.” Darcy smiled widely. Now he needed to speak to his aunt and uncle and hope they were not vociferous in their objections.

The Earl and Countess were more upset by their nephew’s behaviour and his intended cooperation with the shrewish harpy than any objections they may have had to a possible connection to Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

All they told Darcy was they would reserve judgment until—if—they met her. The Countess secretly smiled. Tiffany had shared her suspicion based on William’s letters to his sister. It was about time the boy settled down. If he did, it would only leave Richard to be matched with someone.



Colonel Fitzwilliam and his men arrived in Meryton before ten in the morning. After some enquiries, Richard made

his way to Colonel Forster's office. His adjutant was a little overawed by a visit from a Colonel in the regulars, but Captain Carter managed to perform his duty and soon Richard was shown into Colonel Forster's office.

Forster stood and extended his hand. The reputation of the man entering his office preceded him. He indicated a chair in front of his desk.

"How may I be of service to a hero of Talavera?" Forster enquired.

"You have a Lieutenant George Wickham in your regiment, do you not?" Richard began directly without any niceties.

"I do," Forster replied with his eyebrows pushed together in question. "What of it?"

"Have you heard him telling tales about how he was ill-used by Mr. Darcy, who is related to me, tales which I assume only began to circulate once my cousin quit the area?" Richard questioned.

"Yes, only recently, why?" Forster asked circumspectly. He had remarked to one of his officers it did not do to believe something unless one had heard both sides.

"Because they are all lies and to say that your lieutenant does not have a good character is an understatement. I am here, in fact, to arrest him," Richard revealed.

"I assume you have proof to back up calling one of my officers a liar? On what grounds is he to be arrested?" Forster demanded.

Richard opened the pouch he was holding. "This is his signature on a document accepting payment for the living out of which my cousin supposedly cheated him." Richard handed the document to the Colonel opposite him.

When he read the amount, Forster's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Three thousand pounds, and not many years past, and the man now cries poverty."

“Actually, it was four thousand. My uncle bequeathed him one thousand pounds which Wickham received at the same time,” Richard clarified. “As to why he has none left, it is simple. He is a gamester, to which your men should be able to attest. He hates to pay his debts of honour as little as he likes to pay the debts he accrues with tradesmen. That is why I am arresting him—well now we have a writ from the magistrate, the bailiff with me will actually do the deed. I hold here copies of markers for well over three thousand pounds of debts he never paid in various towns. Had my cousin not cleaned up after him, are you aware of what would have occurred to the economies of the towns after he cheated those merchants out of their hard-earned money?”

“That is why there is no credit allowed to my officers or men. I am the only one allowed to receive credit in this town,” Forster mused.

“I would wager that is because of a Bennet daughter.” Forster looked at Richard questioningly. He related how Wickham had not been believed when he told the false tale of woe built around a single kernel of truth. “What I mean is Wickham was refused the living, three years after receiving payment and resigning all claim to it. He has never taken orders so my cousin was sure it was a plot—which he roundly refused—to demand more funds from Darcy. You should know he is a seducer and defiler of very young girls as well.”

“I am recently engaged and my fiancée is a good friend of the two eldest Bennet sisters, she told me the second one, Miss Elizabeth is extremely intelligent,” Forster related.

“Firstly, my hearty congratulations,” Richard responded, “and yes, I believe it was Miss Elizabeth Bennet who detected the fallacies in Wickham’s tale of woe.”

“**CARTER!**” Forster bellowed.

“Colonel,” the adjutant returned as he stood to attention in front of his commanding officer.

“Is Lieutenant Wickham on duty?” Forster enquired.

“He is, Sir.”

“In that case, have him brought to me,” Forster ordered.

“If I may,” Richard looked to the other colonel who nodded. “Do not mention me or anyone else seeking him, he has a penchant for escape when he thinks it is time to pay the piper.”

Carter saluted and was soon on his way to comply with the orders. Not too many minutes later, voices were heard approaching the office door. One of them was easily identified as Wickham’s.

Richard stood behind the door, so when it was opened, he was hidden from view.

Wickham gave the Colonel what passed for a salute. At the same time, Richard pushed the door closed.

“Lieutenant,” Forster bellowed, “when you told how Mr. Darcy cheated you, you omitted how he paid you three thousand pounds in return for you signing away any claim to the living.”

He was not sure why the Colonel had asked for him, but this was the last thing Wickham expected. He froze in fear as he heard the last voice he ever wanted to hear again.

“Has the cat got your tongue, Wicky? Nice welt on your face my ward gifted you,” Richard drawled as he leaned against the wall next to the door.

Time stood still for Wickham! He had never before felt so completely terrified. He slowly turned, hoping against hope it was not Fitzwilliam standing behind him, but no such luck. There was Darcy’s cousin with a malevolent gleam in his eye. In panic, Wickham looked around the office, there was only one window and Fitzwilliam was much closer to it than he was.

“W-w-why a-a-are y-y-y-you h-here?” Wickham stammered out as his body began to shiver from fear.

“To escort you to King’s Bench debtor’s prison. Did you think my cousin did not keep your vowels each time he made your creditors whole?” Richard was no longer leaning

on the wall. He was between the door and the window, hand on the hilt of his sabre in case he needed it.

“I-I w-will t-t-tell...” Wickham’s mouth shut when he saw Fitzwilliam begin to unsheathe his sabre.

“One more word and you will never see tomorrow, never mind your new home,” Richard growled.

Wickham had no doubt this was no idle threat. He looked to Colonel Forster to see if he could expect support from that quarter. There was none. Richard knocked on the door and two large former soldiers stepped in and took Wickham into custody.

“Your days of running out on your debts and leaving seduced girls behind to face the consequences of your lies on their own are over. You will spend the rest of your days in gaol...unless you give me reason to end your wasted life on our way to King’s Bench,” Richard barked at the defeated man. He nodded and the two men took Wickham away.

Irons were clapped onto Wickham’s wrists and ankles, and before he was loaded into the donkey drawn cart, Colonel Forster had Lieutenant Denny cut the epaulets denoting Wickham’s rank from his scarlet coat.

As the cart pulled out of the encampment with the escort, his former brother officers—who by now had heard the truth about the miscreant—were standing watching him with disdain pouring from each of them. They all knew the markers he had signed for his debts of honour were as worthless as he was.

His humiliation was complete.

Chapter 28

“Come in, Jane,” Bennet welcomed. “Your fiancé sent me the settlement, and I am inclined to sign it, but before I do, I wanted you to see it. Your Uncle Philips has reviewed it with me and agrees it is a very favourable contract.”

“Thank you for allowing me to do so, Papa and Uncle Frank,” Jane responded as she took a seat next to her uncle in front of her father’s desk. “However, I have no experience reviewing legal documents.”

“The most important piece for you is to know what is being settled on you and how that will affect your quarterly allowance,” Philips told his niece. “Allow me to open it to the relevant page.” Jane nodded.

Her head was swimming. Her betrothed’s income was above the reputed amount per annum which had been ascribed to Mr. Darcy. Then she saw the amount he was settling on her, five and thirty thousand pounds!

“This is far too much,” Jane protested.

“Did I not tell you this would be Jane’s reaction?” Bennet looked at his brother. He turned back towards his eldest daughter. “He would not offer that amount if it was a hardship for him. By doing so he is ensuring your future, and that of any children you may have in case he is called home to God too early.”

Jane said nothing but read on. “What would I ever do with five hundred pounds pin money per quarter?”

“You will be able to support charities and I am sure with a house in London and your being there for the season each year, you will find it is not excessive,” Bennet explained.

She shook her head. “In that case Papa, I suppose I must accept things as they are,” Jane agreed.

With that, Bennet dipped his quill into his inkwell, shook off the excess ink and then signed all four copies of the settlement. One would be placed into his safe in his study, one

given to Philips to file, and the other two would be returned to the pouch they had come in and provided to Bingley's groom to carry them back to London.

After kissing first her father and then her uncle on the cheek, Jane made her way back to the stillroom.



Darcy arrived at Bingley's house on Curzon Street a few minutes before two. The butler relieved him of his outerwear and then ushered him into the drawing room where Bingley, his younger sister, and the Hursts were seated.

The Bingleys and Hursts stood and bows and curtsies were exchanged. Darcy did not miss how Miss Bingley patted the seat of the settee next to her in expectation of his sitting there. There was no situation under which he would have sat next to the harpy. As soon as Bingley was seated once again, Darcy made for the wingback chair next to his friend.

Miss Bingley got a pinched look on her face when her *intended* ignored her invitation and refused to sit next to her. One thing at a time. First, she would achieve her aim—with Mr. Darcy's aid—of making Charles see there was no future with Jane Bennet. Next, she would secure Mr. Darcy. Either he would offer for her, or he would be compromised. She would win her prize, one way or another.

"Caroline we are all here at your behest," Bingley stated coolly.

Looking at his friend, Darcy saw an anger simmering below the surface and was very thankful he was not about to do what he had planned to do. He was sure had he proceeded in such a vein, it would have spelled the end of his friendship.

"As I told you, you need to listen to Mr. Darcy," Miss Bingley said with saccharine sweetness. "You did not want to listen to me, but surely you will heed our very good friend." She batted her eyelids at Mr. Darcy.

"And here I thought you were *my* good friend," Bingley addressed Darcy curtly. He knew he needed to allow

things to play out, but it angered him that Darcy thought him so weak as not to know his own mind.

“It seems your sister is confused,” Darcy stated, “you and I are very good friends. Miss Bingley is no more than the sister of my friend.”

Why was Mr. Darcy saying this? She would fathom that out later, now she needed him to direct her brother for her. “We agreed on Friday morning about the ills of my brother connecting himself with Miss Bennet, did we not?” Miss Bingley trilled.

“On Friday morning past, yes, we did...” Caroline Bingley preened in anticipation of Mr. Darcy doing her work for her. “...however, I have come to realise I was wrong and have no place trying to insert my judgement for that of your brother’s about his future.”

At first, when his friend began to speak, Bingley girded his loins for the coming argument with, and break from, Darcy. He felt vastly relieved it seemed Darcy had changed his opinion.

“You agreed with me!” Miss Bingley screeched. “You promised to help me...my brother.”

“It is unfortunate you are disappointed Miss Bingley, but I am neither the first nor will I be the last man to realise he had begun to embark on a road that was not the correct one. Is it not the mark of a gentleman to correct himself when he sees he has erred?”

Louisa Hurst watched as her sister’s pallor turned a shade of puce as Caroline tried to reign in her fury. She thanked her lucky stars she had woken up before she had followed Caroline into this madness.

“Darce,” Bingley addressed his friend, unlike when he greeted him earlier, with warmth in his voice. “Did you know your sister and I—with your and your family’s approbation mind you—are in an unofficial courtship, one to be formalised while I am in London?”

“**WHAT!**” Darcy thundered as Caroline Bingley’s pallor turned grey. “Bingley, I thought you wanted to court Miss Jane Bennet. What has my sister to do with anything? I always thought you see her as another sister.”

“And that is *exactly* as I see her. Bingley turned towards his ashen younger sister. “It is not me who has made these ridiculous assertions, was it Caro *dear?*”

‘*Please tell me you did not use Mr. Darcy’s sister to discourage Miss Bennet,*’ Louisa Hurst beseeched silently. ‘*Do you not realise if you did, Mr. Darcy and his family will ruin you!*’ Then she asked herself a question: ‘*If so, how would Charles be aware of what you wrote in your letter?*’

“W-what would I-I know about that, I-I have never heard that said,” Miss Bingley prevaricated. “That sounds like a rumour one of those vulgar Bennets would spread.”

“Miss Bingley, did you, or did you not assert Miss Bennet was a fortune hunter only interested in your brother for his money?” Darcy questioned.

“Why yes, indeed I did, it is gratifying to see you agree with me...” Miss Bingley closed her mouth when Darcy raised his hand.

“Neither do I now nor have I ever thought Miss Bennet a fortune hunter—unlike you are,” Darcy responded. “The reason I raise this is, in what world would such a rumour be circulated by someone who, according to you, is bent on capturing your brother for pecuniary advantages? Spreading such a vicious lie would only garner enmity from your brother, and retribution from me.”

“I must agree with Darcy, both of your assertions cannot be true, one contradicts the other,” Bingley added. “And like Darcy said, you Caroline are a social climbing fortune hunter.”

Miss Bingley sat, her mouth opening and closing, no sound escaping. This was not how she had planned things for today.

“You claim you wrote a pleasant letter to Miss Bennet in which you assured her of my regard and I would be returning to Netherfield Park, but you closed the house. Is that what you expect me to believe?” Bingley challenged his younger sister.

“Louisa, tell them...” Miss Bingley tried.

“Leave me out of this mess, Caroline. It is of your making and I want no part in it,” Mrs. Hurst stated.

“Well said Louisa,” Hurst chimed in.

Bingley had enough of toying with his sister. “Caroline, before you try dissembling again, I am in possession of the letter you wrote to Jane.” He pulled the letter out of his waistcoat’s pocket and held it up.

To try and divert attention from her letter, Miss Bingley cottoned onto the fact her brother had addressed the low woman by her familiar name. “What right do you have to use Miss Bennet’s given name?” she scolded.

With a smile, Bingley turned to Hurst. “When you were engaged to Louisa, did you not address her with her familiar name?” Bingley asked innocently.

He waited as those in the room realised what he was saying. “No! I forbid it!” Miss Bingley screeched. “I will ruin her and all of the Bennets in society!”

“You do not have the power to forbid me *anything*,” Bingley growled. “Not only that, how will one who has caused her own banishment from society ruin anyone?” He handed the letter to Darcy. “You need to read this.”

In a panic, Miss Bingley lunged to try and retrieve her letter before Mr. Darcy read it. She would never have written those words had she suspected her letter would ever be seen by anyone other than her intended recipient. How was she supposed to know her brother was already engaged to the insipid woman?

Darcy deftly sprang from the chair; he lifted his arm and took a step back so Miss Bingley dove face first into the now vacated chair. While Miss Bingley tried to pick herself

up, Darcy read the letter. His face showed more and more anger the more he read.

“May I?” Mrs. Hurst requested once Darcy had completed reading. He wordlessly handed the letter to Bingley’s older sister.

Louisa Hurst took the letter and sat on the divan again next to her husband and allowed him to read it with her. “You have really done it this time,” Hurst opined as he shook his head.

Darcy retrieved the letter from the Hursts, folded it, and placed it in his inside jacket pocket. “The Earl and Countess will see this and they will know how to act,” Darcy said icily. “You not only used my sister’s name—one who cannot stand to be in your company—but you intimated all of my family had expressed their approbation for this imaginary courtship. If I were you, Miss Bingley, I would not attempt to show my face in society—ever again!”

“But you are to marry me,” Miss Bingley howled.

He turned to his friend. “Bingley can your sister be so delusional as to ignore all of the signals I have given her that her company is tolerated only because you and I are friends? Have I ever given her the slightest encouragement to signal I was interested in her as anything else?” Darcy asked his friend.

“No Darce, you never did,” Bingley averred. “In fact, you have indicated over and over again your disdain for my younger sister only falling short of wearing a sign around your neck saying *I am not interested in Caroline Bingley.*”

“I am supposed to be Mrs. Darcy, mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House! Surely you have not lost your good sense to be interested in that hoyden Elizabeth Bennet,” Miss Bingley screeched.

“As a matter of fact, not that it is your concern as you will never be anything to me, yes, I hope to convince Miss Elizabeth to accept me,” Darcy confirmed.

Caroline Bingley snapped, she jumped up and hurled herself at Mr. Darcy in a desperate attempt to compromise him. She never reached him because her brother stepped in front of his friend and caught her.

“Even had you reached Darcy, none of us here would have demanded he marry you, and even had we, he would have rightly refused,” Bingley told his furious sister. “You will be on your way north in the morning to live with Aunt Hildebrand. She will receive a letter telling her of your coming before you arrive. I am releasing what is left of your dowry—the interest thereon—to you.” He skewered his sister with a warning look as she was about to protest. “Did you think you could overspend your allowance with impunity? I have records of all of the additional costs I have had to cover. Also to be deducted is all the money spent on replacements for the breakages you have made when you have one of your tantrums. Bear in mind, if you want to keep your maid, you will have to pay her with your own funds every quarter day.”

“No, this cannot be! It is not fair! I will not go to live with that old biddy!” Miss Bingley insisted.

“That is your choice,” Bingley began to respond. He waited as he saw his sister’s face light up. “However, you may not enjoy the other choice—Bedlam.”

Finally, Miss Bingley allowed herself to see the steel in her brother’s eyes. All the fight went out of her. “I will go to our aunt,” she capitulated.

“Miss Bingley do not test me and return to London. If you are ever in my company again, you will receive the cut direct,” Darcy warned.

“There is nothing for you in Town, I have closed every single account you have used in the past,” Bingley informed his reeling sister.

He rang for his housekeeper and butler and informed them Miss Bingley would be departing at first light and she was to have her remaining meals in her chamber and was not permitted to exit it until her departure on the morrow.

“May I speak with you in your study?” Darcy requested once the shrew had been escorted out of the drawing room.

“Louisa, are you well?” Bingley asked before heading to the study.

“I am. Anything Caroline is suffering is at her own hand,” Mrs. Hurst averred. “Please accept my warmest congratulations on your engagement. Miss Bennet is a sweet girl.”

Bingley inclined his head to his older sister and then led Darcy to his study. Once the door was closed and Bingley seated behind his desk, Darcy paced back and forth a few times.

As soon as he organised his thoughts, he admitted all to his friend regarding what he had planned to tell Bingley and his reasons for doing so. At the end of his speech, he beseeched Bingley to forgive him. At the same time, he told his friend he would understand if he was unable to pardon him.

“Darce, there is nothing to forgive,” Bingley assured his friend. “I cannot condemn you for what you may have done. All I can judge is what you *have* done. Unlike my younger sister, you saw the error of your ways and changed course before you did what you had thought of doing. None of us would fare well if we were judged on our thoughts. I choose to base my judgements on your actions, and for those, I have no complaints.”

“Thank you, Bingley, that is rather magnanimous of you,” Darcy inclined his head.

“Tell me you would not have said the same if the roles had been reversed,” Bingley challenged.

“You have the right of it,” Darcy admitted. “I wish you and Miss Bennet all the happiness in the world. I do have to ask a favour of you though.”

“You can ask me anything,” Bingley allowed.

“When you return to Netherfield Park, are you open to two Darcys and a Fitzwilliam accompanying you?” Darcy requested.

“Yes, you are always welcome as are both your sister and the Colonel,” Bingley agreed. “By the way, you remember the *tradesman* in *Cheapside* my sister was railing against as an inferior Bennet connection?” Darcy nodded. “That is none other than my partner, Edward Gardiner.”

