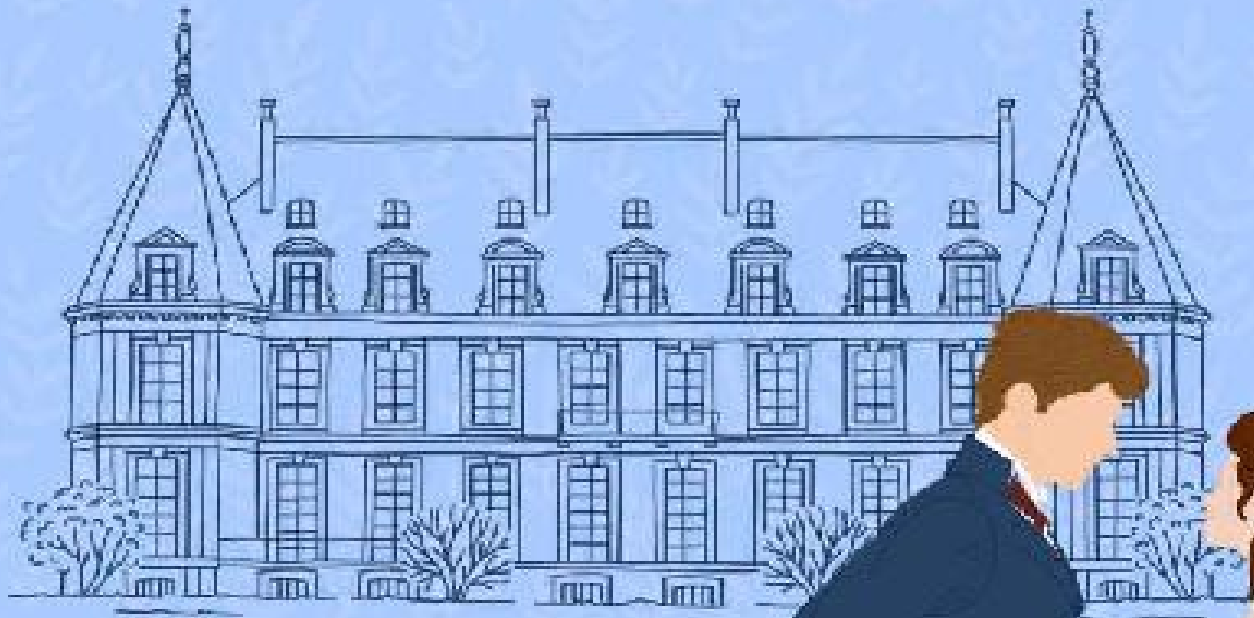


ALI SCOTT



A
Wound
DEEPER THAN
Pride

A WOUND DEEPER THAN PRIDE

A PRIDE & PREJUDICE VARIATION

ALI SCOTT



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For my parents

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PROLOGUE



April 20, 1812

Pain engulfed Elizabeth. It came in waves, rolling through her body every time she moved. Beneath her back, ice-cold stones stung like a thousand tiny daggers piercing into her flesh. The hum of gathering onlookers echoed in her ears, their muttering growing ever urgent. Above her, the blank sky revealed nothing. She gazed up at the vast, eternal space. Was it Heaven, opening up to claim her?

It was not real and yet too real. It could be a dream. But why would she dream of Mr Darcy, his face full of alarm at glimpsing her in a place she should never have been? The pain coiled around her neck and twisted its way across her ribs. It must be a dream—a dream of iron sparking against rough stones and clashing violently, of wood crunching against cobbles. A moan escaped from her lips. She prayed it was a dream, for surely she would wake soon.

A shadow blocked out the blinding sky, and she slowly turned her head towards it. A presence, dark and warm, hovered near her. Its strong silence inexplicably comforted her. Her vision clouded. The nearby scream of a horse filled her ears, followed by the sound of footsteps rushing past. Unable to withstand the uproar, Elizabeth closed her eyes, and the chaos suddenly stopped.

But not the pain.