“Oh, my goodness! Your joint ventures earn me a pretty penny each year and make up a significant piece of my income,” Darcy shook his head.

“One more thing. Gardiner is the owner of Netherfield Park.” Bingley smiled and offered his shocked friend some port.

Chapter 29

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam sauntered into his cousin's study on Tuesday morning prior to the time he knew William would break his fast. Richard had enjoyed a plate at his parents' house before walking across the green to Darcy House, but there was more than enough room in his stomach for some of the excellent fare his cousin's cook consistently delivered.

"Well?" Darcy enquired when he lifted his head from the letter he had been writing and saw who had disturbed his peace.

"It is done, Wicky is a resident of King's Bench. If he ever manages to work off his debts, he will be an old man by then," Richard reported.

"And is he healthy?"

"Basically. He *may* be a *little* battered and bruised. I think he tripped and fell into my fist."

"Richard, you are enjoying this too much," Darcy chuckled.

"After what the bastard did, or tried to do, with Giana he is very lucky he is alive," Richard told his cousin all about the confrontation and Wickham's veiled threats, which had died in the coward's throat when faced with the option of being silent or being run through.

"It is good he will never be able to impose on any innocents again. You missed an *interesting* time I had at Bingley's house when I went to meet him. Thank goodness I woke up to my errors before I arrived at his door." Darcy related what had occurred at Curzon Street the previous day.

"Well done Bingley! He knew what he wanted and did not need permission from you or anyone else. Based on your descriptions of the lady, it is a pity I did not meet her before him. What is being done with the pretentious tradesman's daughter?"

“As far as I am aware, Miss Bingley is on her way to Scarborough already this morning. I showed the letter to your mother as I promised the shrew I would. Aunt Elaine will make sure if the harpy ever shows her face in Town again she will feel her own ruin keenly.”

“Do you have this letter of lies with you?”

Darcy opened one of his desk drawers, retrieved the offending missive, and then handed it over to Richard.

“If she was a man I would have called her out!” Richard exclaimed angrily after reading the vile missive.

“You would have had to queue up behind me and your father for that. I would never strike a woman, but the anger I felt at her using Giana’s name, threatening her reputation in such a cavalier manner may have pushed me to it if the letter had ever seen the light of day in society.”

“Her attempted compromise was not very well thought out,” Richard mused.

“Nothing she ever did was,” Darcy related. “As I told her, I would never have married her no matter what, even had she chosen to make her attempt in front of more than Bingley and the Hursts, who would have never supported her claims.”

“We, especially you, are well rid of her from our lives. What about you?”

“With regards to what, Richard?”

“The lady you mentioned in your letters to Giana?”

“I intend to try and win her hand. You still have leave until after Twelfth Night, do you not?”

“Correct,” Richard confirmed.

“Giana, you, and I are invited to join Bingley and the Hursts at his leased estate in Hertfordshire. That reminds me. I used Miss Elizabeth’s lack of connections as a reason to not pursue her. Do you know who her uncle is?” Richard shook his head. “None other than Andrew and Priscilla’s neighbours in Portman Square, Gardiner.”

“He is connected to many nobles, my father, Andrew, and myself included. The rest of the *Ton* would very much like to be connected to him and his money-making abilities.” Richard whistled. “Is he Bingley’s partner whom he has mentioned on occasion?”

“The very same, to whom I too am connected. By the way, he is Bingley’s landlord. Will you join us?”

“Of course I will. Mother will want a full report on this wonderful creature who has captured your heart.” Richard paused. “What of her feelings for you?”

“In my humble opinion, I will have to work hard to earn her regard, even though I did apologise for my unwise slight, I have seen no signs of tender feelings for me from her,” Darcy shook his head sadly. “Then again, the side of myself I showed in her neighbourhood was not who I truly am so all I can pray is when she sees me for who I am, she will give me a chance to win her heart.”

“With Giana and me with you to stop you inserting your hessian into your mouth, you may have a chance of winning the fair maiden. May I be present when you tell Aunt Catty you are marrying another?”

“Richard,” Darcy admonished with a smile. “I assume you will join me in breaking my fast?” The Colonel nodded. “Then come, let us proceed to the breakfast parlour.”



“There is a letter from London for you, Jane,” Bennet informed his daughter.

Jane and Elizabeth were working in the stillroom when their father delivered the missive. “Thank you, Papa,” Jane responded as she placed it into her apron’s pocket.

“What we are doing here will wait. Come Janey, I am sure the letter is burning a hole in your pocket. Go read what your fiancé has to say,” Elizabeth encouraged.

“Thank you for your understanding, Dearest,” Jane averred. She retrieved the still sealed message and removed

her apron. "It is far too cold to sit in the park so I will go to the small parlour."

Elizabeth waved her older sister away and returned to making the herbal remedy they had been working on.

As soon as she sat, Jane hungrily broke the seal. This was her first letter from Charles. She smoothed out the page and began to read.

11 December 1810

54 Curzon Street, London

My beloved Jane,

It took me some time to let go of the anger I felt for Caroline after I read that vile piece of poisoned prose she sent you. Thank goodness you were secure in the love and commitment we share to see it for the pack of lies it was.

I am so very sorry my sister attempted to hurt you in that fashion. Of all of her many sins, her trying to hurt you was the worst in my opinion.

It is done. I will not go into the lies my sister tried to tell when she was confronted about her actions. Suffice it to say she was rather shocked when I produced the letter. That was nothing to how she looked when Darcy reacted to what was written in the missive.

She is on her way to Scarborough where her residence will be of long duration. Darcy and his family (his aunt is the Countess of Matlock) have made sure she will never be welcome in polite society again. If my Aunt Hildebrand cannot abide Caroline in her home, I told her in the letter I wrote that she is free to contact my local solicitor who will find an establishment for my sister to live on her own.

No longer will I pay for Caroline's overspending or anything else in her life. She has the remains of her dowry and she will have to learn to make do with the interest from that.

Enough about her. My business has been achieved more speedily than I had anticipated (much to my delight)

which means I will be back in my angel's presence on Wednesday by early afternoon.

In my keenness to have it done, I dropped the notice of our engagement at the papers on Saturday past. Wanting nothing to delay my return to you for any reason, I decided not to wait until the day I departed to submit it. It will be in Thursday coming's editions.

I will be accompanied by the Hursts, two Darcys (Miss Darcy will be one of the party), and Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam (Darcy's cousin).

As you in the area have no doubt heard, Netherfield Park's manor house has been reopened and all of the servants my sister had Mrs. Nichols let off have been re-employed without missing a single day of wages. Louisa, who has wished us happy (sincerely I must note) will be my hostess.

How I have missed not seeing you each day. Now that I have the signed settlement back from your father, what say you to us setting a date for our wedding when I return to you? For my part, it cannot be soon enough, but I will defer to you on this subject.

“No more than I have missed seeing you,” Jane told the letter as she pulled it to her chest to feel his closeness. She extended her hands and began to read again.

Did I ever mention to you I have a business partner in London? It is none other than your uncle, Edward Gardiner. Imagine my surprise when I discovered he is the owner of Netherfield Park.

That is all for this letter my beloved Jane.

With all of my love and more,

Charles

Jane read the letter twice more and then with a dreamy look on her countenance secreted the letter in her memory box before making her way back to the stillroom to rejoin Lizzy.



“Come in, Fanny,” Bennet invited when his wife knocked on his study door.

“Thomas, did you already know that Edward owns Netherfield Park?” Fanny asked incredulously.

“Philips and I were aware Gardiner purchased it some five years ago, but we had both been sworn to secrecy,” Bennet explained.

“Even from your own wife?” Fanny had a look of being betrayed on her mien.

“Your brother and sister did not want their business spread far and wide to everyone in the area.”

At first, Fanny wanted to object and then she thought of how she used to be. Had she been aware Edward owned the property, she *would* have joined Hattie in boasting of it to the whole of the neighbourhood. The truth was she used to live for gossip, something in which her sister still revelled.

Hattie Phillips could not understand why her younger sister no longer seemed interested in gossip.

Rather than be upset or angry, Fanny felt chagrined as she admitted her younger brother had a point in not sharing the information with his sisters. If he had wanted to keep his name from being known as the owner of the estate, he had no choice.

Fanny had not only ceased gossiping, but also no longer boasted about anything to her friends. She had to admit since she had stopped doing so, her interactions with them were much more pleasant. The only problem was Hattie still lived for gossip. She knew not how to curb her older sister’s penchant for tittle-tattle. In addition, was it even her place? Was it not up to Hattie’s husband? It was—if he ever chose to do something about it.

“When he moved his family to Portman Square, I suspected he was doing well, but not to this extent,” Fanny shared.

“Gardiner begged me to invest your portion with him when we first were married, and to add to it each year,”

Bennet admitted to his wife. "I could not trouble myself. However, ten years ago, I moved your five thousand pounds to Gardiner so he would cease importuning me about it. If only I had done so when we married and then added to it each year as he suggested."

"I assume Edward has increased the value of my dowry?"

"He has. Today it is worth over eleven thousand pounds," Bennet revealed. "Other than your quarterly allowance, the rest of the dividends have been reinvested to help the principal grow. If I were to pass today, you would have an annual income above one thousand pounds."

"So even without Mary marrying William, we would have been secure?" Fanny guessed.

"You have the right of it. But Fanny, I must admit one of my greatest financial failures to you. If I had given your dowry to Gardiner when we married almost four and twenty years ago and even added a small amount like five hundred pounds per annum, there would be over eighty thousand pounds available today. I am so ashamed. Our girls would have had dowries above ten thousand each—before receiving their share of your dowry when you pass—and you would have had the rest as long as you lived."

"What have I heard Lizzy say about the past and our inability to change it?"

"You mean: Think only of the past as that remembrance gives you pleasure?"

"Yes, that is what she says. What is done is done. We both made many errors, but at least we have admitted that and are now able to move forward without repeating our past mistakes," Fanny stated.

'And I used to think her devoid of good sense,' Bennet berated himself silently. *'How much better our lives would have been had I woken up years earlier!'*

"What you say has much merit to it and we will proceed thusly." Bennet pulled his wife into a hug and kissed

her gently on the lips causing her to blush like the Frances Gardiner of seventeen.



“William, do you think Mr. Bingley would think it an imposition if Tiff accompanies us to Hertfordshire?” Georgiana asked hopefully the evening before the departure.

She had returned to live at Darcy House the evening of Miss Bingley’s comeuppance in anticipation of accompanying her brother to Netherfield Park. Tiffany was as curious to meet these wonderous Bennet sisters as Giana was, hence, the request.

“No, he would not,” Bingley replied as he entered the music room. He had just arrived to see Darcy to confirm the travel arrangements for the morrow.

“Bingley, welcome,” Darcy shook his friend’s hand.

“Oh thank you, Mr. Bingley,” Georgiana enthused as she gave a curtsy. “Brother, may I inform Tiff, if Thompson accompanies me across the square?”

“You may. Wrap yourself well, it is cold out,” Darcy agreed.

“Are we agreed you will meet us at Curzon Street at nine on the morrow given my house is closer to the road leading to Hertfordshire?” Bingley verified.

“We will be there. It seems I will need at least two coaches with our personal servants as well as the two companions,” Darcy estimated.

After going over a few more details Bingley turned to take his leave, but stopped himself. “I hope you will succeed in wooing Miss Elizabeth; I think I will enjoy being your brother.”

“As would I being yours my friend, as would I,” Darcy responded.

Not long after Bingley took his leave an excited Giana returned to inform her brother that with her parents’ blessing, Tiffany would join them on the morrow.

Chapter 30

It was three coaches rumbling through Meryton on the way to Netherfield Park around one on Wednesday afternoon. The residents were used to seeing one fancy carriage, but not two followed by a third which was not much less fancy than the two lead conveyances. There were three horses of quality being led by some of the outriders, of whom there were ten.

Those on the main street of the market town watched as the convoy of coaches turned onto the road which led to Netherfield Park. That confirmed what the denizens had heard about the estate not being abandoned by Mr. Bingley and the house having been reopened.

The more charitable matrons were pleased for Miss Bennet that her young man had returned. A second, much smaller group, less caring about the feelings of others, hoped what they had heard was not true, thus leaving the field open for their own daughters.

What Darcy could not yet know was thanks to his buying all of Wickham's debts of honour the miscreant owed to his fellow officers, his reputation had been rehabilitated in the area to those who had still thought him a proud, disagreeable man. To Darcy, the amount his cousin had pledged in his name was a pittance in the scheme of things; to those who would be made whole, it was very substantial.

The arriving residents were met by the Nicholsons, and even the normally stoic butler had a half smile on his face in welcome for Mr. Bingley's return.

They and a small core of servants were not affected by the former mistress's decision to close the house, but those who had expected employment for at least a year had been, and the Nicholsons had felt for them. Within a day or two of the order being issued, it had been rescinded and the best news of all was Miss Bingley would no longer be the mistress. It had been with great pleasure the Nicholsons had informed all those who Miss Bingley had unceremoniously sacked that they were employed as before, for at least the remainder of the one-year

lease term. The fact the master would pay them as if they had not missed any time off work only cemented their opinions that Mr. Bingley was one of the best masters.

Louisa Hurst led Lady Tiffany and Miss Darcy to their suites with a shared sitting room between their bedchambers. Their suite was across the hall from the one Richard and William were in. The two companions were placed in bedchambers located either side of her respective charge's.

Within an hour, everyone had washed and changed, and all met in the main drawing room on the first floor. "My coach is ready, I am to Longbourn. Would anyone care to accompany me?" Bingley informed those in the drawing room.

"Charles, you should go on your own," Mrs. Hurst opined. "When you are there you should request permission for all of us to call on the morrow to offer our congratulations in person. I think it may be too much for all of us to descend on the Bennets without prior warning, notwithstanding Mrs. Bennet's reputation as a stellar hostess."

"You know what, Lulu, you have the right of it," Bingley agreed. He turned on his heel to gather his outerwear before boarding his conveyance.

Mrs. Hurst glowed with pleasure. It had been some years since her brother had used that term of endearment which he once used all the time.



"He is come, Janey," Kitty stated. She had been sitting and working on her sampler with the rest of her sisters, mother, and Mrs. Buxton when she heard a noise in the drive.

Her mother had requested her second to youngest daughter, who was closest to the window which fronted the drive, to give an unobtrusive look to see who was arriving at their home.

"By *he*, I assume you mean my fiancé," Jane verified trying not to sound too enthusiastic but failing spectacularly.

"Yes, it is Mr. Bingley," Kitty confirmed.

One look from the companion had Kitty seated and working with her needle and thread again.

That was how Bingley found the ladies. Mrs. Bennet watching her brood with a loving look, the five Miss Bennets working on their samplers and the companion watching her two charges like a mother hen.

“Mrs. Bennet, ladies,” Bingley greeted all and bowed, his eyes never leaving his fiancée for an instant.

“Your business is completed, I assume,” Fanny stated. She made no illusion to Miss Bingley and her disgusting assertions.

“Yes, Mrs. Bennet, it is. How very good to see all of you looking so well,” Bingley responded. No one in the room was under any illusion to whom the remark was truly directed. “Are the two Mr. Bennets in the study?”

“They are,” Fanny averred, “My Mr. Bennet is educating Mary’s William on the running of the estate.”

“Before I go to greet them, I wonder if it would be an imposition to bring a large party with me when I call on the morrow?” Bingley requested. He then clarified. “The Hursts are with me as is my friend Darcy. In addition, Darcy’s cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lady Tiffany Fitzwilliam as well as Miss Darcy are with us and all would like to come convey their wishes of happiness to Miss Bennet.”

“Of course, Mr. Bingley, any of your friends will always be welcome here,” Fanny replied.

Bingley bowed to the matron again and turned to take himself to the study to pay his respects to Mr. Bennet and his soon-to-be brother-in-law, the other Mr. Bennet.

Elizabeth sat; her hand raised in mid-air. When she had heard Mr. Darcy had departed with the harpy and the Hursts she had never thought to see him ever again. Now, not only would he be in her home, but his sister and two cousins as well. She was sure it meant nothing for her, but nevertheless felt a level of excitement.

She finally admitted to herself she had never been indifferent to the man. At first, she had allowed her prejudices to influence her thoughts of him, but then he had apologised to her.

The apology had changed everything, washing her prejudices away and allowing her to see Mr. Darcy more clearly. Since then, she had protected her heart. First, she had latched onto the idea he was engaged, and then when that had been disproved, she had convinced herself he would never align himself with the daughter of a minor country squire.

Even though he did not say anything overt, considering the hauteur and pride of his actions that first night at the assembly, Elizabeth was sure the man had enough filial pride and pride of position to not allow himself to court one so far below his station in society.

It would be interesting to meet his sister. She knew the tale Mr. Wickham had told her was full of lies, but she was curious to see just how far from that convict's description the truth of the matter was.

Jane's fiancé had mentioned a Colonel and Lady Tiffany Fitzwilliam. Were they husband and wife, cousins, or brother and sister? Her question would be answered soon enough in the morning.



“Welcome back, Mr. Bingley,” Bennet stated when bows had been completed. He was glad to see Mary had convinced her fiancé he no longer needed to bow as if the King was in the room. “I am pleased to know the *problem* has been dealt with and will not be a thorn in Jane's side.”

“The *problem* is well on her way to Scarborough. To ensure she did not get it in her mind to bolt, I placed adequate guards with her. In addition, the money and her jewels are being held by one of the outriders so she will have no means to try to make her way back here. As an extra level of security, they will be given over to my Aunt in Scarborough,” Bingley shared.

“Have you and Jane discussed a date for your nuptials yet?” Bennet enquired.

“We have not,” Bingley averred. “It is my intention to have that discussion today.”

“Will you attend my wedding to my Mary tomorrow a sennight?” William Bennet asked keenly.

“My party and I will be happy to attend if we are welcome,” Bingley responded.

“Is my patroness’s nephew present?” William Bennet queried hopefully.

“Yes, in fact, two nephews and two nieces,” Bingley shared. He elucidated as he received questioning looks from both men. “Miss Darcy has accompanied her brother as has Colonel Fitzwilliam and his younger sister, Lady Tiffany. The latter two are the two youngest children of the Earl and Countess of Matlock.”

William Bennet looked as if he was going to faint from excitement. “An earl’s son and daughter! Lady Catherine’s nephews and nieces! I will go distracted. I must pay them every arrear of civility.”

“Unless you want them to feel uncomfortable, I would not pay them too much attention,” Bingley advised. “Please excuse me, I will return to the drawing room.”

Bennet made his way from behind his desk and escorted Bingley to the door. “Speak to Mary,” he stated so only Bingley could hear. “She knows what to say to curb the worst excesses of her betrothed.”



On his return to the drawing room and before he took a seat next to Jane, Bingley spoke with Miss Mary as her father had advised. She nodded freeing him to join Jane.

“It is so very good to see you in person again Jane,” Bingley told his fiancée.

“As good as it is to be seen by you,” Jane stated daringly.

Bingley felt the heat rise under his collar. How he loved this woman. The sooner they wed, the better.

“Are you open to discussing a date for our wedding?” he questioned.

“Nothing would please me more,” Jane assured her fiancé.

After retrieving a calendar from Bennet’s desk, the two were soon sitting in the small parlour with the door fully open. They both poured over it, and if they may have sat a little closer than propriety strictly dictated, neither moved.

“What say you to the fifteenth day of January? A Tuesday,” Jane suggested. “It is almost ten days from Twelfth Night and more than a month from the day we became engaged.”

“And that will become known publicly as I listed the date of the ball as the date we became engaged. No one will be able to claim it is a patched-up affair,” Bingley informed his lady love.

“In that case let us inform my parents,” Jane said.

Neither Bennet parent raised an objection, so the date was set. The banns would begin being called on Sunday upcoming. A note was sent to Hattie Phillips and Sarah Lucas announcing the engagement, thereby ensuring the rest of their neighbours would be aware within the hour. Once Lady Lucas informed her husband, it would only make the news travel that much faster.

By dinner that evening, any of the mothers who had hoped Mr. Bingley had thrown over Jane Bennet and was once more available had had their paper thin hopes crushed.



As seven was a little too many people even for the luxurious Darcy travelling coach, especially when four of the number were rather large men, two conveyances pulled into the drive at Longbourn the following morning.

The Darcys and Fitzwilliams were in the lead equipage while Bingley and the Hursts rode in the second carriage.

As the guests were expected, there had been no need for Fanny to enlist one of her daughters to peer out of the window when the sounds of arriving vehicles were heard.

Once everyone had alighted, or in the case of the three ladies, handed out, the seven arriving callers made for the front door which Hill was holding open for them. Both of Longbourn's footmen were on hand to assist the guests with their outerwear.

With all the cards in hand, Hill led the group to the drawing room and announced them to the waiting Bennets.

Mary saw her fiancé was about to begin his effusions about the honour of being in the company of four of Lady Catherine's family when she placed her hand on his upper arm. That simple action broke through the haze of his wonder. Hence, William Bennet retained his seat and said nothing after he had greeted them calmly.

The relationship between the two Fitzwilliams was cleared up for Elizabeth when Lady Tiffany was introduced as the Colonel's younger sister. The Colonel was a little shorter than his handsome cousin and not as good-looking. He had sandy blond hair and piercing blue eyes. He was not at all bad looking, just not on par with his taller cousin.

Lady Tiffany had auburn hair and the same blue eyes. Miss Darcy had golden blond hair with very similar eyes to her brother, both in colour and shape.

"Miss Bennet and all the Bennets, I want to apologise for my less than stellar behaviour when you first met me. Miss Bennet, allow me to wish you happy with my brother and welcome you to the family," Mrs. Hurst stated sincerely.

"First, let me say since we will be sisters, please call me Jane," Jane began to reply.

"As long as you address me as Louisa," Mrs. Hurst reciprocated. "I think the two of you will be very happy together...Jane."

“I would like to add my best wishes for a felicitous future,” Darcy intoned.

He did not miss the way Miss Elizabeth was looking at him as if she was trying to solve a puzzle. He hoped he would have a chance to speak to her as he intended to admit his almost mistake to her and explain how he was able to correct his course before he made it.

Bingley sat down and handed his fiancée a copy of the *Times of London* which had been delivered that morning. He pointed out the engagement announcement which pleased Jane greatly. She handed the paper opened to the relevant page to her parents. Bennet had the paper in his study but had not had a chance to read it yet. Anyone who had not heard the news disseminated via the ‘gossip-three’ in Meryton, would know as more and more of the locals began to read their daily edition of the London papers.

Tiffany and Giana sat themselves on either side of Elizabeth. The older cousin began the conversation, and it took Elizabeth no time at all to determine Miss Darcy was the exact opposite of how the dastard had characterised her. If anything, she was a little shy, but she was not proud and did not think herself above her company.

She was not aware why the two younger girls were so keen to know her, but Elizabeth had no resistance to becoming better acquainted with them so she soon found herself in a lively debate with the two intelligent young ladies.

Soon enough Elizabeth stood to join Jane with the serving of tea. She was replaced by Kitty and Lydia who seemed keen to speak to the cousins. Mary soon joined them. She and Miss Darcy spoke of music while Lady Tiffany and the two youngest Bennets spoke of art, specifically drawing and painting.

As she walked to where the tea service had been left, she felt Mr. Darcy’s eyes following her. Her theory he was looking at her to find fault had long been discarded, but she knew not what the looks actually portended.

Elizabeth happened to look towards where the Colonel was sitting, and she was able to see his eyes crinkled in a smile. His amusement seemed to be the behaviour of his cousin who was still watching her intently. She decided it was time to make a sketch of Mr. Darcy's character again.

The party from Netherfield Park remained for an hour. Before their departure, Mrs. Hurst extended an invitation for the Bennets to call on the morrow so Jane could have a tour of the house from the perspective of the future mistress.

Any Bennets who did not join them earlier in the day were invited to join the rest for a family dinner.

Chapter 31

“Are you just going to stare at Miss Elizabeth when you are in her company or will you actually talk to her and state your intentions?” Richard enquired after returning to Netherfield Park.

The men were sitting around the dining room table enjoying their drinks after the meal. From the strains of music permeating the air, they could tell that one of the ladies had begun to play the pianoforte.

“It has not escaped me I need to speak to her, but what if she is not interested in getting to know the true me?” Darcy responded.

“Then William, it is not meant to be.” Richard held up his hand to stem the protest forming on his cousin’s lips. “You have a choice: either speak and know one way or the other or torture yourself with not knowing.” Richard paused to allow his words to sink into his cousin’s consciousness. “I must tell you though, from what I observed the lady is not indifferent to you.”

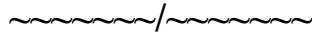
Darcy looked at Hurst. “I agree with Fitzwilliam. She was looking at you almost as much as you looked at her,” Hurst opined.

With no Caroline Bingley to drive him to hide in the bottle and from the company, Hurst was alert and observant of what was occurring around him.

“Do not look at me, I was too busy speaking to Jane,” Bingley raised his snifter in salute. “Fitzwilliam does have the right of it. If I had not plucked up the courage and talked to her, I would not be engaged to the best woman in the world.”

He sipped his libation slowly as he cogitated. What the others were saying was correct, the only way he would know was to risk his heart and let the alluring Miss Elizabeth know how he felt. The three eldest Bennet sisters would be arriving on the morrow in the morning and Darcy resolved to find a

time he would be able to have a few moments with Miss Elizabeth.



Elizabeth was feeling confused and conflicted. Why did she allow Mr. Darcy to affect her so? The truth was, she had felt an instant attraction to the man when she first saw him enter the assembly hall. Because of her immediate infatuation with the handsome man from Derbyshire, Elizabeth had never admitted openly—or even to herself—how much his slight had wounded her fledgling hopes and her vanity. Her prejudice had been excited and directed at Mr. Darcy as a means of protecting her bruised heart.

All of that changed at Netherfield Park.

Her petticoats and walking dress had been, as the Bingley sisters had pointed out as much and as often as they could, at least six inches deep in mud. Mr. Darcy had not looked down on her for that at all. In fact, on her way up the stairs, she had heard first Mr. Bingley and then Mr. Darcy defend her actions as sisterly affection.

She had not understood his actions while she had been resident at Netherfield Park—one minute gallant and solicitous, and the next standoffish and haughty. His behaviour had helped Elizabeth guard her heart as she told herself a man of his social and economic standing would not look to align himself with her. At the same time, she had considered the fact he was a gentleman farmer like her father, so in that they were equal.

Luckily, before her heart had led her on a merry dance, her future brother-in-law had mentioned the supposed engagement between Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh.

It had become her shield over her heart as she tamped down any romantic inclinations for the extremely handsome, intelligent, and well-built man. That shield had been shattered at the ball when he had informed her of the error of her cousin's assertion.

She had fallen back on her mantra of him considering her too far below him in order to once again protect herself from the inevitable heartbreak she would suffer if she followed where her heart desired to lead her.

Jane had informed her of her wonderful news the night they returned home and as happy as she was for her dearest sister, Elizabeth felt trepidation in the inevitable. She would be in Mr. Darcy's company often, and she was sure she would not be able to stop her heart from going where it wanted to go. It had been a relief to Elizabeth when Mr. Darcy departed the day after the ball as it would be far easier for her not to be constantly reminded of what she could not have.

Now, not only had he returned with Jane's fiancé, but he had brought his sister and cousins with him. It had seemed to Elizabeth earlier when the visitors from Netherfield Park were present that Mr. Darcy had been encouraging a closeness between her and his sister.

She knew not what he meant by that—more likely she did not want herself to believe what it could mean—and then there were the looks. The looks which, once she finally acknowledged Jane and Charlotte's correctitude that they were in fact conveying an interest in her—and not to find fault as she had told herself once—sent a frisson of pleasure shooting up her spine and made her feel warm all over.

Elizabeth was sure he was too honourable to trifle with her—or any woman's—emotions but in a final, desperate attempt to guard her heart she convinced herself that until, or unless, he spoke on the subject, she was misinterpreting things.

Lying in her bed, next to a slumbering Jane, sleep did not come easily to Elizabeth as these thoughts swirled around in her head. Just before she finally allowed Morpheus to wrap his arms around her, she decided she would take an early morning ramble to Oakham Mount, weather permitting of course. It was, after all, a sure way to clear her mind.



Darcy allowed Zeus his head in the cold morning air. Both horse and rider's breaths were visible as they exhaled with the exercise they were sharing. After a good gallop, he pulled back on the reins and allowed his stallion to start the process of cooling down. Much steam was rising from Zeus's flanks and neck.

He pointed his horse toward the hill which the locals called a mount—a misnomer in his opinion—at a canter. About three-quarters of the way there, he slowed his steed to a walk.

Horse and rider arrived at the base of the hill and Darcy had his horse trot around the foot of the hill until he found the path which led up to the top. Knowing Zeus would never run off once he dismounted, Darcy allowed the reins to fall loose so his stallion would be able to find some grass on which to munch.

About halfway up the path, Darcy heard the sweet sounds of someone singing—a lady for sure. It took another note or two for him to identify the singer by her voice. It was Miss Elizabeth.

When they had been at Lucas Lodge early in their acquaintance, he had heard her sing and been enraptured by her voice. Then Miss Bingley had interrupted him with her nonsense. He could not remember ever taking more pleasure from hearing another sing, not even the professionals at the opera.

Unsure how to proceed, Darcy froze where he stood on the path, still a little below the summit of the hill. At first, he decided she would not want her solitude disturbed and hence he turned to make his way back down the path. But then he heard Richard's voice and the conversation they had the previous evening.

He stopped his descent and turned around. *'You are being a coward. If she is not interested in getting to know you better in a courtship, it will not change the answer whether it be now or later. You have never turned tail and run from situations before; you will not begin today!'* Darcy berated

himself silently as he began to walk towards the top once again.



Elizabeth had arrived at Oakham Mount with as many, if not more, questions running through her head as she had the previous night when she had battled to fall asleep. Her ramble—almost a run at the punishing pace she had maintained—had done nothing to clear her head.

On reaching the mount, she had made her way to the summit and had taken a seat on a rock facing the east. It was a cold morning, nothing surprising given the fact it was winter. However, it was a relatively clear day so she waited for the sun to peek over the horizon.

The clouds were already displaying reds, golds, and silvers announcing the imminent rising of the sun. When the rays finally broke above the horizon, they were considerably weaker than at other times of the year, which was also expected.

The sun and its lightly warming rays inspired Elizabeth to break into spontaneous song. On completion, she heard a most unexpected sound—applause.

She stood and whirled around facing the path and there, in all his handsome glory, stood the object of all her confusion. Elizabeth was not sure whether or not to express anger at his interrupting her solitude, so she kept her tongue under control, acknowledging the fact to herself that he had as much right to be here as she.

“Miss Elizabeth, please pardon my interruption of your solitude,” Darcy gave a half bow.

“You did in fact intrude on my reverie,” Elizabeth began, “however, that does not mean your company is unwelcome.”

At first, she saw a look of contrition on Mr. Darcy’s handsome countenance. The transformation of his face from apologetic to radiating more light than the rising sun was instantaneous as he heard and processed her words. Mr. Darcy

was wearing the widest of smiles revealing two dimples she had never seen on his face before.

‘*Oh my,*’ Elizabeth thought. ‘*Dimples! If I thought him handsome before, that is nothing to how he is when he smiles.*’ At that instant, she knew she would like to be the one who caused him to smile more often.

“If you are not in a hurry and are willing to spend some minutes with me, I would like to say some things,” Darcy requested, “however, I do not want to endanger your reputation, so if you prefer, I will leave you to yourself.”

“We are out in the open, not trying to hide away to have a secret assignation so I believe my reputation is safe in your hands,” Elizabeth averred.

Darcy approached deliberately and once Miss Elizabeth seated herself on one end of the boulder, he sat on the opposite side to her.

“There is something I want to ask, but before I do, I want to make an admission which may affect your answer.” Elizabeth nodded her permission for him to proceed.

“I am sure you remember I joined Miss Bingley and the Hursts in returning to London after the ball, do you not?”

“I do, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth responded with some confusion not knowing what he was getting at.

“You already know Miss Bingley’s letter to your sister was full of fiction, none of which was supported by anyone, least of all me. In fact, her hubris in using my sister’s name in her prevarication was the last straw which caused me to break with her on a permanent basis. What you may not know is she told Mrs. Hurst and me that Bingley had agreed she could permanently close the house and for us to follow him to London—also false.”

Elizabeth did not know all of the details, but it fit with what she had guessed. “Please carry on, I am not sure what it is you wanted to tell me yet.”

“Before we departed, Miss Bingley enlisted my aid in convincing Bingley not to return to Hertfordshire, and to my

shame I agreed with her.” Darcy did not miss the look of anger which crossed Miss Elizabeth’s face. He decided it was now or never so he forged ahead. “After Sir William spoke of the expectations at the ball, I looked at your sister closely and *convinced* myself she felt no affection for my friend.”

“Why would you have to convince yourself of something obviously not true?” Elizabeth demanded.

“Because of my feelings for you.”

Elizabeth was thrown, he had given the very last reason she had expected to hear. “Please explain.”

“Even at the assembly after my vile words, I immediately saw I was wrong and found you so much more than handsome enough to tempt me. By the time you arrived at Netherfield Park to care for Miss Bennet with your incredibly fine eyes glowing from the exercise, I knew I was in love with you.”

Again Elizabeth was at sixes and sevens. Had she heard correctly, did Mr. Darcy just state he was in love with her? She used her hand to signal him to continue. She did not trust herself to speak yet.

“I now freely admit it was improper pride which caused an epic battle between my heart and my head. I, a gentleman farmer, thought myself above you, when if anything, you Miss Elizabeth are superior to me in every way which is important. Yes, I have wealth and connections, but I digress. Knowing Bingley and Miss Bennet marrying would throw me in your company far too often to resist my love for you, I agreed to assist Miss Bingley for purely selfish reasons.”

“Something must have changed. You seemed very supportive yesterday unless you were disguising your true feelings about the engagement.”

“Disguise of any sort is an abhorrence to me. The truth is I had a change of heart when I returned to Darcy House. I admitted I was deluding myself that Miss Bennet did not have a tender regard for Bingley. I knew then I could not, and

would not, try to sway my friend. Of course, I had no knowledge he was already betrothed to your excellent sister. At the same time, I decided I was the world's biggest fool not to pursue the woman I love for prideful and nonsensical reasons. There was but one thing I had to do before I would allow myself that pleasure."

"W-what was that?"

"One of the things I had used to convince myself was if I married a lady with no fortune or connections, my sister's marital prospects would be harmed. I discounted that when I had my revelations but I could not be so selfish as to proceed without conferring with Giana. I did, and she told me what a fool I had been to leave you without declaring myself and echoed my opinion that any man who would eschew her as his wife because of who I married was not worth her time.

"The Monday we met at Bingley's house, I admitted all to him after I had refused to support the harridan, and I mentioned my reaction when Bingley handed me the vile letter."

That he had pushed his own desires to the side to canvas his younger sister's opinion did nothing but increase Elizabeth's esteem of Mr. Darcy.

"You were worried I would condemn you for intentions you had, ones which you admitted to yourself were wrong and then did not follow through as you had intended. I would never judge you or any other for what you considered, rather than for your actual actions."

"That is very similar to what Bingley said when I admitted all to him." Darcy revealed his dimples again.

He was most gratified. As he had spoken he saw Miss Elizabeth's features soften. The more he spoke the more pleased she looked.

"What was the question you wanted to ask me if I did not send you on your way after your disclosures?" Elizabeth asked with an arched eyebrow.

“As much as I love you, and I do love you most ardently, I am fully cognisant of the fact I have not always shown my character to advantage around you and your family. What I want more than anything—if you agree that is—is for you to get to know the true me. To that end, Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would you honour me by granting me an official courtship?”

She could not deny the excitement she felt at his request. Her heart screamed for her to accept his courtship without delay, but her rational mind asserted itself first.

“Before I answer your question, I have one or two of my own,” Elizabeth asserted.

“For you, I am an open book.”

“You were correct, we are equal in the strictest sense, but you have noble relatives, do you not?”

“I do, my Uncle, the Colonel’s father is the Earl of Matlock and his eldest son is Viscount Hilledale,” Darcy clarified.

“Do they not want you to find a wife from the *Ton*?”

“The same day I spoke to Giana, I told my aunt and uncle all as well. They were not complimentary about my behaviour and told me I was a simpleton to allow my pride to stop me from seeing if there could be something between us. So, *if* you eventually accept me, they will support us fully.”

“I assume the aunt who spread the story of your supposed engagement to her daughter will not be so sanguine?”

“Lady Catherine would react the same way regardless of who I marry, as long as it was not Anne. The fact neither of us want to marry the other would not factor into her thoughts. My aunt has been out of society closeted at Rosings Park for years so regardless of her own opinions, she has no influence in society and certainly not any over me and my choices,” Darcy explained.

Elizabeth sat silently for a few moments. “In that case Mr. Darcy, as long as my father approves, I will be happy to be

courted by you.”

His first inclination was to pull her into a hug and taste her sweet—as he was sure they were—lips. Darcy restrained himself and bestowed kisses on the tops of both of Miss Elizabeth’s gloved hands. He turned each over and repeated his action on the pulse of each wrist, where his lips contacted her skin.