CHAPTER ONE



The previous day

Elizabeth Bennet's travelling cases were packed and stacked neatly in front of the chaise beside her travelling companion, sixteen-year-old Maria Lucas. Cool morning air filled her lungs as she walked towards her friend. The ponies were being readied in the rough country lane in front of the house, and Elizabeth took a moment to appreciate the prettiness of the scene. Scatterings of delicate primroses lined the walls leading up to the parsonage. A few wayward chickens scratched around the pales near the garden gate. Somewhere in the fields beyond the lane, a lowing herd of cattle made their presence known. Fresh April clouds were dotted through the heavenly blue sky, their whiteness a perfect contrast to the green meadows beneath.

I cannot wait to quit this place, thought Elizabeth as she cast her eyes across the pastoral scene. *Never before have I so craved the familiarity of my own boisterous family.*

Elizabeth was to journey to London with Maria, but in truth, she did not care where she went as long as it was far from Kent and all its painful memories. Her visit to Charlotte Collins had begun well enough. It had been wonderful to be reacquainted with her dear friend, her happiness outweighing any discomfort caused by Charlotte's dreadful husband. Mr Collins—a ridiculous man whom Elizabeth had the misfortune of calling cousin—had only proposed to Charlotte after Elizabeth had rejected him. The entire sojourn had been peppered with his poorly disguised barbs regarding her lack

of taste in men. Her cousin alone would have been a trial, but added to the mixture was his patroness, the formidable Lady Catherine de Bourgh, causing Elizabeth's happy spirits to be put to the test. Equal parts condescending and authoritative, Lady Catherine had either interrogated or overlooked Elizabeth, depending on her humour. It had taken every ounce of Elizabeth's goodwill to laugh off their rudeness. Yet nothing had come even close to the final insult. Lady Catherine's nephew Mr Darcy—a proud, disagreeable, and scornful man—had arrived, unannounced, at the parsonage and had confessed his love for her in what could only be described as the most abominable proposal in Christendom. Nothing could have prepared her for it. She had no idea how a man in love should behave, and after two proposals, she was still none the wiser.

After declaring his love for her, Mr Darcy had extolled at considerable length all the ways in which she was unsuitable for the distinguished title of Mrs Darcy. He then had the audacity to be surprised when she took offence at his words! Angry at her refusal, Mr Darcy had gone on to point out some unpleasant truths regarding her family, mortifying Elizabeth and provoking her to reply with some feeling. She shuddered as she remembered all that had passed between them. *And this was a man supposedly in love with me!* His proposal had made her feel less inclined to marry than any other experience in her twenty years. Her departure from Kent had not come too soon.

Reaching the chaise after her brisk pace, she stopped to catch her breath. Charlotte was not long behind, arriving promptly to bid them adieu.

“Safe travels, dearest Lizzy. I look forward to receiving your letters. And pass all my best wishes to dear Jane.” Charlotte's voice was wistful as she drew Elizabeth into a long embrace.

“I shall write to you with every dull detail. You will soon regret your plea for correspondence.” Elizabeth attempted to hide her sadness with a tease. How difficult it was to say goodbye knowing the odious company Charlotte was condemned to! Her friend seemed to sense Elizabeth's dilemma and said little else. Moving away from Elizabeth, Charlotte placed a fond kiss on Maria's cheek before finding her place at Mr Collins' side. With no more farewells left to utter, Elizabeth and Maria climbed aboard the carriage. The door clicked behind them, and the horses' hoofs echoed on the stony path as the carriage rumbled away. From her seat by the window, Elizabeth watched as the parsonage disappeared from view, Charlotte becoming nothing more than a small shadow on the mud-splattered lane. As the carriage rolled and

creaked its way down the path, Elizabeth espied Maria opening a book. Returning to the window, her mind wandered elsewhere. She was thinking of the letter hastily pressed into her hand a little over a week ago.

Mr Darcy's letter now lay neatly folded inside Elizabeth's reticule. She was not sure why she had kept it. Certainly, she had no need to re-read it. Every bitter word had scorched its way onto her memory, and she could recall each angry remonstrance with absolute clarity. No, indeed, there was no reason to keep his correspondence, yet she found that she could not be parted from it. She wondered how long it had taken him to write. His neat, masculine handwriting had filled two sheets of paper. What had been his feelings as he wrote it?

Never once in their acquaintance had she thought of Mr Darcy as a passionate man. His proposal of marriage had changed her opinion of him in that regard. It was impossible to forget the pained incredulity of his expression as she refused him, and worse still, the fire in his eyes when she listed all the reasons why she disliked him. Truthfully, she realised, she did not know Mr Darcy at all.