There was a hitch of Elizabeth’s breath as she felt his lips on her skin. She could feel goosebumps rise on her arms as her heartrate increased with the pleasure of the contact.

“May Zeus and I escort you back to Longbourn? If you approve, I need to speak to your father.”

“Zeus?” was all Elizabeth managed as she fought to regulate her breathing and heart.

“My stallion. He is a gentleman and will follow us to your home,” Darcy related.

With a nod of permission from Miss Elizabeth, Darcy stood and offered her his hand to assist her to stand. She gladly accepted it and with her hand resting on his forearm, they began the walk down the path.

Chapter 32

Bennet was in his study going over his ledgers and examining information on new farming methods with a view to increasing Longbourn's income and finally beginning to save like Gardiner had begged of him since the day he had married Fanny.

There was a knock on his study door. Based on the time of the morning he was sure there was only one who would be at the door. "Come Lizzy," he called out.

The door opened and it was in fact Lizzy, but she was not alone. Darcy followed her into the study. The two came and stood in front of his broad oak desk. Bennet sat back, placed his spectacles on the open ledger, and raised his eyebrows in question.

"Mr. Darcy has something to ask you Papa, and I am here so you will know this is no joke," Elizabeth stated.

Although he had suspected Darcy held his second daughter in tender regard, Bennet had not thought he would come asking for Lizzy's hand so soon. He had hoped to have her with him for a little longer especially with first Mary and then Jane marrying soon and leaving Longbourn. There was no advantage in procrastinating.

Bennet extended his hand, palm up. "Go ahead, I will hear what Darcy has to ask of me."

"You are too intelligent not to have noted my regard for Miss Elizabeth," Darcy began.

"Smart man, start out complimenting my intelligence," Bennet remarked sardonically.

"This morning, I met Miss Elizabeth while on her walk and after revealing some things which may have deterred her from granting my request, she allowed me to ask for, and then granted me a formal courtship, with your permission, and hopefully blessing, of course."

"What did you confess?" Bennet asked evenly.

As concisely as he was able, Darcy told Bennet all from the decision to abandon Netherfield Park to his return with Bingley to the neighbourhood. He was perfectly candid and did not gloss over anything which could show him in a negative light if the listener chose to see him that way.

“Lizzy had the right of it when she stated you corrected your course before taking any actions to hurt Jane and my family, even though you now know it was already too late to turn Bingley from his fiancée,” Bennet stated after a few minutes to chew on everything Darcy had told.

“It would be a terrible world to live in if we were all condemned for our thoughts and not our actions,” Elizabeth added.

“As such and seeing my daughter has not refuted your assertion she granted your request, I see no reason to deny your application. You have my permission and blessing to court my second daughter,” Bennet granted.

“Thank you, Bennet,” Darcy gave a half bow to the man he hoped would be his father-in-law one day in the not too distant future.

“And I add my gratitude Papa,” Elizabeth beamed happily.

She realised how fortunate the apology for the slight at the assembly had been. Without it she would have abused Mr. Darcy to her family giving them the impression she hated the very sight of him and she may have ignored her own logic when listening to *that* man’s lies.

“Away with you now. Allow me to return to my work...wait a minute if you please. Darcy, do you employ crop rotation at your estates?” Bennet enquired.

“For a few years now,” Darcy averred.

“If you have the time, please remain so we may talk,” Bennet requested.

Even had he wanted to, after Bennet just permitting the courtship to Elizabeth, there was nothing the man could have

asked for which he would have refused. The added benefit would be the gaining of a deeper friendship with Bennet.

“I will leave you two to it,” Elizabeth stated pertly as she exited the study.

“You will join us to break our fasts.” It was a statement from Bennet not a request. “I will announce the courtship then. If my wife has happy effusions, you will be there to share them.”

“I am at your disposal,” Darcy responded.

Jesting was put aside as the two men began to go over the finer points of crop rotation.



“Jane, Jane! I think I understand how you felt the day Mr. Bingley asked you for your hand,” Elizabeth sighed dreamily as she twirled around in their shared bedchamber.

“Lizzy, did Mr. Darcy propose marriage to you?” Jane exclaimed excitedly.

“Not yet, but he requested and I granted a courtship. He loves me, Jane! He loves me!”

“And why would he not? You two match each other as well as Charles and I do. And you said you could never have the same happiness as me.”

“In my defence, when I said that, I believed it. But now everything has changed.”

“Lizzy, do you love Mr. Darcy?”

“No...I do not believe so. It is why he suggested the courtship so I can see if my feelings grow to match his own as I come to know him better.” Elizabeth paused. “Has your Charles told you all about London yet?”

“He told me we would find time to discuss everything when we visit Netherfield Park today. Charles did share about Carol...Miss Bingley being banished from his household so she will never interfere in our lives again.”

“In that case, I will wait until you speak to your fiancé. If you have any questions or want to discuss anything with me after, I will be here for you.”

“There is one disadvantage to your not being engaged yet,” Jane stated as she changed the subject slightly.

“What is that Sister dearest?”

“Have you forgot our girlhood dream of marrying our grooms in the same ceremony?”

“Oh, I did not recall that, but now you mention it I do,” Elizabeth owned. “I am sure Mr. Darcy intends to give me sufficient time to know my own mind, so I am positive if he proposes, it will not be with enough time for us to marry together.”

“Talking of weddings, did you hear Charlotte and her Colonel are to marry the day after Mary?”

“I must admit I have not been as good a friend to Charlotte of late and did not know. I will make sure to spend time with her at Lucas Lodge on the morrow.” Elizabeth got a dreamy look on her countenance again. “Mr. Darcy is assisting Papa in the study; I assume he will join us when we go to break our fasts.”

“My suggestion is you share your news with Mama now, so she is not taken unawares when Papa makes the inevitable announcement.”

“You have the right of it, Janey. Even with all the changes they have made, Papa still enjoys his jokes. At least they are no longer at anyone else’s expense.”

Elizabeth made her way to her mother’s chamber. She could hear her mother’s maid asking her mistress for her preferences for the day so she knew her mother was awake. She knocked on the door.

“Good morning Lizzy. Did you need something?” Fanny enquired after Elizabeth entered the room.

“No Mama, I do not. There is something I wanted to share with you,” Elizabeth enthused.

Fanny could tell her second daughter was excited about something. “Well, do not keep me waiting, Child, what is it?”

“Mr. Darcy is courting me,” Elizabeth related succinctly.

“The same man who insulted you?” Fanny asked incredulously. “I know, I know, he did apologise. Oh my, you said a courtship not an engagement?”

“Correct, Mama,” Elizabeth confirmed. “And Papa has bestowed his permission. Mr. Darcy is with him in the study as we speak, and I suspect he will join us for the morning meal when I would wager Papa will make the announcement.”

She was about to make comments on Mr. Darcy’s reputed wealth when Fanny stopped herself. All that mattered was it seemed obvious Lizzy was very happy.

“Telling me yourself is greatly appreciated. Run along now Lizzy and I will see you in the dining parlour.”

Elizabeth kissed her mother on the cheek and then almost skipped her way out of the bedchamber. Fanny could not but smile at the display of Lizzy’s unbridled happiness.



Bennet knew better than most how much his wife had changed, but he could not understand how she managed to sit perfectly calmly through his sharing the news of Lizzy’s courtship.

He was puzzling out why Fanny had not reacted with surprise when he noticed the smirk on Lizzy’s face. He had been outplayed; his daughter had obviously told her mother.

Everyone congratulated Lizzy and Darcy, the most effusive of which were given by William Bennet. Had he not been assured there never was an understanding between Mr. Darcy and Miss de Bourgh before, this would have convinced him.

Mary watched her fiancé with both pride and pleasure. Not one mention of the ubiquitous Lady Catherine de Bourgh. She thought about how over the last weeks she had slowly but

surely pointed out how unseemly it was for a man of the cloth to be seen as worshipping a mortal person almost like a deity.

She had helped William see respect was one thing, but blind obedience and flouting some of the rules of the church at the same time was not something which would endear him to his parishioners, and more importantly to the hierarchy of the church. When he had asked for clarification, Mary had shown him a book of rules for clergymen which forbade the sharing of information parishioners told in confidence and also that non-clergy were not allowed to have approval of, or input into, the lessons delivered from the pulpit.

As soon as William Bennet had accepted the fallibility of his patroness and read the rule about livings being for life, he began to see the error of his former ways which had led to the cessation of praise for Lady Catherine.

It had been very comforting to him when he accepted all the threats Lady Catherine made about removing him from his living, if he did not obey her in all things, was so much stuff and nonsense. He daily thanked the goodness of God that He had seen fit to send him a future wife as intelligent as his Mary.

Mary could not but smile as she returned to the present. Her fiancé was still the same in essentials and still somewhat sycophantic, as evidenced by his effusions to Mr. Darcy, but she was sure with a bit more time, that too would change.

After the meal, even though he would have preferred it was only Miss Elizabeth to see him off in the drive, all the family was present to wave to Darcy as he rode up the drive on Zeus who had had a nice long rest and some pampering in the Bennet stables.



Louisa Hurst stood next to her brother to welcome the Bennets who arrived at Netherfield Park. The three eldest sisters were the occupants of the Bennet carriage. After the footman handed out Misses Elizabeth and Mary, Bingley took his place and handed his angel out of the conveyance.

“Mary’s fiancé is learning from Papa and our youngest sisters are in their lessons with Mrs. Buxton,” Jane informed her hosts.

“Welcome Jane, Miss Elizabeth, and Miss Mary,” Mrs. Hurst stated sincerely. “Miss Elizabeth please accept my best wishes on the occasion of your courtship with Mr. Darcy.”

Notwithstanding her sad letters from their aunt’s house in Scarborough, Louisa was very glad Caroline was no longer at Netherfield Park. She still loved her sister, but who knew what her reaction would have been if she had been present when Mr. Darcy announced his courtship earlier.

“I appreciate your good wishes, Mrs. Hurst.” Elizabeth inclined her head to the lady. “When your brother marries Jane, we will be sisters of a kind, so would you please call me Elizabeth or Lizzy,” Elizabeth requested.

“And I am Mary,” Mary added.

“Then it is Lizzy and Mary. In that case, please call me Louisa,” Mrs. Hurst responded. Both younger Bennet sisters agreed to do so. There was no denying how much more pleasant life was without Caroline, especially her pretensions and her tantrums.

“At the same time, as we will be brother and sisters in less than a month, please call me Charles,” Bingley offered.

“As long as you use our familiar names, we will be happy to call you by your given name,” Elizabeth replied for herself and Mary.

Bingley proudly led Jane, who was resting her hand on his forearm, into his leased house. Mrs. Hurst, Elizabeth, and Mary followed them. Once the butler and a footman had taken their outerwear, the five made their way to the drawing room where Hurst, Richard, Darcy, Tiffany, and Giana were awaiting them.

Greetings were exchanged. “Miss Elizabeth, I was so very pleased to hear William’s news,” Georgiana gushed.

“And I as well,” Lady Tiffany added.

“Elizabeth or Lizzy please, and that is Mary,” she inclined her head to her next younger sister who nodded her approval.

“In that case, please call me Georgiana or Giana as almost everyone in the family does,” was the invitation in reply.

“And I am Tiffany,” she allowed.

Hurst and the Colonel both expressed their wishes for the happiness of the newly courting couple.

Darcy approached the lady he loved and bowed over her hand. He so wanted to bestow kisses on it, but in company like this he tamped down his desires. One thing he regretted was that, unlike his sister, he had no permission to use Elizabeth’s familiar name yet. As soon as he had the opportunity to speak to her out of the hearing of others, he intended to ask they use Elizabeth and William between them when no one else was about.

Having handed her gloves to the butler, Elizabeth felt a great thrill when Mr. Darcy took her hand and held onto it for somewhat longer than strictly proper but she had no complaint regarding that fact.

As soon as Mrs. Nichols joined them Louisa and Bingley escorted Jane on her tour of the house. While that was occurring, Elizabeth and Mary joined Tiffany and Giana in the music room. It was the first time either Bennet heard Giana play and they were beyond impressed. She had not only technical proficiency but played with great feeling as well. Tiffany played very well also, but her younger cousin was a little better.

When she was roundly complimented—which Giana knew was sincere and not an attempt to reach her brother through her—by Lizzy and Mary, she blushed at the praise. Neither Bennet sister, with Tiffany agreeing with them, would allow her to demure.

A little more than an hour later Jane was returned to the drawing room by Bingley and his older sister. She shared

she had no intention of making any major changes. Unlike the absent Miss Bingley, Jane would not make changes for change's sake, and especially not in a leased home. The only change she would make was to return the bedchamber Miss Bingley had used while in residence to the way it was before it had been made over in a most gaudy and tasteless fashion.

The rest of the Bennets arrived an hour before dinner, and it was a very happy party that shared a pleasant evening together.

When it was time for the Bennets to depart, Bingley had his coach waiting behind the Bennet carriage so his guests would have no need to squeeze into one conveyance.

Chapter 33

An enormous carriage trundled down Longbourn's drive the day before the wedding of Mary to William Bennet.

"That is Lady Catherine's barouche," William Bennet stated as he looked out of the window.

"What is she doing here?" Mary demanded. "Did she not tell you she would not be able to attend our wedding? If she is here for our wedding, she has come a day early."

"I think I may have erred," William Bennet stated contritely. "In my last letter I mentioned how well-matched Cousin Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy are. I was not thinking and forgot about her incorrect assertions regarding an engagement between him and her daughter. I beg all of your pardons for any trouble I may have caused."

"William, you did nothing with malicious intent," Mary pardoned her fiancé as the rest of the family nodded their agreement.

"Hill," Bennet called. The butler entered without delay. "Send a groom to Netherfield Park and have Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam informed their aunt has arrived unwanted and uninvited."

There was a rapping on the front door. "Send the groom on his way and then answer the door," Bennet instructed.

After a few minutes Hill opened the front door. "How dare you keep me waiting," Lady Catherine screeched, "do you know who I am?"

"Unless you give me a card, I know not who you are, Madam," Hill responded respectfully.

"I will not give you a card. I demand you allow me entry to this house without any more delay!" Lady Catherine demanded.

“Hill, is there a fishmonger at the door? Do they not know they should seek entry through the servants’ entrance?” Bennet asked as he arrived at the door. “I have witnessed much better breeding in the peasants who work the fields. Who is this *person* disturbing our peace?”

“I know not master, she has refused to hand me a card or identify herself. She seems to believe I would know who she was without such information,” Hill responded with a deadpan expression.

For the moment, Lady Catherine was frozen without a sound emanating from her mouth. The two men were speaking about her as if she was not present with no respect for her exalted position in the least.

“Please inform us who you are, state your business, or be on your way,” Bennet drawled. He was fighting to keep a straight face as the termagant’s face was pinched in the extreme and changing colour before him. He hoped she would not expire from an apoplexy on his doorstep.

“I am Lady Catherine de Bourgh, daughter of an earl, wife of the late Sir Lewis de Bourgh, and you will stand aside for a peer of the realm and allow me entrance immediately,” Lady Cathrine blustered.

“Admittedly, it has been many years since I was at Cambridge,” Bennet replied sardonically while making a show of considering his words. He was still blocking the doorway with Hill. “Unless they have changed the rules, and I do not believe they have, you are no more a peer than am I. You have a courtesy title due to your father’s rank. Neither that nor being the wife of a knight make you a peer. You my *Lady* are a commoner, same as me.”

“Never have I been thusly insulted in all of my days,” Lady Catherine screeched.

“Quite frankly, I find that hard to believe,” Bennet averred. “You have still not told me why you are here disturbing our peaceful morning.”

“A report of a most alarming nature reached me two days ago. In his latest report he posted to me, my parson wrote your eldest daughter is on the point of being most advantageously married. In addition to him also marrying one of your brood, your daughter Miss Elizabeth Bennet, is being courted by my nephew, my *own* nephew, Mr. Darcy. I am sure my parson was mistaken—hence, it must be a scandalous falsehood. I would not injure my nephew so much as to suppose the truth of it being possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place that I might make my sentiments known to your chit of a daughter.”

Bennet was seething at the insults to Lizzy, but decided to make sport of the ridiculous woman until her nephews arrived. “If you believed it impossible to be true, I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your *Ladyship* propose by it?”

“At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted by Mr. Collins informing me he was in error,” Lady Catherine demanded.

“Your coming to Longbourn, to see my family,” Bennet stated coolly, “will be rather a confirmation of it. Surely our neighbors will assume you are here to congratulate Lizzy on being courted by Mr. Darcy.”

“Let me be rightly understood. This match, to which your daughter has the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No never! Mr. Darcy is engaged to my daughter. Now what have you to say?”

“Are you telling me your nephew Darcy is so dishonourable he would request a courtship from my daughter while engaged to yours?”

A somewhat flummoxed Lady Catherine hesitated for a moment and then spoke again. “The engagement between them is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favourite wish of *his* mother, as well as of hers. While in their cradles, we planned the union, and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished in their marriage, to be

prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family! Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friends? To his tacit engagement with Miss de Bourgh? Are you and your daughter lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy? From his earliest hours he was destined for his cousin!”

“I have heard all about this phantom engagement before. But what is that to me? Especially as your nephew has roundly refuted your claims. We know it all. This supposed engagement was your desire alone. It is known how you suddenly started to speak of this after both Darcy parents had passed on. Even had your late sister agreed—and we both know she never did, its completion depended on others. If Mr. Darcy is neither by honour nor inclination confined to his cousin, why may he not make another choice? And if my second daughter is that choice, why may she not accept him?” Bennet paused. “Are you saying Darcy and your daughter were born at the same time? I believe he told us he is three years her senior.”

Lady Catherine ignored that question as well as what she did not want to hear. “Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Mr. Bennet, interest; for do not expect for your daughter to be noticed by his family or friends if you wilfully allow her to act against the inclinations of all. She will be censured, slighted, and despised, by everyone connected with him. Her alliance will be a disgrace; her name will never even be mentioned by any of us.”

“These are heavy misfortunes,” replied Bennet, “but the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation, that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine.”

“Obstinate, headstrong man! I am ashamed of you! You are to understand, Mr. Bennet, that I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose; nor will I be dissuaded from it. I have not been used to submit to any person’s whims. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment...”

“It will make your situation at present more pitiable, Lady Catherine; but it will have no effect on me or my family.”

“I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence. My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other...”

“**NO WE WERE NOT!**” was yelled from behind Lady Catherine.

Bennet had not noticed the slight, sickly-looking woman standing behind the virago. There also were the sounds of multiple horses’ hooves approaching. Bennet looked up and riding down the drive at speed were both Darcys and both Fitzwilliams.

Lady Catherine had not paid attention to the arrival yet as she turned on her daughter and ordered, “Anne, return to the coach, I will sort this out in my...your favour.”

“**NO YOU WILL NOT!**” Darcy yelled.

“Hello Anne,” Tiffany said as she came to stand next to her older cousin. Giana stood on the other side and also greeted her cousin.

“Tiffany, Georgiana, it has been very long since I have seen you. Richard and William it is good to see you,” Anne de Bourgh greeted her cousins.

“Now that some sensible persons have arrived, should we enter the house and stop the display of ill breeding for all to see?” Bennet suggested.

For the moment Lady Catherine was stymied. She had banked on being able to intimidate the Bennets with threats and if that did not work, she was prepared to bribe them. Not only was Anne speaking out against her, but now she had to contend with her nephews and nieces as well. She *would* carry her point.

Bennet sent his two youngest daughters upstairs in the company of Mrs. Buxton before the virago entered the room. He had requested his wife to remain calm and quiet for now.

As soon as she entered the drawing room, which was far too small and had no elegant furniture like she had placed at Rosings Park, Lady Catherine saw her path forward. Her snivelling parson!

“Unless I hear a promise that Miss Elizabeth will break from my nephew this instant, I will withdraw my permission for Mr. Collins...” Lady Catherine stared open mouthed as the toad dared to interrupt her.

“My name is Mr. William Bennet, not Collins,” he reminded his patroness.

“That is not the material point. In addition I will sack Mr...whatever your name is.” She glared at the clergyman, who had surprisingly not flinched or given her one of his low scraping bows she preferred. “If you are sensible you will inform your cousin I am never gainsaid.”

“Is my aunt father to either you or your fiancée?” Richard enquired. He was trying, but failing to hide the amusement in his voice.

“No, my father passed away these many years,” William Bennet agreed.

“And my father is standing right there,” Mary pointed to her smug looking father.

“That being the case Mother, you have no authority to stop them marrying,” Anne de Bourgh stated.

“I can still sack him!” Lady Catherine screeched.

“Excuse me, Mr. William Bennet, I must have missed something,” Darcy interjected. Like his cousin before him, he was fighting not to smile.

“What is that Darcy?” William Bennet questioned.

“How dare you address my nephew thusly...” Lady Catherine attempted to say but the conversation continued as if she had said nothing.

“Has my aunt been appointed the Bishop of Kent, or mayhap Charles Manners-Sutton, The Most Reverend Willowmere, by Divine Providence Lord Archbishop of

Canterbury has relinquished his position and Lady Catherine has ascended to be head of the Church of England?"

There were not a few coughs as those other than Lady Catherine tried to cover their laughing.

"Not only did this Bennet chit use her arts and allurements on you, but you are addled in the brain, Fitzwilliam. How can you speak such nonsense, I will have to come run Pemb..." Lady Catherine closed her mouth as she saw the faces of both nephews grow red with anger directed at her.

"There is only one here who is delusional. I was making light of the fact you have no power to remove a clergyman from his living, the appointment is for life," Darcy barked. "At last, we hear your true motivation for your lies about Anne and me being engaged. In your mind you thought not only would the marriage take Anne away from *her* estate, but you would get your grubby hands on Pemberley." Darcy turned to Anne. "We need to speak to Uncle Reggie and Aunt Elaine; I think your mother needs to be in an asylum."

As soon as she heard her brother's name, again ignoring that which did not fit her desires, Lady Catherine saw a way to assert her will.

"My brother will never accept that..." Seeing the fury on Darcy's face, Lady Catherine ceased her tirade.

"Insult the woman I love again and so help me I will physically throw you from this house," Darcy growled.

Lady Catherine shrank back. She could see she had pushed too far and Darcy meant every word of what he had just threatened.

"Aunt dear," Tiffany added, "Mama and Papa both know and approved of William's plan to try to win Lizzy's hand. The only one they would disapprove of is you and your horrendous behaviour here today."

"Well said Sister," Richard agreed proudly. "Tiff has the right of it. If Father was here he would have ordered you to Bedlam long ago."

“As you well know, Mother, I am already five and twenty and I am now asserting my ownership rights over my estate, the de Bourgh fortune, and de Bourgh House. You have a choice, the dower house or you will leave my estate with nothing but what remains of your dowry and fend for yourself,” Anne asserted firmly.

The blows kept on coming and Lady Catherine was reeling. If only she had never sent her then snivelling parson to heal the breach and find a wife among his cousins. Before she could unleash the pent up vitriol, she felt a sharp pain in her head, then a flash of light, and then nothing.

“Fanny, take the ladies out of the room please. Hill, have Mr. Jones summoned,” Bennet instructed on seeing the termagant’s eyes roll back and her fall to the floor unmoving.

Fanny and the five younger ladies—Anne de Bourgh had insisted on remaining—exited the drawing room. As they did, Giana leant over so Jane could hear her. “Mr. Bingley wanted to come, but he decided it was a family affair, he will arrive in about an hour.”

Jane squeezed the younger girl’s hand in thanks. She had been wondering where her fiancé was.

Darcy felt for a pulse and then placed his hand over his aunt’s mouth in order to attempt to detect a sign of her breathing. There was none of either. He shook his head.

A few tears rolled down Anne’s cheeks. She had not liked her mother very much, but she was still her mother, or had been. It seemed she had attempted to meddle in someone’s life one time too many.

It was not too much longer before Mr. Jones arrived. He quickly confirmed the fact Lady Catherine de Bourgh was beyond his assistance—or the assistance of any other in the mortal world.

“Was it an apoplexy?” Bennet inquired.

“With the speed it occurred, I do not believe so,” Jones opined.

“When I was training to be a doctor, I read a treatise by Lancisi about something called an aneurysm. My guess is the deceased had one, possibly in her brain, which ruptured,” Jones explained.

“Bennet may I use your study to write to my parents and brother?” Richard requested. Bennet nodded.

“It is cold enough so we will be able to return the body to Rosings Park for burial,” Darcy told Anne once Richard had made his way to the study.

Her first inclination was to say she did not want her mother buried in the family crypt, but Anne knew that was both churlish and vindictive, something her late mother would have done. She was not her mother.

“Will you wait to hear from our aunt and uncle before we move her?” Anne queried.

Darcy turned to the apothecary-doctor. “Mr. Jones, will there have to be an inquest?”

“No, the death was not of a suspicious nature and if I am not mistaken there were many witnesses of unimpeachable character.” Jones saw nods from those in the room. “I will create a certificate of death later today and make my report to Sir William. He will accept my conclusions. Thereafter you are free to remove the corpse.”

Knowing they would be able to move his late aunt on the morrow, Darcy went to inform his cousin of the plans so he would tell his parents to make directly for Kent. They were sure Andrew would not attend as Cilla was due any day, which reminded them, it was only the Earl in London as his wife was at Hildale waiting for her newest grandchild to arrive.



Much to Jane’s relief, Bingley arrived and was apprised of what had occurred. About two hours after Mr. Jones departed Longbourn, the certificate arrived signed by himself and the magistrate.

Plans were made to travel to Rosings Park after the wedding on the morrow. As they were in deep mourning—for

at least a short while—the Darcys and Fitzwilliams would not attend the wedding breakfast.

Chapter 34

While the earthly remains of Lady Catherine de Bourgh, née Fitzwilliam were placed into her barouche, her favourite coach which she believed highlighted her highborn status, Darcy asked to meet with Bennet and Miss Elizabeth in the former's study.

“We will confirm it with our uncle when we meet him at Rosings Park, but Giana and I will not mourn for longer than six weeks,” Darcy reported. “For most of that time, we will either be at Anne's estate helping her learn to manage her birthright or in London. Our intention, as we stated yesterday, is to depart from the church as soon as the wedding ceremony is complete. I would like to know Bennet, if you will permit me to write to Miss Elizabeth through your offices. Any correspondence will be addressed to you so you will be able to make sure there is nothing objectionable before passing the missives onto your daughter.”

“I have no objection to your writing to one another in that fashion,” Bennet granted.

Knowing she would not see the Darcys, especially her suitor, during the deep mourning period did not lessen Elizabeth's disappointment when it became a reality. She stared into the warm, crackling fire hoping neither man would see the maudlin thoughts reflected on her face.

“Tiffany and Giana have agreed to write to Jane, Mary, and me as well,” Elizabeth related.

“They want to get to know your younger sisters better too, but no one could have predicted our time in the neighbourhood being cut short in this fashion.” Darcy was already angry with his aunt for the words she had spewed about his Elizabeth, but now thanks to her untimely death, he would be separated from his dearest, loveliest Elizabeth for some weeks. “If we do not return prior to it, we will most definitely be at Miss Bennet's and Bingley's wedding. By then—if our uncle does not object—we will be out of deep

mourning so we will be able to partake in the celebration after the wedding.”

It was then they heard the Bennet matron calling. It was time to make the walk to the church in the Longbourn village. Thankfully the coffin had been moved out of the house before the bride descended the stairs.



Those who had not seen Mary Bennet lately could not believe their eyes at the pretty picture she made as she was guided up the aisle on her father’s arm.

Mary was wearing a light burgundy gown which complimented her skin tone perfectly. In addition, she wore ivory elbow-length gloves and her hair had been arranged in a most attractive coiffure. She had even agreed to allow the maid to curl some of her normally straight hair. On her head, she wore a bonnet, also in ivory. The pins in her hair were pearl-tipped and matched her mother’s pearls which she had been given to wear on this most special of days.

During their engagement, Mary had not fallen in love. Much to her own surprise, she held her future husband in tender regard. It was nothing she had ever expected. When she told her sisters she was not romantic like them she had been sincere.

She smiled when she saw how excited William looked as he stood waiting for her next to Mr. Pierce—the same rector who had christened her and her sisters. Not having any male friends before he came to Hertfordshire, the groom had asked his future brother, Charles Bingley, to stand up with him. The latter had agreed in his typical affable manner.

Jane was standing up for Mary which facilitated the other engaged couple being able to lose themselves at times in one another’s eyes.

William Bennet had accepted he did not need to run back to his patroness right away even before the death of Lady Catherine. Due to this new understanding, some changes had been wrought to their plans for after the ceremony.

Much to Mary's delight, they were to attend their wedding breakfast and enjoy a honeymoon. Mr. Darcy had offered them the use of a house he owned in Ramsgate. They would spend a fortnight there thanks to the curate agreeing to fill the parson's duties for an additional length of time.

With a small prompt from Bingley, the groom met his bride at the head of the aisle. There, Bennet kissed his middle daughter on her cheek and placed her hand on William Bennet's forearm.

As ceremonies of this kind tended to, it seemed to go by in the blink of an eye. The newlyweds, Jane, and Bingley all signed the register. Unlike most brides, Mary did not have to resign the name Bennet thanks to her husband reclaiming his ancestral name.

The Darcys, Fitzwilliams, and Anne de Bourgh waited with the family members, and soon-to-be family, who were wishing the newly married Bennets happy when they emerged from the registry.

When they walked out to the waiting Darcy travelling coach, everyone was relieved the barouche with the remains of the self-styled great lady had departed for Rosings Park directly after being placed within, so it was not waiting outside of the church as everyone emerged and made the short walk to the manor house.

Elizabeth hugged her two new friends and confirmed her commitment to correspond with them. She was followed by Jane who made the same promise. Anne de Bourgh was given their condolences once again and then she joined her two younger cousins in the cabin of the conveyance.

Richard took his leave of the Bennets and then he too boarded the coach to take a seat on the rear facing bench. Darcy wished the newlyweds happy again and then farewelled the rest of the Bennets except for Elizabeth.

The Bennets and Bingley walked a little distance towards the house leaving the courting couple with relative privacy to speak.

“May I have a token to hold close to my heart while we are separated?” Darcy requested quietly.

“There is nothing I have with me...” Elizabeth trailed off as she followed his eyes and noted he was looking at her hair. She knew some curls were protruding from the bonnet—a few always did.

“May I?” Darcy inquired. Elizabeth nodded shyly as her cheeks bloomed with a deep blush.

Darcy removed a penknife from his pocket and wound the end of one curl around his finger. In one deft move, he cut about two to three inches of her silky hair off. He opened the back of his fob watch cover and placed the precious curl within.

“And what am I to have to remember you?” Elizabeth asked daringly.

He removed a handkerchief from his pocket. In one corner was his embroidered initials. There was a large ‘D’ in the centre with an interlocking ‘F’ on one side and ‘A’ on the other.

Elizabeth softly caressed the letters. “The F and D are self-explanatory, but what is the A?”

“It is my middle name, for my paternal grandfather, Alexander,” Darcy revealed.

He looked at her intently and Elizabeth could see and feel the love in his look. “I will miss you, all of you,” she told him.

“It is the only time Lady Catherine will succeed in separating us, but the time will pass soon enough, and we will be in one another’s company before long. I will miss you tremendously, Elizabeth.”

“As I will you, William.”

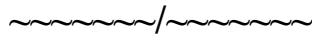
Like he had when he requested the courtship on Oakham Mount, Darcy kissed the top of both of her hands and then turned them over. These gloves were a little longer than

the ones Elizabeth had worn then so he pushed each one down some until her pulse area on each wrist was revealed.

A lingering kiss was gifted to each. Elizabeth felt like she was flying on the wings of doves. She did not want the moment to end, but just then her father cleared his throat.

“We must away, your mother pointed out the guests are already at the house,” Bennet reminded his daughter.

After each squeezed the other’s hand, they parted, most reluctantly. Darcy joined his family members in the carriage and Elizabeth joined her family. With a knock on the ceiling, the coach began to move as the two matched pairs strained against the traces at the coachman’s command.



Mary and William Bennet departed some two hours later in Bingley’s older carriage—still far better quality than the Bennets’ equipage.

Their plan was to reach Hunsford that afternoon so Mary could be shown her new home where they would spend their first night as man and wife. Fanny, assisted by Maddie Gardiner, had given Mary *the talk* last evening.

As soon as the conveyance was out of sight, the Bennets, with Bingley close to his fiancée as was his wont, returned to the celebration which continued unabated without the bridal couple.

With Charlotte’s wedding on the morrow, and then the planning for Jane’s in a mid-January ceremony, Elizabeth knew she would have activities to keep her mind occupied and distract her from missing William. As soon as his name popped into her head, her hand went to her reticule and the precious handkerchief contained within.

Elizabeth found rubbing his initials made her feel he was close to her. It struck her she was either in love with William already, or very close to that point.

She supposed it was lucky her sister and husband would be at Hunsford most of the time so there would not be too much confusion when one used the name William. Before

she left, Mary had begged Elizabeth to come visit her in her new home in early March. She had not hesitated to accept Mary's invitation.

Jane would be married by then. With Mary also away and with the two younger girls busy with their lessons, being able to spend time with Mary and seeing her home would be perfect—if she was not already married herself by then.

When she thought of the possibility of being married to William in the next few months, Elizabeth found it gave her an inordinate amount of pleasure. She had come to accept that in character and intelligence, she would never find another man who matched her as he did.

She could not help wondering if William was missing her as much as she was him.



“Do you think my ordering my late mother to the dower house caused her death?” Anne asked guiltily.

“No more than my telling her I would never marry you did,” Darcy assured his cousin.

“William has the right of it,” Richard told his cousin. “Do you not remember what Mr. Jones told us?”

“Unfortunately, no. I was somewhat preoccupied,” Anne responded.

“Of course you were,” Tiffany told her older cousin and took one of her hands in her own.

“Based on his diagnosis, he explained what he called an aneurysm is the weakening of a blood vessel. The fault can break at any given time,” Richard recalled. “In your mother's case, it could have easily occurred with her sitting on her *throne* in the drawing room or sleeping. In fact, at any time with or without strain and stress.”

“The explanation is much appreciated, Richard. It will allow me to release this guilt which has been building inside of me,” Anne sighed with relief.

“I will miss the Bennet sisters,” Giana stated.

“As will I,” Tiffany agreed.

‘You have no idea how much I will miss one Bennet sister,’ Darcy thought. ‘I will pray the time apart will fly. I hope Elizabeth is ready to hear my proposals when I see her again.’

Not long after, they arrived at Bromley and there waiting for them was a Matlock coach. During the break to rest the Darcy team, Lord Matlock told his son and nephew to join him in his conveyance when they departed.

“Now tell me what you did not put into your express,” Lord Matlock demanded when they were on their way once again.

The cousins explained all, including what Bennet had reported to have transpired before they arrived, which they told the Earl was corroborated by Anne who heard everything which had been said, even though she waited in the barouche.

Lord Matlock shook his head at his late sister’s abject stupidity. “So that tired old lie of hers contributed to her demise in the end,” he mused.

Richard repeated what he had told Anne regarding what was suspected of felling Lady Catherine and how it could have occurred any time and any place.

“William, have you made progress in your quest to capture Miss Elizabeth Bennet’s heart?” Lord Matlock enquired when the subject of his sister’s passing had been exhausted.

“I am in a courtship with Elizabeth,” Darcy stated and got a faraway look as his hand went to the fob watch which contained his precious token. With his uncle and cousin looking at him quizzically, Darcy shook his musings of his beloved from the forefront of his mind for the moment. “We did not mention it earlier, but the next youngest Bennet sister married the rector of Hunsford. His quite innocent mention of the courtship is what caused your sister to leave her fiefdom.”

“Is he the usual kind of sycophant Catherine preferred?” Lord Matlock wondered.

“He was,” Richard related with a grin. Seeing the enquiring look from his father he elucidated.

“It seems Miss Elizabeth is not the only intelligent Bennet sister,” Lord Matlock opined. “It is just as well Catherine is no longer with us. Losing her power over one of her lackeys would have caused her an apoplexy if this aneurysm had not taken her.”

“Uncle Reggie, would you object if Giana and I mourn for six weeks complete?” Darcy questioned.

“I have no objection, however, have you canvased Anne’s opinion on this subject?” was the Earl’s reply.

“We did Father, and Anne has no objections. She will observe six months of mourning as far as society is concerned,” Richard averred.

“In that case, it will be six weeks total for the nieces and nephews. As we are visible in society, your mother and I will observe three months complete,” Lord Matlock stated. “Who is to help Anne with the running of the estate?”

“I will remain as long as she needs me, and I do not think it would hurt if Richard resigns his commission and comes to learn how to run the estate. Anne shared he is her heir if she dies without issue and as she will never marry...” Darcy revealed.

“You know your mother and I would be overjoyed if you resigned, Son,” Lord Matlock agreed. “I know you have a fair amount saved thanks to the shrewd investments Gardiner has made on your behalf.”

“I suppose it is time. When we reach the estate, I will write to General Atherton and announce my resignation,” Richard decided.

For the additional hour until they reached the palings of Rosings Park just before the turn into the drive, the men spoke of the war and other current events.