She shivered. *And what of Mr Wickham?* Her stomach recoiled in disgust as she remembered that scoundrel's mercenary approach to Mr Darcy's younger sister. Every conversation she had ever had with Mr Wickham echoed in her ears. How had she not noticed his impropriety when disparaging Mr Darcy's character to all the neighbourhood? Shame burnt her cheeks when she recollected how quickly she was persuaded to Mr Wickham's version of events. The carriage rumbled past a field, and her feet tingled with a desire to be out of doors. *It would do you some good to be out in the open*, she told herself. *Instead of shut away, reliving every erroneous judgment.*

Glancing around the chaise, she saw Maria shut her book and tap its cover impatiently. Elizabeth turned her head away, her mind still full of Mr Darcy's letter. No man except those of her family circle had ever written to her directly, and to think that he had entrusted his sister's meditated elopement to her confidence! Elizabeth sighed quietly. His words would not leave her. *'But I was not then master enough of myself...'* Had she really provoked such a response in him? Returning her gaze to the window, a tear pricked at the corner of her eye, and she did her best to discreetly blink it away. *How I wish we could begin again*, she told herself. *I would know to keep up my guard around Mr Wickham, and with Mr Darcy I could...*

Elizabeth did not know how to end that thought. Her opinion of Mr Darcy was confused to say the least. His letter was the closest thing Elizabeth had ever had to a lover's note, and yet it contained very little in the way of endearment. Why did it affect her so? *I feel honoured by his candour*, she realised. *Perhaps that is why I cannot destroy his letter.*

"Have you ever been in love?" Maria Lucas's voice broke Elizabeth from her reverie. She turned her eyes from the window and cast them towards her young friend. Maria's expression was earnest. Elizabeth hesitated, unsure how to answer.

Thankfully, Maria filled the pause for her. "I fancied myself in love once. But now I am sure it was only an infatuation."

Elizabeth smiled broadly at her friend's proclamation. "Goodness! However could you tell the difference?"

Maria bit her lip and leant forwards conspiratorially. "You must promise not to tell Charlotte."

"I can make no such promise! What if you tell me that you were in love with a scoundrel? I could not keep that a secret from your sister."

"Arthur Sheppard is no scoundrel!" Maria exclaimed indignantly. "He is a fine man from a respectable family." Two small pink rosettes blossomed on her cheeks. "He brought me small nosegays every Sunday after church. And he always waited for me by the gate near Chapel Farm."

"Ah! So, Arthur Sheppard is the object of your heart!" Elizabeth's smile deepened. "Rest assured, your secret is safe with me. Charlotte could not object to such an agreeable brother-in-law."

"No! You have misunderstood me! Arthur Sheppard is *not* my beau. I thought myself in love with him, but I am now convinced of my mistake."

"Your mistake! Maria, you have caught my attention." Elizabeth took Maria's soft, plump hand in hers, relieved for a distraction from her own thoughts. "You must tell me everything about Arthur Sheppard and how he convinced you not to love him."

Maria cast her eyes down. "There is not much more to say."

"How do you know that it was an infatuation and not love?"

"Because there was not a moment when I did not think of him! When I worked my embroidery, I could only choose threads that matched the colour of his eyes. When I dined with my family, I wondered what dishes he might prefer. At church, I could distinguish his voice from others in the congregation, and I thought that there could be no finer baritone in all of

Hertfordshire.”

“In my inexperienced opinion, these are all pretty symptoms of the very deepest affection.”

“But I knew it could not be true love!”

“What makes you so sure?”

“When he went away for his apprenticeship, I thought about him every day for almost two weeks, and then I stopped thinking about him altogether. If I truly loved him, my heart would not forget so quickly.”

Forget! Oh, to quickly forget! Elizabeth paused, as once again her own memories assailed her.

It was the sound of mud underfoot that had alerted Elizabeth to his presence. Mr Darcy, his face as severe as ever, walked restlessly in the clearing between the trees. She stood still, unable to move from her place upon the footpath. He was the last person she had wished to see. This was her favourite spot, her refuge from the world. How often had she walked here and chanced upon him? Their encounters had always seemed accidental, but now she realised that their meetings had really been by his design. Mr Darcy ceased his pacing when he saw her. Wordlessly, he held her gaze, those dark, brooding eyes revealing nothing. Her breath caught in her chest. With long, decisive strides, he crossed the grass and stopped abruptly in front of her.

“I have been walking in the grove for some time in the hope of meeting you,” he said, his tone one of haughty composure. Bewildered, she looked up into his face. Something in his expression shifted, and when he spoke again, his voice was laced with an undeniable anguish. “Will you do me the honour of reading this letter?” Into her hands, he placed an envelope. As he did, his fingers pressed against hers in a final farewell, and Elizabeth tasted every unspoken word on her lips. Wishing to say more, she opened her mouth, but Mr Darcy swiftly bowed and gave her his back. Returning to his nearby horse, he mounted the animal, and—with a kick of his heels—he was gone.

Had it been her imagination that saw the slight hunch of his shoulders as he stalked away? For how long would *his* heart be disappointed?

“Lizzy, what are you thinking?” Maria hissed. “You believe me foolish? I cannot speak to Charlotte about these matters. She is hopelessly practical when it comes to love.”

With some relief, Elizabeth turned her attention back to Maria and her easier dilemmas, hiding a grin at her companion’s accurate description of Charlotte.

“I am no expert when it comes to love, but I have a great deal of experience with foolishness,” she replied. Shaking away the image of proud, handsome, sorrowful Mr Darcy, she patted the embroidered squab next to her. “Come closer, my dear. The Arthur Sheppards of this world are much easier to love than some other gentlemen I could name. I shall give you all the knowledge that I have at my disposal.”

Nodding eagerly, Maria listened with rapt attention, drinking in Elizabeth’s advice with every breath.

CHAPTER TWO



With a lumbering rattle, the chaise rolled to a stop in front of the Gardiners' house. A great whooping noise could be heard from one of the windows. Elizabeth smiled. It would do her some good to have all the distractions of her noisy relations. Her uncle and aunt had four young children, all of varying heights, ages, and characters. Whatever their differences, the Gardiner children were united by a love of their older cousin Elizabeth. Peering up at the house, she saw a flurry of heads pushing back the curtain at the nursery window. As they waited for the driver to settle the horses, she glanced at Maria and grinned at her friend's apprehensive expression.

"Do not be afraid. My little cousins are perfectly harmless—most of the time."

Maria's eyes widened at Elizabeth's words. "I am sure that all your relations are charming."

"So kindly put—yet we both know this to be a falsehood given that we are acquainted with Mr Collins," Elizabeth said, giving Maria a wink. She paused when she saw Maria's flustered expression. "Forgive me. He is your relation now, and thus I should not speak poorly of him."

"You do not like Mr Collins?" Maria's brow furrowed in confusion. "But he seems so knowledgeable—and to be on such close terms with Lady Catherine de Bourgh." Her voice dropped to a reverential whisper. "I cannot believe we dined at Rosings *nine* times."

Elizabeth laughed. "I am surprised we were allowed to dine there at all." Catching Maria's look of surprise, she continued, "Lady Catherine does not

strike me as a benevolent woman. I rather wondered at us being invited in the first place.”

“Perhaps she desired a more varied company.”

“You mean to say Mr Collins’s company is not sufficient?” A sharp knock on the door indicated that the driver was ready to assist the ladies. The deep smell of London stung Elizabeth’s nostrils as she was helped from the chaise.

“No, not at all! Mr Collins has many fine qualities to be sure.” Maria descended behind her. “Charlotte says he treats her well and that his work in the parish gives them a common purpose...” She hesitated. “I suppose he could talk a little less.”

Elizabeth laughed heartily. “That, my dear, is an understatement.” The door to her uncle and aunt’s house swung open, and whatever Elizabeth was about to say next was lost to a mob of laughter and embraces.