Chapter 35

Darcy was still helping Anne adjust to the management of Rosings Park when Mary and William Bennet arrived back at Hunsford to take up residence at the parsonage. From the mess the late Lady Catherine had left behind, it would take quite a while to unravel it all.

Contrary to his late aunt's assertions she was the best of estate managers; she had been anything but. Darcy could not imagine a more inept person to run an estate than she had been. There were months' worth of work to begin to set everything to rights. Almost half of the tenant farms were vacant as families who had farmed the estate's land for generations had moved to seek other situations rather than suffer under the late woman's raising of their rent practically every quarter combined with her dictatorial and interfering ways.

There was only one positive to come out of his aunt's removal from her fiefdom: Richard was no longer in the army. Much to his parents' and all members of the family's delight he was a gentleman farmer now having agreed to remain at Rosings Park and learn all he could from his younger cousin.

The Earl departed the day after his late sister's interment as word arrived announcing the birth of Paul Reginald Fitzwilliam—named for his two grandfathers—causing Lord Matlock to depart for Staffordshire with all speed to see his son's heir.

The progress and the speed at which Richard was learning how to run the estate was impressive to Darcy. He had also noted how much closer Anne and Richard had become. It was not something on which he would comment. Rather, he would allow whatever was to occur to happen in its own time. He had learnt his lesson regarding interfering in other's romantic affairs.

As it always did, it did not take long before he was contemplating the great pleasure of seeing Elizabeth again.

In a few days, he, along with the residents of both the mansion and the parsonage, would make the almost fifty mile journey to Hertfordshire to spend a sennight in that shire until his friend married his angel, who happened to be his Elizabeth's sister.

There had been letters exchanged between Elizabeth, Giana, and Tiffany since the departure from the Meryton neighbourhood. As much as he loved reading her words, especially those that had direct or oblique references to himself, it was simply not the same as being in her warm company. There had been a few letters sent to each other, but through Bennet so they had to be circumspect regarding what was said.

As it always did when he thought of Elizabeth, Darcy's hand found its way into his pocket to open the back lid of his fob watch. It was always with him when awake and next to his bed when he slept. Without a thought, he would lift the lid and caress the lock of hair to feel closer to her.

On this day, Tiffany and Giana were visiting Mrs. Mary Bennet at the parsonage. Darcy looked at his fob watch and saw it was close to the time he had agreed to arrive at the parsonage and accompany his sister and cousin back to the manor house.

Taking advantage of his long strides, it did not take him many minutes to reach his destination.

"Welcome Mr. Darcy," Mary greeted her guest when he entered the sitting room where she and her two friends were seated.

She offered him some tea to which Darcy politely demurred having just had tea at Rosings Park not an hour past. He looked at the two younger ladies. "Are you ready to depart?" Darcy enquired.

"Before you take your leave with Giana and Tiffany," Mary interjected. Darcy sat and looked at his beloved's sister expectantly. "I have learnt you will be required to remain at the estate for a few more months in order to undo the damage wrought by the former mistress, is that correct?"

“It is, Mrs. Bennet,” Darcy acknowledged. He was not sure to what the question tended, but he did know Mary Bennet was an intelligent lady similar to his Elizabeth.

“Did you know I have invited Lizzy to visit, and she has agreed to come here in March?” Mary asked slyly.

“No, I was not aware of that fact,” Darcy averred.

“For Tiffany and Giana, of course,” Mary looked directly at Darcy when she spoke, “I have written to Lizzy and invited her to return with us after Jane’s wedding. She has accepted my invitation.”

The three ladies in the sitting room were almost blinded by the beaming smile which Darcy displayed on hearing his beloved would soon be in residence.

“I am sure Tiffany and Giana cannot find the words to express their thanks for your gift to them,” Darcy responded.

He did not remember the walk back to the manor house with the two young ladies or what they had been chattering about. Darcy was too busy calculating the hours until he saw Elizabeth again and revelling in the fact she would be with them when they departed Hertfordshire.



The depth and scope of how she missed William had convinced Elizabeth she was in love with him; especially as it felt like part of herself was missing when he was away. One evening, she had discussed this with Jane as they conversed about the nature of love.

Not having been in love before, Elizabeth was not sure of her feelings yet. When she and Jane spoke, it was plain to see the way they felt about their respective men had much in common. For Elizabeth, it was the confirmation she needed. Like Jane with Charles, when she thought of the future, there was no version she could imagine without William in it. In fact, if she tried to do so, all she felt was a deep feeling of desolation.

At first, Elizabeth had railed against the unfairness of being separated from William for so long, but she had caught

herself.

William was being selfless and she needed to remember that and act accordingly. He was placing the needs of others above his own desires. Elizabeth knew without any doubt where he preferred to be so she followed his example and tamped down her selfish desires.

Not two days before Mary's invitation to advance her visit, a letter had come from Giana with the news William would be needed at Rosings Park for months, not weeks as had been thought. Mary's letter had been for her as an oasis was to a man who had been lost in the desert without water.

For the rest of that day, much to her sisters' amusement, Elizabeth had walked about in a dreamy state.

Elizabeth spent as much time as she could with Jane. All too soon her sister would no longer be at Longbourn and their relationship would change dramatically. Not for one instant did Elizabeth begrudge Jane her happiness, but it did not change the fact she would miss seeing her sister on a daily basis.

Jane had asked Elizabeth to be her maid of honour. Elizabeth had accepted with alacrity and was determined to fulfil her duties with aplomb. The fact William was standing up with Charles and would be near her during the ceremony was an added bonus.

Sometimes when she was not busy assisting Jane, Elizabeth would walk into Meryton to visit Charlotte Forster.

She knew the former Miss Lucas was not a romantic, but it was easy to see her best friend was well pleased with her situation and her husband doted on her. Her husband had leased a house in Meryton in which they were residing before their move to Derbyshire. He had resigned his commission and was waiting a month or so for a new colonel to arrive and take command of his regiment before he and his wife travelled north to his small estate.

The two friends were pleased they would be neighbours if—when—Elizabeth's courtship ended with a

proposal. Evidently, Charlotte's husband's estate was less than eight miles from Pemberley.



The day before the party from Kent was to arrive, Jane and Elizabeth were visiting Netherfield Park to join Louisa for tea. The latter two were in a discussion in which Hurst was also involved.

Jane and Bingley sat on a settee a little away from the rest where they could speak without being overheard. "My aunt in Scarborough informed us of Caroline's tantrum when she heard of the courtship between Lizzy and Darcy," Bingley revealed.

"Surely she is not so delusional as to think Mr. Darcy would suddenly change his mind about her?" Jane enquired in wonder.

"No, she is aware of that fact. However knowing that and being sanguine about the woman she blames for all her ills succeeding where she never would have are two separate things," Bingley explained.

"So, she is a dog in the manger," Jane shook her head. She decided to speak of something more pleasant. "It pleases me no end to see Lizzy as happy as she is. It has always been a dream of mine for her to be as happy and in love—well almost as much—as me. It is only a pity when they marry they will be in the north and we here."

"Did you think I would have you separated from your most loved sister?" Bingley averred. "My lease here is until the end of October of this year. I intend to ask Darcy to be on the lookout for an estate in his neighbourhood for me to purchase."

The smile of pleasure that lit up his fiancée's face told him of her approbation of his plan. "Only the weekend after today and then Monday before we marry," Bingley reminded his Jane, "I cannot wait."

"It is the same as I feel," Jane agreed.

In another two hours, the Bennet carriage arrived to transport the two eldest Miss Bennets back to Longbourn.



Thanks to the younger married Bennets being hosted at Longbourn, that estate was the first stop for the coaches arriving from Rosings Park. Mary and William were warmly welcomed home by their family.

“Marriage becomes you,” Fanny beamed at her middle daughter.

“Thank you, Mama,” Mary replied with a warm smile.

If there had not been her whole family and those in the conveyances watching, Elizabeth would have fallen into William’s arms. “It is *very* good to see you,” she said instead when William, who had alighted to allow her sister and brother to do so, approached her.

Darcy gave a stately bow. “Not nearly as pleasurable as it is to see you,” Darcy stated. “My hearing you had accepted your sister’s invitation warmed my heart.”

“As it did mine when Mary extended it,” Elizabeth averred.

“You two will see one another at dinner here this evening,” Bennet said amusedly as he watched the looks of love passing between his second daughter and her suitor.

Both coloured as they had entered their own world in which no one else was around them when Bennet’s remark had brought them back to reality.

Fanny swatted her husband’s arm playfully. “Thomas, you are embarrassing them!” Fanny exclaimed quietly.

“Until dinner then,” Darcy bowed over his beloved’s hand, bestowing a kiss on it, which had not the impediment of a glove.

Her blush only deepened as she felt the waves of pleasure from feeling his lips on her skin.

Darcy reboarded his coach. He struck the ceiling with the head of his cane and the conveyance lurched forward as the horses took up the strain and began to pull the equipage back towards the estate's gateposts.



Overjoyed was Fanny Bennet when she witnessed her eldest marry. It was her second daughter to do so, and with Lizzy being courted, the number would soon increase to three daughters well situated.

The wedding was being held in the Longbourn village church and like Mary's wedding, there was not an open pew available. Jane had looked resplendent in a pale blue wedding gown which had accentuated the cerulean blue of her eyes.

Rather than a wedding bonnet like Mary had worn, Jane wore a veil made of delicate Belgium lace. Her gloves were satin and pure white which reached her elbow where the sleeve of her gown ended. Jane was wearing a sapphire bracelet, necklace, and earrings—all engagement gifts from Charles.

When the congregation stood to signal the bride's approach, Elizabeth broke her eye contact with William. She turned her sight towards the inner vestibule doors. Jane began gliding up the aisle on their father's arm.

Bingley had been mesmerised when he saw his Jane begin her walk towards him, but Darcy had prodded him so when Jane arrived at the head of the aisle, he was waiting for her.

Before either member of the couple could blink they were exchanging vows and giving and receiving rings. They had decided to each give a ring even though most did not.

Darcy and Elizabeth's eyes were locked one on the other's, hardly blinking as they each silently recited the words of the vows to themselves when Jane and then Bingley recited them aloud.

Once Mr. Pierce announced them man and wife, the new Mr. and Mrs. Bingley and their witnesses made their way

into the registry. Darcy and Elizabeth witnessed their signatures and then exited the room, with Darcy pulling the door closed behind him. It was more than five minutes before the newlyweds emerged, both with rather swollen lips.

The wedding breakfast at Longbourn reflected the estate's mistress's well-deserved reputation for setting a fine table—the finest in the neighbourhood.

After close to an hour, Elizabeth accompanied Jane to what, up to that morning, had been their shared chamber for the latter to change into her travel attire. While his wife was changing, Bingley approached his friend and best man.

“Darcy you must allow me to thank you for the use of Seaview Cottage for our honeymoon,” Bingley told his friend.

“Bingley, you know it is my pleasure. You and your wife are welcome to reside there any time it is available,” Darcy stated as he clapped his friend on the back.

The *cottage* was a house Darcy's late father had purchased as a wedding present for the late Lady Anne, on a bluff close to Brighton.

“Where is Fitzwilliam,” Bingley looked around realising he had not seen Darcy's cousin since the ceremony.

“He escorted Anne back to Netherfield Park. She still has more than a month of deep mourning remaining, hence her absence at the wedding breakfast,” Darcy elucidated.

“Are they...?” Bingley enquired.

“Possibly, but unless or until there is an official announcement I will not speculate. Have an enjoyable honeymoon my friend.” Darcy inclined his head towards the door of the room where the new Mrs. Bingley entered followed by Elizabeth.

Jane and Bingley made a final round of the guests expressing their gratitude for sharing this most special of days with them.

With that done, the newly extended family, plus some who would be soon enough, made up the group of farewellers

who, after hugs, kisses, and slapping of backs, waved to the retreating rear of the Bingley coach.

Chapter 36

For the first half of the journey into Kent, the five ladies rode in the Darcy coach. Two of the three men would have ridden alongside had the temperatures not been frigid.

Regardless of the weather, the clergyman would not have mounted a horse as he had never been taught to ride. He admitted the same to the cousins with him and they offered to teach him the skill, if he in fact wanted to learn. Their offer was gratefully accepted as it had always been something William Bennet had wanted to do, but as his father had not been able to ride himself, it was never an option for him growing up as the son of Clem Collins.

From Bromley, one William, joined his wife in the Darcy coach while the other one the lady he was courting. Anne, Tiffany, and Giana were with Richard in the de Bourgh barouche.

Elizabeth and Darcy sat opposite one another, she facing forward and he looking to the rear. Mary was on the bench with her older sister while her husband sat next to Darcy. For the first half hour there was no conversation between the courting couple who were satisfied with just getting lost in each other's eyes.

Every now and again—by accident of course—Darcy would reposition his legs and his knee or shin would come into contact with Elizabeth's legs. Each time she felt a frisson of pleasure travel from the point they touched to her entire body.

Before the hour was up, William Bennet fell asleep and Mary seemed much taken with the book she was reading. Darcy stretched his one leg—understandably to place it in a more comfortable position—and when he had found a position which suited, his thigh was firmly against Elizabeth's shin.

The result was the deepest blush Darcy had ever seen from the lady he loved. Rather than make her uncomfortable, or put her in a position for her younger sister to have to

remonstrate with her regarding propriety, Darcy withdrew his leg.

As soon as William moved his leg away, Elizabeth felt bereft of the warmth she experienced when it had touched her own leg. She looked over at Mary and saw an arched eyebrow behind the book of sonnets she was reading. Her younger sister had not pointed it out, but it was obvious she was a rather observant chaperone.

“Miss Elizabeth, you like morning rambles, weather permitting of course, do you not?” Darcy verified.

“Yes, indeed I do Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth confirmed.

“One of the paths through the groves runs right next to the parsonage. If there is no precipitation, with your sister’s and brother’s permission, may I collect you to show you the wonders of the nature at Anne’s estate in the morning?” Darcy requested.

“You know I would never turn down the opportunity to explore nature,” Elizabeth accepted.

Both looked at Mary expectantly.

“Personally I have parish duties in the morning, especially as we have been away for a sennight,” Mary mused. She did not miss the way the courting couple’s faces fell. “However, as long as you have a chaperone, I am sure Lizzy will enjoy the walk. Your sister or one of your cousins is acceptable, and if not, a maid or footman will suffice.”

“I am sure Tiffany and Giana would be more than happy to join us,” Darcy responded as he perked up.

Elizabeth was pleased as well. She forgot Mary had a wry sense of humour and she enjoyed teasing at times, as she had just done.

“What time do you break your fast, Mrs. Bennet?” Darcy enquired.

“Usually at ten,” Mary averred.

“In that case,” Darcy looked at his beloved, “we will collect you at half after eight.”

“Please join us for the meal when you return Lizzy to the parsonage,” Mary invited.

So it was decided. After that Mary went back to her book and Elizabeth and Darcy debated books they had recently read. The spirited debate only ended when the coach slowed as the coachman guided it into the parsonage’s drive.

Mary gently woke her husband. Once their trunks were off-loaded, the Darcy footmen assisted the Bennet’s manservant to deliver them to the various bedchambers. With promises to see one another soon, the occupants of the two conveyances departed for the less than half mile drive to the mansion.

Sitting in his carriage, Darcy felt bereft of Elizabeth’s company but he could still smell her lavender scent. He opened the back cover of his fob watch and wound his fingers around her lock of hair, as he so often did.



The anticipation of the walk with William had Elizabeth up and ready almost an hour before the front doorbell rang. Hearing the bell, she had to force herself not to run and open the door instead of one of Mary and William’s servants.

The housekeeper and cook in one person returned leading the Darcy siblings and Tiffany into the sitting room.

“Good morning Lizzy,” Georgiana managed before she hugged the woman she was sure would be her sister one day.

Tiffany replaced her cousin to hug her friend as soon as Giana stepped back.

“It is good to see all of you,” Elizabeth greeted all three, her eyes never leaving the face of the man she loved.

“Shall we?” Darcy proposed.

The three had not relinquished their outerwear on arriving knowing they would be back outside soon enough. The housekeeper assisted Elizabeth into her warm pelisse. She donned her fur lined gloves and her warmest bonnet.

The two younger girls led the way out of the parsonage to the path which led into the grove. The courting couple followed behind them, at a distance. He offered her his arm, and Elizabeth willingly placed her gloved hand on his forearm.

There were no evergreens in the grove so all of the trees were stark, their branches bare. There was long grass on the forest floor which had been turned brown and dormant by the occasional frost and the persistent cold. No snow had fallen in Kent but it was still rather cold.

“Where we all live in Derbyshire,” Darcy inclined his head to his sister and cousin walking ahead of them, “everything is covered by a thick coating of snow.”

“We had a dusting of snow at Longbourn after Christmas, but it did not remain on the ground very long, so thankfully I did not lose too many days of exercise to precipitation,” Elizabeth responded.

“I hope your celebration of the festive season was not as subdued as it was here,” Darcy stated.

“As would be expected,” Elizabeth averred. She looked around at the leafless trees. “I imagine this is a wonderful sight in the spring when everything is verdant. Do you have forests at Pemberley?”

“Very expansive ones.” Darcy was not boasting, just stating a fact. “From the gate posts to the house is over two miles, most of the way there are wooded areas either side of the drive. The house itself is on rising ground, actually built at the foot of a hill. The hill is covered with evergreen trees so it is possible to see green every year round from the master suite, albeit with snow on their branches in winter.”

“It sounds like many more trees than here. Do you have a large formal garden?”

“Not as large as some; not nearly as much and not as ordered as Rosings Park’s formal gardens.” Darcy saw the quizzical look from Elizabeth. As she had not had the *pleasure* of seeing his late aunt’s attempt at ordering nature, he explained what she would see. “My mother loved gardening

and her passion was roses. There is a large rose garden, and some beds of mixed flowers, but for the most part, nature has not been molested at my estate.”

Elizabeth was about to say how much she would like to see the forests at Pemberley but stopped herself. She did not want to seem to be angling for an invitation.

“I heard Miss Bingley go on about your library. Is it truly so extensive?”

“As I said then, it has been the work of many generations.”

“You, according to that *lady*, have added to it yourself.”

“When in London, I lose myself in bookshops, especially Hatchard’s. I cannot help myself; I am always buying additional tomes regardless of the fact I would need multiple lifetimes to come close to reading most of the books in the collection.”

“My father is a bibliophile as well.”

“As is, I believe, his second daughter.” Darcy looked at his walking partner lovingly.

Without realising she had done so; Elizabeth’s arm was wrapped around Darcy’s arm by now. She loved the feel of his strength she felt in the muscles below her hand. If it were possible, she would never relinquish her hold on his arm.