The rest of the day passed without much incident. Dinner was a boisterous affair. Elizabeth’s uncle ordered an early meal in honour of the hungry travellers. Elizabeth had not realised how tired or ravenous she was until she began eating. Luckily, she was among family and did not feel any compunction about helping herself to a second portion of buttered potatoes. It was a relief to be amongst one’s own people where there was no judgment or pretension. Mr and Mrs Gardiner shared jokes and news of their mutual acquaintances, and Elizabeth did not know whether her sides ached from overconsumption of food or from laughter. Her only worry was Jane, who—apart from her welcoming smile at their arrival—said very little all evening. The separation between Elizabeth and Jane had been a little shy of four months, and her silence was unusual. Elizabeth was on the verge of commenting on Jane’s lack of appetite when a second course of lemon pudding and assorted fruits appeared, creating such a chorus from the Gardiner children that Elizabeth’s worries for her sister were momentarily set aside. Cards and games followed their meal, with many happy arguments among Elizabeth’s cousins. Even Jane managed a smile as they all watched little Henry attempt to recite the Lord’s Prayer despite having only a passing acquaintance with many of its words. Indeed, the evening’s merriment was

just the tonic Elizabeth needed to erase all the recent tumultuous events from her mind. For a few blissful hours, a sense of equilibrium was restored—Kent seemed a lifetime away rather than twenty-odd miles.



It was only later, when she readied herself for bed, that Elizabeth remembered her brief conversation with Maria from their arrival. That Mr Collins might be considered a good husband had never occurred to her. His conversation, his tastes, his manners were—to her mind—so ridiculous that she had never considered his better qualities. In the spirit of self-reflection, she decided to re-examine her opinion.

Maria was correct. Pompous and fawning he may be, but Mr Collins was essentially harmless. And Charlotte was given a great deal more freedom as Mrs Collins than if she were sitting, unmarried, gathering cobwebs at Lucas Lodge. Elizabeth sighed softly as she ran her comb through her hair. She had been right to refuse her cousin's proposal, she knew it, yet she could not shake the feeling that her life was at a crossroads. She glanced over to the bed where Jane lay, hoping to speak to her, but at that moment Maria, in the bed opposite, opened her eyes. She could tell by the gentle rise and fall of Jane's chest that her sister was close to sleep, and all hopes of a private conversation were quashed.

You would not be happier if you were Mrs Elizabeth Collins, she told herself. But what if you were Mrs Elizabeth Darcy? That question was a little harder to answer. Elizabeth did her best to push it from her mind as she climbed into the bed next to Jane, determined that Mr Darcy would not be the last thing she thought about before she fell asleep.

CHAPTER THREE



Flinging himself into his favourite armchair, Fitzwilliam Darcy stared glumly into the dwindling fire. A man of purpose, he detested being alone with his thoughts. *Especially*, he noted, *when my mind will do nothing but torment me*. It had been nine days since Darcy had made the worst decision of his life, and try as he might, he was unable to rid himself of the gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach. What had possessed him to propose to *Miss Elizabeth Bennet*—a woman beneath him in nearly every way possible? It had been a moment of weakness, nothing more. He had spent so long picturing Elizabeth as his wife that he had lost all sense of reality. Too many nights had been filled with the image of her beautiful face sleeping next to him, the touch of her fingers entwined with his, the curve of her lips as she smiled. He sighed deeply, his broad shoulders slouching further into the dark leather of his seat. He had thought that she might be surprised at the speed of his proposal—he had not expected her to be outraged. *Well, it is simply her loss*. There were far more suitable women for him to pursue. London was overflowing with them. He would find a woman worthy of his love. Closing his eyes, he tried to picture himself proposing to someone else. All he could see was Elizabeth, in the library at Netherfield Park. She had been curled up on the chair by the window with her head bent over a book, completely unaware, he now realised, of how she utterly captivated him.

He buried his face in his hands. *Why in God's name did I do it?* It had been the painful realisation that he might never see her again, the thought of her gone forever, that had been unbearable. He groaned softly. Opening his

eyes, he reached out for the decanter of wine on the nearby table and filled his glass. The heady aroma flooded his nostrils, and he inhaled deeply—for a blissful moment forgetting his sorrow. Slowly, he sipped the wine, hoping to submit to its numbing power.

Elizabeth's refusal echoed dully in his ears. *Arrogant and conceited.* Those had been her words. How could he have been so mistaken in her estimation of him? He absently swirled the glass. And then there was the letter. His stomach contracted. Written in a fit of anger, it had been his intention to disabuse Elizabeth of her misconceptions regarding his behaviour. Once he had begun, he had been unable to stop until he had—to his mind—justified his conduct. A powerful feeling had struck him, however, as soon as her delicate fingers had closed around the envelope. It had been regret. That damned letter was to be his last communication with her, and he had used the opportunity to criticise her family. A heavy sadness clawed at his chest. If she thought him uncivil before, what would her opinion be now?