The feel of her dainty hand on his arm thrilled Darcy. Since reuniting with her in Hertfordshire, he had decided to take things slowly and not frighten Elizabeth with his ardency. That plan was about to be thrown to the wind because the looks she was giving him were loaded with love, of that he was certain.

For a time they did not speak, just enjoyed the closeness they felt between them. Sometime later, they exited the grove into a field. There was a hill on one side of it. On the flat summit of the hill was a folly built in the form of a small Grecian temple.

The younger girls walked up the hill and sat down on a bench to one side of the structure. Darcy led Elizabeth onto the marble floor on which the temple was built.

“You see there, over the tops of the trees, that is the manor house.” Darcy pointed to the southwest.

“It looks like a large building,” Elizabeth observed.

“That it is. When we return to the parsonage I have an invitation from Anne for you all to join us for dinner on the morrow, you will be able to see it from up close.”

“Do not forget, I will see the infamous over-ordered gardens as well.” Elizabeth smiled at the thought of the former mistress’s illogical obsession with control.

“If I would like to address you privately, do I make the request of your cousin? Oh, he is your brother-in-law now.” Darcy paused. “That is unless you think it is too soon to do so?”

“No, it is certainly not too soon, and yes, William, you would ask my brother William’s permission.” Elizabeth glowed with pleasure as she could guess why he wanted to address her and she could think of nothing she would like more.

There was no need for more words. Their eyes said all that was needed. Soon enough they were on their way back along the path they had walked to the folly.



Even if there was no great variety like that served at Rosings Park, the morning meal was both enjoyable and tasty. At its completion Darcy followed the master of the house into his study where he was to work on his sermon.

Permission was granted for the courting couple to meet in private, with the proviso the door would not be closed all the way and would last no longer than ten minutes. The two Williams repaired to the sitting room where the four ladies were to be found.

“Mary dear, Darcy would like to have a private interview with Lizzy, which I have granted. We should away for ten minutes,” William Bennet announced.

A most unladylike squeal of pleasure escaped from Giana’s mouth. She clapped her hands over it in embarrassment. Mary and her husband led the two younger girls from the sitting room.

The door was closed about three quarters of the way. Elizabeth was standing in the centre of the room as Darcy fell onto one knee in front of her and took her hands in his own. “Elizabeth the love I feel for you is immeasurable. Besides loving you, worshiping the very ground you walk on, I respect you in every way.

“I almost made the mistake of thinking about the disparity in wealth and societal position between us, before my heart changed and I realised in every way that counts we are equal, in fact in many ways you are my superior like in your kindness and joyful nature.

“Our intelligence is very well matched. Never have I met a woman who can not only articulate her positions in the cogent fashion you do, but you are able to defend them with logic and facts thereby showing me more often than not the error in my conclusions. Elizabeth, you are everything and so much more than I have ever wanted in a wife, a partner in all things. Please say you will marry me my dearest, loveliest, beloved Elizabeth.”

For a moment Elizabeth had thought William was about to list all of the reasons she was his inferior in wealth, connections, and society. She was beyond pleased she had listened to what he actually said and not operated from her sometimes hasty assumptions. Thankfully she had finally learnt not to jump to conclusions without the requisite information.

“Your being away after your Aunt’s passing has proved the axiom about distance making the heart grow fonder. When you requested the courtship I had tender feelings for you, but I was not in love with you yet. While we were separated, it hit

me that my life would be empty without you in it and I was, in fact, ardently and irrevocably in love with you. Based on the way you always treat me as an intelligent being I have no doubt you respect me. Never once have you dismissed something I have said just because it was a lady who stated the position.

“So in answer to your question, yes, William, absolutely yes, I will marry you.”

He released her hands in order to stand up. Once standing, he again took one hand in his and drew her very close to him until they were almost touching. Darcy looked at his fiancée to gain permission and Elizabeth looked up at him and was so caught up in the look of intensity that she could only nod her head in the affirmative.

Elizabeth’s mouth suddenly felt dry and her heart thumped against her chest like a drum beating inside of her. He whispered her name and as she looked up, it seemed as though he was moving very slowly until she felt the light pressure of his lips on hers. Suddenly, she felt very hot as he pulled her even closer and her arms which seemed to have a will of their own found their way around his waist.

Darcy pulled his head back and looked into Elizabeth’s eyes to make sure she was sanguine with the kissing. He saw no trepidation, just a burning passion in her eyes.

He lowered his head again and the kisses were deeper, more insistent now. He let his tongue play over her lips. Her mouth opened instinctively allowing his entry and their tongues touched tentatively and then duelled vigorously. The sensations this action caused were exquisite. The kiss lasted until they had to stop to breathe, and they reluctantly pulled away from each other. Her breathlessness left her standing on legs which felt wobbly from the passion she was experiencing. They both looked at each other with silly smiles on their faces.

She floated upon a sea of sensation unlike anything she had ever imagined. Scattered impressions drifted across her consciousness. She then noticed something hard pressing against her hip. Elizabeth could scarcely draw breath. Having

grown up on a working farm, she was sure she knew what was pressed against her.

Before they could kiss again, or she allow her hand to brush over his hard appendage in error, they heard the clearing of a throat in the hallway. The newly engaged couple practically jumped apart.

With two quick strides Darcy went to look out of the window. As was his wont when he needed to distract himself and cause evidence of his arousal to shrink, Darcy thought of Caroline Bingley which had the intended effect causing his arousal to shrink in an instant.

By the time Mary and William Bennet entered, Darcy had turned around and was standing next to his fiancée with no visible evidence of his former excitement.

“William proposed to me, and I have accepted him,” Elizabeth reported what was already obvious.

This time there were two squeals from the hallway as both Tiffany and Giana entered the room and threw their arms around Elizabeth. Elizabeth returned their hugs in kind.

“A sister, at last! No, *five* sisters,” Georgiana gushed.

Remembering her brother was present, Giana threw herself in his arms.

“You seem almost as happy I am marrying Elizabeth as I am,” Darcy teased his sister.

“I am so very pleased to be gaining sisters, especially one like Lizzy,” Georgiana enthused.

“When, my soon to be cousin, will you marry?” Tiffany enquired.

“I need to ride to Hertfordshire to see Bennet first,” He looked at the man who would be his brother. “I assume you do not have permission to consent to an engagement?”

“My husband does not, but Papa had the foresight to give me this letter.” Mary handed the missive to her future brother.

Darcy broke the seal and read the words. His smile grew wider with each word he read. He handed the sheet to his fiancée.

“We are officially engaged!” Elizabeth exclaimed as she handed the note to Mary.

Her father had guessed there would be a proposal in Kent and had given Mary the letter to be used if Lizzy accepted Darcy. He decided to save his future son-in-law an almost one hundred mile roundtrip.

As soon as Anne was informed of her cousin’s good news, she sent a note to the parsonage inviting them for dinner that very evening.

Chapter 37

Letters were received from Longbourn conveying Elizabeth's parents and two youngest sisters' heartfelt congratulations on her engagement.

For the first few days Elizabeth could be seen pinching herself at random times. When Mary asked her why she was doing so, her older sister had told her she was still coming to accept the reality she and William were in fact betrothed.

For the rest of January and into the first weeks of February a routine of sorts was established. Weather permitting of course, Darcy would arrive each morning, other than on the sabbath, to walk with his fiancée. If either or both Giana and Tiffany were not with him, then a footman accompanied him. By February the days were getting a little longer which gave the walkers that much more time together before they broke their fasts.

If there was precipitation, one of the de Bourgh coaches would collect Elizabeth after the morning meal, and she would spend the day with Tiffany and Giana at the great house.

In the late mornings, Darcy and Richard, and often Anne, were usually busy with estate business as they continued to unwind the mess the late Lady Catherine had left behind. The midday meal, much to the approbation of the engaged couple, was a time when everyone at the manor house would be together. Usually there would be an hour after the meal when the men would remain in the ladies company.

There were exceptions. Some days the two men would ride out on the estate seeing to tenant and other concerns. Nearly a month after the previous mistress's death, all the tenant farms were filled once again.

When word made its way around the area about the changes at Rosings Park, some of the former tenants took new leases and for the few who were happy where they had relocated, it had been easy to find replacements. Something

which increased the confidence of the tenants was when Miss de Bourgh had—at her cousin William’s recommendation—lowered the rents to where they should have been all along. She also sacked the steward who had only parroted anything her late mother had said, and had not the requisite experience to know what the late Lady Catherine had been doing was wrong.

A new man, a former under-steward at Snowhaven, the Earl of Matlock’s primary estate, had been employed. He had more than enough knowledge needed to be an effective man for the job and the tenants were already singing his praises. Thanks to the new steward’s capable efficiency, it seemed to Darcy he would be able to depart Kent almost a month earlier than he had previously estimated.

When the men were out on the estate with the steward, they would return between four and five in the evening, well in time for dinner. Mary and William Bennet ate dinner at Rosings Park three or four times a week.

On Sundays after services, the Bennets from the parsonage visited the residents of the manor house. That way there was not a day of the week the members of the engaged couple did not spend time in each other’s company.

Mary was heard to comment what an easy guest her sister was. She slept at the parsonage, after her walk she broke her fast and then was away for the rest of the day until after dinner.

The truth was when Mary was not busy with visits to parishioners, she would be found with Elizabeth, Tiffany, and Giana at the mansion.

The love between Elizabeth and Darcy blossomed and deepened. During the walks they took in the mornings, they would be silent at times just revelling in each other’s company. At other times they would discuss anything and everything. The one subject neither tired of was finding out about their betrothed’s childhood, especially the mischief each would get up to—Darcy was fascinated to find out his future wife was a

little imp as a child. Neither could wait until they would no longer need to part one from the other at the end of the day.

To that end, one afternoon, a week after the engagement, they had borrowed a calendar from the study and selected the eighth day of March for their wedding, only three days after Elizabeth reached her majority.

A letter was dispatched to Longbourn and the reply from Fanny carried the endorsement of both herself and Bennet.

Darcy had sent one to the rector of the Pemberley parish as well so the banns would be called in the appropriate parishes.

All the while in the background as they worked together and spent time in each other's company, Anne and Richard were unobtrusively falling in love. Anne had never thought she would be able to marry, and certainly never bear a child, but in the months since her mother's passing, she had begun to feel better than she had in years.

One of the main differences was Anne was no longer drinking the elixir her mother had insisted she needed each morning. Each day it was not administered Anne had more energy. Almost three months since her mother's death, Anne was not only feeling much better, but looking far stronger as well.

Rather than a sickly grey pallor, Anne had a glow of health about her.

In the week past, Anne and Richard had journeyed to London to visit some doctors as well as Lord and Lady Matlock who had recently returned from Staffordshire.



One day when the three residents of Rosings Park were calling at the parsonage, Darcy told the three Bennets, his sister, and his cousin, "When Richard and Anne return, I will inform them we are to depart for London on the eighteenth of this month so Elizabeth may shop for her trousseau."

“That will be perfect timing as Jane and Charles will arrive on Saturday the sixteenth on their way from your house near Brighton,” Mary reminded everyone. “I am sure Lizzy will be pleased Jane will be in London when she shops. Have the Gardiners responded to your request to be hosted with them?”

“Yes, Aunt Maddie wrote and told me I am welcome anytime they are home, as are any of us,” Elizabeth averred. “If they had been away, I am sure Janey would have had room for me.”

Before anyone else could speak, there was the sound of coaches passing. “That must be Anne and Richard,” Giana opined. “Why is there more than one carriage?”

Tiffany stood and looked out of the window. “Mama and Papa are in the other coach!” she exclaimed excitedly. She loved her cousins and friends but she had missed seeing her mother since their departure for Hertfordshire the previous year.

“Elizabeth, will you return with us so I may have the pleasure of introducing you to my aunt and uncle?” Darcy requested. Elizabeth nodded her agreement.

Soon the four were walking across the park towards the mansion.



The greetings between mother and daughter were as effusive as could be expected after months of not seeing one another.

“William will you introduce your fiancée to us please,” Lord Matlock boomed.

Darcy complied and was gratified to see how easily his aunt and uncle warmed to Elizabeth, just like he knew they would.

“We would have seen you in town in a few days, how is it you are at Rosings Park now?” Darcy asked after a while.

“They are here for the wedding,” Richard stated with an absolute deadpan.

“We are not marrying until next...” Darcy caught himself. His grinning cousin was not speaking of his and Elizabeth’s wedding. “You mean you and Anne, do you not?”

“Have I not always said you are intelligent?” Richard ribbed.

“When? And when did you propose to Anne?” Tiffany enthused.

“In London. When the doctors pronounced Anne healthy, I proposed. We decided not to waste any more time so I purchased a special licence,” Richard explained. “Before you ask, Anne, like all of us thought she was not healthy enough to marry. It seems the incompetent apothecary’s elixir did not agree with Anne.”

“Do you think your mother knew she was harming and not helping you?” Darcy queried.

“For my own sanity, I will believe not,” Anne asserted. “The only person who could answer that question is no longer alive.”

Out of respect for Anne’s wishes, the subject was not canvassed again.



The Bingleys arrived in time to be present for the wedding of Anne de Bourgh to Richard Fitzwilliam. It was conducted by William Bennet in the ballroom at the manor house with family in attendance.

After the wedding breakfast, the newly married Fitzwilliams headed for the Darcy house in Ramsgate. They would travel directly from there to Hertfordshire in early March to attend the wedding upcoming.

On Monday, Mary and William Bennet saw a line of coaches off as the rest of the combined family made for London.

The Fitzwilliam parents were for Matlock House. The Darcys, along with the Bingleys, Tiffany, and Elizabeth went directly to Gardiner House on Portman Square. Tiffany and Giana did not want to leave Elizabeth's company after being spoilt with so much of it in Kent, but it was impressed upon them they would see her soon enough.

The Bingleys remained for dinner and left some hours later once the sisters who had missed one another had shared—in Jane's case what was appropriate for her maiden sister's ears—all the news since they had parted at Jane's wedding.



When the notice announcing the engagement of Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy to some unknown country miss had been published and seen by many disappointed mothers and daughters, those same mothers and daughters planned how they would tear strips off the pretender. Those plans were quickly scrapped when it became clear the future Mrs. Darcy had the support of some of the most powerful ladies—and their husbands—in society.

The shopping party who escorted Elizabeth to order what she needed for her trousseau included Lady Matlock, Madeline Gardiner, Jane, Tiffany, and Giana. If members of the *Ton* did not get the message from the support being shown by Lady Matlock for her future niece, they were firmly convinced on the days the group was joined by the Duchess of Bedford, the Countess of Holder, and the Countess of Jersey.

At first Elizabeth balked at the amount of money being spent—mostly by her fiancé—on her clothing. When Aunt Elaine—as she had been instructed to call Lady Matlock—explained why she would need so much—both because of her new station and the different climate in Derbyshire—Elizabeth accepted the reasoning and said no more.

Never one who was enamoured with shopping, by the time Saturday morning arrived and they headed to Meryton, Elizabeth was more than ready to leave London.

When she saw her parents and youngest two sisters standing under the portico at Longbourn, Elizabeth had never

been happier to be home. It struck her that in about a fortnight it would no longer be her home.

As she thought about William and her love for him, the thoughts of leaving Longbourn became more pleasant.



Like she had for the previous two weddings, Fanny deferred to Elizabeth and William's desires for theirs. The main difference was the celebratory meal would be held at Netherfield Park.

A week before the wedding the Earl and Countess arrived with not only Tiffany, but Anne and Richard. They had all met in London and travelled together. Anne Fitzwilliam was glowing with happiness and those, like the Bennets, who had last seen her in December of the previous year, could not believe it was the same lady they had met then. The Hilldales were not willing to travel with little Paul yet, hence their absence.

The next day Mary and William Bennet arrived from Kent in a coach which Anne and Richard had placed at their disposal. It was the first time since Mary's nuptials all five Bennet sisters had been together.

In the days leading up to the wedding a firm friendship had been established between the two youngest Bennets, Tiffany, and Giana. With Elizabeth quite occupied by wedding plans, the youngest four, along with Maria Lucas included on occasion, were much in each other's company.

Elizabeth and William had followed Jane and Charles's example and eschewed a pre-wedding ball.



The night before the wedding, Elizabeth received the *talk* from her mother and Aunt Maddie together, just as they had done for Mary and then for Jane.

Besides not looking forward to the momentary pain they mentioned, Elizabeth was in anticipation of her wedding night. She was certain of the love they shared and as such she

knew without any doubt William would no more knowingly hurt her than she would him.

After her mother and aunt left the chamber, Jane and Mary entered.

“Is there anything you need to ask us *old* married women?” Jane teased with a light blush.

“No thank you, Mama and Aunt Maddie covered everything,” Elizabeth averred. Even had she questions—and she did not—it was not something she wanted to canvas with either Jane or Mary.

“Try and get as much sleep as you can and remember no rambling all over the countryside in the morning,” Mary jested wryly.

“Even if you feel too excited to eat, break your fast in the morning. I promise you will not regret it,” Jane advised. “Until the morning.” Jane hugged Lizzy.

Mary took her turn next.

It was not easy thanks to the excitement, but eventually Elizabeth allowed Morpheus to claim her.



The eighth day of March was an almost cloudless spring day. As Elizabeth walked from the house to the church on her father’s arm she was vastly pleased to see nature in bloom once again. Ripening buds on the trees promising the return of greenery and crocuses starting to bloom were all around them as they made their way towards the church and her future.

Her hand was lightly resting on her father’s arm and Jane, her matron of honour, followed behind making sure the dress was not dragging in the dirt as Elizabeth walked.

Fanny and the rest of those who had been resident at Longbourn had left for the church a few minutes earlier. Before she departed the house, Fanny had bussed Elizabeth’s cheek not wanting to disturb the maid’s stellar work. She had

squeezed the bride's hand and then shoed the rest of the family out the door.

On arriving in the vestibule, Jane smoothed the train out behind Elizabeth and made a visual inspection to be sure all was as it should be with Lizzy's dress. One of the inner doors opened and Jane began her walk up the aisle.

She gave her husband a beatific smile as she passed him in the second to front pew seated next to the Hursts.

As would be expected as they were as close as brothers, Richard was standing up with William. The latter had been impatient to see his Elizabeth but had calmed when he saw Jane Bingley heading up the aisle. As soon as she reached her place opposite Richard, the aging rector gave the signal for everyone to stand.

Mr. Pierce nodded to two men at the rear of the nave and each one opened an inner vestibule door. Darcy almost forgot to breathe when the vision which was his bride entered the nave of the church.

Her gown was an off-white silk with a clear gossamer overlay which shimmered as she walked. Like Jane before her, Elizabeth wore a veil, and she was adorned with the jewels Darcy had presented her from the family collection. The necklace an enormous central emerald with alternating emeralds and diamonds either side of it all the way to the clasp in . In addition she wore the matching earrings and her hair pins were tipped with diamond and emerald chips.

She was always beautiful, but now she was a vision.

Richard did not need to remind Darcy to move to the spot where Elizabeth's father would hand her to him. He was far too keen to have her as his wife to forget.

Bennet stopped in front of Darcy, lifted his daughter's veil, and kissed both of her cheeks before replacing the lace. After walking up the three steps, with Elizabeth's hand resting comfortably on his forearm, they stood before the clergyman.

The parson signalled everyone to be seated. "Dearly beloved..."

This time when they said their vows it was aloud in front of all of the witnesses. As Jane and Charles had done, they flouted convention and presented each other with rings. While their friends were making for their conveyances for the quick trip to Netherfield Park, the new Darcys were in the registry making sure they had signed the book correctly.

By the time they joined the enlarged extended family, both had extremely swollen lips.

Fanny and Bennet were the final two to exit the church before the newlyweds. “God has been very good to us, has He not Thomas?” Fanny asserted.

“He surely has, Fanny,” Bennet agreed. “That and several changed hearts brought us to this point in time.”

“When you are correct, you are correct,” Fanny smiled as they linked their arms tighter and walked towards the Bennet carriage waiting in front of the landau which would transport the newlyweds to Netherfield Park.

Epilogue

Pemberly July 1821

“Bennet Alexander Darcy, did you hide Bethie’s favourite doll again,” Elizabeth demanded of her eldest child.

She normally called him Ben when she was not remonstrating with her almost nine-year-old son. Much to her husband’s and her parents’ delight, Ben, who had arrived in the world in August 1812, looked very much like his father had at the same age—dark curly hair, the same piercing blue eyes, and already tall for his age. Additionally, he very much had his mother’s character and seemed to like playing pranks just as she had at that stage in life.

Bethie—Bethany Anne—had been born in December 1815, only two days before Jesus’s birthday, and would be six in December coming.

Ben was not vindictive and he loved his sisters and would protect them with all that he was able when needed, but he was somewhat of an imp and thought it was great fun to make Bethie search the nursery for her doll. “Yes, Mama, I did.” Like his father, Ben was honest to a fault.

The youngest Darcy—for the time being because Elizabeth was with child again—was Mary Jane who had been born in February 1819. Where Bethie looked like a younger version of her Aunt Giana, Mary Jane looked exactly like her mother—something her father thought was excellent. She was smaller than her cousins of the same age, had the raven coloured ringlets like her mother, and the same emerald-green eyes.

“I told you he did, did I not Mama?” Bethie exclaimed.

“Ben you need to learn that even if you do not mean harm, playing the same prank over and over again can be hurtful to Bethie,” Elizabeth told her son gently.

The change in her son’s face was instantaneous as he understood the import of his mother’s words. His big blue eyes

filled up with unshed tears as he felt horrified that he may have hurt his sister.

Without a word he took himself up to the nursery and returned with the purloined doll which he wordlessly handed to his sister. "Sorry Bethie, I will not hide her again," Ben stated gravely.

"I forgive you, Ben," Bethie allowed as she hugged her doll who in colouring looked much like her mama.

"Off you two go, back to the nursery and make sure you do not wake Mary Jane," Elizabeth tutted. "I am sure you have lessons yet this morning do you not Ben?"

"I do Mama. Greek," Ben scrunched up his nose in disgust. Like his parents, he was a very intelligent boy who despite his display loved to learn.

She nodded and the nursemaid who had been waiting for her charges came forward and took Bethie's free hand and then led the two young Darcys back to the nursery.

The guests would begin to arrive later that day. As they did most summers, the Darcys would be hosting the extended family for almost two months. One thing Elizabeth was as thankful for today, as she had been when Jane and Charles had purchased Meadowbrook, was the fact her most beloved sister and best friend lived less than twenty miles from Pemberley, about fifteen miles the other side of Lambton.

When both families were in residence at their estates, hardly a week passed without visits to one estate or the other.

Pemberly's steward had informed Darcy of the estate coming up for sale in May 1811. Jane was in the early stages of being with child when the Bingleys had come to visit thus facilitating viewings of Meadowbrook. While Jane and Elizabeth had inspected the manor house, Darcy and Bingley had ridden the estate with the steward.

With Jane's hearty endorsement, Bingley had made an offer on the estate which had been accepted. The selling family planned to move at the end of July, meaning the estate would be theirs from the first day of August. Thankfully with

their uncle being the landlord at Netherfield Park, he had released his niece and nephew from the remainder of the lease without penalty.

As soon as the Bingley's moved out, the Gardiners began to move into their estate.

In mid-November 1811, Francine Elizabeth Bingley arrived, born at her parent's estate. Little Franny, as she was called by all, looked very much like her mother in all but her hair colour. She had the same strawberry blond colour as her father.

In August 1813, Charles Thomas Bingley joined the family. He had his mother's blue eyes, but his hair was the same colour as his Aunt Lizzy's. Charlie was one day less than exactly one year younger than his cousin, Ben Darcy. The two were inseparable when they were together, which was often.

Jane and Bingley were blessed with three more children, a little more than two years separating their births. A daughter, Louisa, was born in 1815, the next daughter Madeline in 1817, and then the babe of the family, Arthur was born in 1819. Like her next younger sister, Jane was with child again.

Both sets of married Bennets had been hosted at Meadowbrook for the last ten days and would arrive at Pemberley with the Bingleys that afternoon.

Fanny and Bennet still lived at Longbourn—technically—but only spent a month or two a year there. With all of their daughters married and a growing brood of grandchildren, the older Bennets spent their time between each of their daughters' homes—even though Bennet used to loudly decry travel. It was no surprise to anyone, given the attraction of the library, that Pemberley hosted the Bennet parents for more than three months each year.

Mary and William Bennet and their three sons also resided at the Bennet estate of Longbourn. Their first son Thomas Caleb, called Tommy, had been born in April 1813. The next, Edward William in May 1816. The third son, Collin

Philip—his name a nod to his father’s former family name—had joined the family in November 1818.

Not long after Kitty and Lydia married brothers in a double ceremony in June 1815, Bennet had gone to visit his daughter and son-in-law in Hunsford and proposed they take up residence at Longbourn and assume the roles of mistress and master.

William Bennet had informed his patron and patroness, Richard and Anne Fitzwilliam, of his decision and recommended the curate who filled in for him when he was away be preferred to the living.

Richard and Anne had wished the Bennets well and duly appointed the curate to the living.

With the recovery of Anne’s full health, she had welcomed the prospect of being a mother rather than dreading being with child as a death sentence. She and Richard had been blessed with a son and daughter.

Their son was born in September 1815. Even when the doctors had pronounced his wife fully capable of safely bearing children, Richard had wanted to wait for some more time to pass. It had and they had been blessed with James Lewis. Their daughter had been born in October 1818. She had been named Elaine Anne, called Ellie.

Due to complications of the birth, during which Richard had thought he would lose his Anne, she would never be able to bear another child. The Fitzwilliams would arrive from Kent on the morrow. Richard and Darcy were still as close as brothers.



“Giana, are your sons napping?” Elizabeth asked when she entered the music room and saw her sister sitting at the instrument which had been hers until she left Pemberley as a young bride.

“They are, Lizzy,” Georgiana responded while she allowed her fingers to brush over the familiar keys.

She had, with her brother and sister's blessing, delayed entering society until the season of 1813. Ben, at almost one, was old enough to travel so Elizabeth and Darcy were able to be with Giana and attended the season with her.

Kitty had shared the season with her best friend—such they had become soon after Lizzy married William—and neither had found anyone who interested them in their first season.

Lydia had come out during the season of 1814, and at her coming out ball Giana had met Lord Sed Rhys-Davies, the Marquess of Birchington and heir to the Duke of Bedford. At the time he was five and twenty and she nineteen.

A whirlwind courtship had ensued and by July 1814, Giana was the Marchioness of Birchington. She had borne two sons so far. An heir was born in January 1816, named Sedgewick per the family tradition. Robert William had come along in February 1819. Giana had felt the quickening a few days before leaving Birchington to travel to Pemberley and she sincerely hoped she would be blessed with a daughter this time.

“Our husbands are out riding; I expect to see them home before it is time for the midday meal. I am sure you will be pleased not only Kitty and Lydia and their families arrive on the morrow, but Tiffany and the De Melvilles as well,” Elizabeth enlightened her sister.

At a ball some weeks after Lydia's coming out she and Kitty had met the Wellington-Smythe brothers. Their grandfather had been an extremely wealthy shipbuilder who had purchased an extensive estate in Devonshire for his son.

The brothers' father had inherited the vast fortune when the grandfather had passed away. It was such he had taken a small portion of it and purchased the neighbouring estate for his second son who was less than fourteen months his brother's junior. The two were much like Jane and Lizzy, not only siblings, but best of friends as well.

It had been perfect. They met two sisters, the older brother began to court Kitty, while the younger, Lydia.

After lengthy courtships and engagements, the Bennet sisters married her respective Wellington-Smythe brother in June 1815. So far both sisters had a son and daughter. In January 1817, Kitty delivered a son; in February the same year Lydia delivered a daughter.

In April 1819, the reverse happened. First Lydia bore a son, and a few short weeks later Kitty bore a daughter. In addition to their friendship with Giana, the two youngest Bennets had become close friends with Tiffany.

Lady Tiffany Fitzwilliam had come out in 1812, but it was not until the little season of 1813 when she finally accepted a courtship from Wesley De Melville, Viscount Westmore, heir to the Earl of Jersey. They had married at the end of the season of 1814. To date Tiffany had delivered a son, followed by a daughter, and then another son in 1815, 1818, and 1820.

The Fitzwilliam matriarch and patriarch were at Hilldale with Andrew, Priscilla, and their five children. They would join the rest of the family in a sennight. It was the eldest grandchild's fourteenth birthday and she had wanted to celebrate at Hilldale with her grandparents knowing she would celebrate again at Pemberley with her aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Elizabeth loved how close the extended family was, which included some who were considered family even while they were not. As if her thoughts conjured her, just then Charlotte Forster entered the drawing room .

She was still wearing the muted colours of half mourning. Her mother, Lady Sarah Lucas, had slipped in her home and struck her head on the corner of a sideboard and never been conscious again. The terrible accident had occurred toward the end of March 1821. Charlotte, her husband, and their children had spent a month at Lucas Lodge consoling her father.

With the proximity of the former colonel's estate the friendship between Charlotte, Jane, and Elizabeth was as close

as it had ever been. Even though there was no official bond of family, they were as close as any family could be.

Less than a year after her wedding, Charlotte had been blessed with her first son. For the next five years, there had been nothing and then in 1816, Charlotte's daughter had been born.

“How is your father coping?” Elizabeth asked.

“As well as can be expected. He is more relaxed since he turned the estate over to Franklin and Mandy—the Lucas heir had married the former Miss Long. With both Maria and John married he feels like he is needed by Franklin and his children,” Charlotte averred.

“I am still amazed John has taken over my late Uncle Frank's law practice, I thought he was fixed in London at a large firm of solicitors,” Elizabeth observed .

Frank Phillips had passed away over a year past and thankfully John Lucas had been able to purchase the law offices in Meryton. Even though she had sufficient funds from her widow's portion combined with the proceeds from the sale of her husband's law practice to live independently, Hattie Phillips was living at Netherfield Park with the Gardiners.

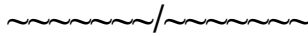
With his two sons running the business, Edward Gardiner had effectively retired from his concern some three years past. Bingley was still a silent partner; however, he held a smaller stake having sold about half of his shares back to Gardiner at a very good profit.

The eldest Gardiner daughter and son were each married to well matched spouses. The younger son had not found a woman to catch his interest yet, and the youngest, a girl, was being courted by a man with a good sized estate.

The Gardiner parents spent a number of months in Derbyshire each year—to Madeline Gardiner's delight. She had grown up in Lambton and thought Derbyshire the best of shires.

Except for the eldest son, the extended Gardiner family was expected in two days. Edward the younger would join his

parents, siblings, wife, and daughter a fortnight later .



In case you were interested in the remaining villains:

George Wickham languished eight years in King's Bench debtor's prison. With the family's agreement, Darcy and Richard had gone to see him with a onetime offer. One choice was to volunteer to move to Australia with the understanding if he ever returned to England he would be re-arrested. Alternatively, he could remain where he was for the rest of his days.

Wickham chose Australia and was sent off with one hundred pounds and the warning that the people there would not be so forgiving if he tried his usual tricks on them.

He was never heard from again, much to the pleasure of those he had bedevilled in England.

Caroline Bingley elected to be set up in her own establishment after a year under her aunt's thumb. She made the mistake of thinking she could re-establish herself in London. She discovered with great speed she was still very much ruined in Town so she had returned to Scarborough cursing Eliza Bennet all the way. She categorically refused to call her Elizabeth Darcy.

She lived as a bitter spinster for almost ten years in her own apartments. One morning when her maid of all work reported for duty in January 1820, she found Miss Bingley in her bed, not moving or breathing.

Other than her brother, sister, and brother-in-law, no others attended her funeral.



The next night, with all of their children put to bed, the adults of the extended family were seated in the largest of the drawing rooms enjoying tea, coffee, and some of Cook's delectable shortbread.

As they always did, Darcy and Elizabeth were seated next to each other ensuring they were close enough so there

was much contact between their bodies. More than ten years since they married, the fires of the love and passion had not diminished; if anything the flames burnt higher and with more heat than they had ever before.

“Elizabeth, if I had not had a change of heart and proceeded with what I planned in London, do you think we would be here together now, sublimely happy?” Darcy asked next to his wife’s ear so only she would hear.

“The path may have been more fraught with obstacles, but I do believe we would have found one another—eventually,” Elizabeth responded softly. “Do not forget you are not the only one who had a change of heart.”

The Darcys looked around the room and saw not a few present who had in their own changes of heart which also had far-reaching consequences.

“As you usually do, you have the right of it, my dearest, loveliest, most beloved Elizabeth.” Darcy drew his wife’s hand to his mouth and bestowed a lingering kiss.

The family members were used to seeing such displays of affection from the Darcys when in company with others, so no one commented on what they had seen.

Fanny Bennet was sitting surveying her family with a smile. ‘*Yes, God has been inordinately good to us.*’

~~~~~***The End***~~~~~

# Books by this Author

[Colonel Fitzwilliam Takes Charge](#)

[The First Mrs. Darcy](#)

[A Change of Fortunes \(Republished & Re-edited\)](#)

[Much Pride, Prejudice, and Sensibility - Without Enough Sense](#)

[Lady Catherine's Forbidden Love & Love Unrestricted Combined Edition](#)

[A Curate's Daughter](#)

[Mary Bennet Takes Charge](#)

[Admiral Thomas Bennet](#)

[Separated at Birth](#)

[Jane Bennet Takes Charge - 6<sup>th</sup> book in the 'Take Charge' series](#)

[Lives Begun in Obscurity.](#)

[Mrs. Caroline Darcy.](#)

[Lady Beth Fitzwilliam – Omnibus Edition](#)

[Anne de Bourgh Takes Charge – 5<sup>th</sup> book of the Take Charge Series](#)

[Mr. Bingley Takes Charge – 4<sup>th</sup> book of the Take Charge Series](#)

[The Repercussions of Extreme Pride & Prejudice](#)

[Miss Darcy Takes Charge- 3<sup>rd</sup> book of the Take Charge Series](#)

[Banished](#)

[Lady Catherine Takes Charge – 2<sup>nd</sup> book of the Take Charge Series](#)

[A Bennet of Royal Blood](#)



**Charlotte Lucas Takes Charge – 1<sup>st</sup> book of the Take Charge Series**

**Cinder-Liza**

**Unknown Family Connections**

***Surviving Thomas Bennet***

**The Discarded Daughter - Combined Edition**

**The Duke's Daughter: Combined Edition**

**The Hypocrite**

# Coming Soon

**Her Grace – December 2023/January 2024**

# About the Author

My website is live at [www.shanag-author.com](http://www.shanag-author.com). I have three children and after finally leaving a disastrous first marriage, a few years later, I found my soul mate—we had been together in our late teens—who I believed I had lost forever over 25 years ago when we separated over a youthful, and stupid, misunderstanding. We miraculously and unexpectedly reconnected about 4 years ago. It was written in the stars because the chances of our meeting again as we did were billions to one. We are now married. I live with the love of my life, and our animals, in Australasia.

Pride and Prejudice was assigned to me in an English literature class when I was 15. It was not my favourite book, as I was forced to read it. I did read it, but under protest in order to pass the class. I forgot about the book until I was in my 30's when in 2004 I discovered and watched, and then fell in love with, the 1995 6 part Pride and Prejudice version made in England for TV. I purchased a copy of the DVD which has been watched more times that I care to count. The tipping point was seeing the 2005 big screen adaption of P&P. In my humble opinion, Colin Firth is my preferred Darcy.

Not long after seeing the movie I acquired and read the complete works of Jane Austen on my Kindle. I read them all starting with Pride & Prejudice, it is my favourite by far of Miss Austen's great works, in fact my favourite, full stop. After I read it three or four times over, I wistfully said to myself: 'it is a great pity that she never wrote a sequel to P&P.'

I was searching the Kindle Store for books and for the fun of it I entered "Pride and Prejudice Sequel" into the search bar not expecting any results. The rest is history. I discovered the myriad of JAFF books. Once I devoured all of the sequels and continuations that I could find, I reluctantly tried a variation. I had the wrong-headed belief that I would not enjoy a variation as much as sequels. Boy was I ever wrong!

The more that I read, the more I started thinking of scenarios and heard stories in my head. I decided to start

writing, something that I never imagined in my wildest dreams that I would ever do. Today I am the proud owner of well over 1,500 JAFF novels that I have acquired on Amazon.

Although I never thought in my wildest dreams I would ever write a novel, I decided to try with my first offering, 'A Change of Fortunes' and I thought that would be it. Then other plot bunnies jumped into my head. Writing had become a full-time occupation for me. It seems that the more I write, the more I want to write. How many of us can say they truly love what they do for work? It is not work for me but a great pleasure.

I write under a penname as I value mine and my family's privacy highly. Part of my reasoning stems from some years ago I was relentlessly attacked online which is also the reason I do not have any social media presence under my penname or my real name. To call what I suffered bullying would vastly understate what happened. Let me ask you to imagine the worst kind of cyber stalking and cruelty and then multiply it by a factor of 100, or more!

It is the reason I am very sensitive to non-constructive and nasty criticism. I have no issue with criticism as long as it is in fact constructive. Especially after my experiences when I was attacked, I have a deep distrust of those who hide behind anonymity to hurl cruel and nasty comments. Please stay well, happy, and safe.