"You are not the first man to be rejected," he spoke aloud to the empty room. "A little bruised vanity is easily repaired." *But what of your heart? a small voice inside him whispered. Is your heart so untouched that you would set her aside this easily?*

Sighing again, he placed his wine glass on the occasional table next to the chair and rose awkwardly from his seat. Peering into the mirror over the mantelpiece, he smiled ruefully at his rather ruffled-looking reflection. *You are likely never to see her again. Now would be a good time to begin forgetting about Miss Elizabeth Bennet.*

A knock at the door broke into his melancholia. It was Mrs Annesley, his sister's companion. A genteel woman some years past the age of forty, she possessed an unobtrusive perceptiveness that Darcy valued greatly. Darcy's younger sister, Georgiana, was in need of such a person after the unhappy events of last summer. Motherly and discreet, Mrs Annesley had been just the woman to build Georgiana's confidence back up again. Well, he had hoped to introduce Georgiana to *another* woman...one whose propensity towards happiness would help Georgiana to enjoy life...to be more spirited and... Darcy flexed his hand impatiently. *You must stop thinking of Elizabeth.*

"Pardon my intrusion, sir." Mrs Annesley was looking at him expectantly.

"How may I assist you?"

"It is Miss Darcy's room, sir. I have had a note from the upholsterers. They wish to know your decision for the fabric." Georgiana was staying with

their aunt, Lady Matlock, at her residence in Richmond, and was due to return soon. Mrs Annesley had not accompanied her—Georgiana would be well cared for under the watchful eye of their aunt. Mrs Annesley had a few relatives that she had wished to visit in London and so had stayed with Darcy at Grosvenor Street. While Georgiana was away, Darcy had decided to decorate her private rooms as a surprise. He deeply regretted embarking on this venture, not sure that he was equal to it. Mrs Annesley apparently sensed this, as she had helpfully adopted the role of chief organiser.

“The fabric?” Darcy tried his best to recall what the choices had been.

“It was either the sprig or vase motif.”

“But of course.” Darcy only had a vague notion as to what she alluded. Doubtlessly, they had conversed about this matter when his mind had been elsewhere. “The furnishings should have...” He cast his eyes swiftly around the room. An urn in the far corner caught his notice. “...a vase motif.” He stood straighter, attempting to pass off his guess with some conviction. Saying nothing, Mrs Annesley pursed her lips ever so slightly. Sensing his final decision was not in fact correct, he folded his hands behind his back and continued in what he hoped was a confident tone. “No, pardon. Georgiana adores flowers. We should have the fabric with the sprigs.”

Mrs Annesley’s shoulders eased a touch. “An excellent choice, sir.” The fine lines around her eyes creased as she beamed at him. “The daffodil sprigs will set off the golden tones in the bed curtains admirably. A dash of brightness will be just the thing to put a smile on Miss Darcy’s face.” Her eyes unconsciously darted around the darkened corners of Darcy’s study. “And, of course, I could speak to the upholsterers should there be any other rooms you wish to decorate.” Darcy bristled at her implication. The room was rather gloomy, but he had been too distracted to notice.

“I thank you, but no, Mrs Annesley.” He bowed stiffly. “Georgiana’s rooms are quite enough at present.”

“Of course.”

After Mrs Annesley left, Darcy walked over to the fireplace and thrust the poker into the fire with a little more force than was necessary. Elizabeth would have known which pattern to choose. He was sure of it. Sparks from the fire scattered up the chimney. Fading embers in the grate crackled hazily. The firelight cast soft flickering shadows against the walls, and he was painfully aware of the silence emanating from all four corners of the room. Darcy suddenly felt very alone. He reached out for the decanter and topped

up his glass. Taking a large mouthful, he revelled in the potent floral notes. The wine might punish him with a sore head tomorrow, but anything—surely—would be preferable to this unwavering, gaping loneliness.

CHAPTER FOUR



Gazing out of the drawing room window, Elizabeth surveyed the city, contemplating whether she would prefer to live in the countryside or in town. Pockets of sunlight peered through the rooftops of the neighbouring houses, and a constant clattering and shouting came from the street below. An invigorating energy permeated all that she saw. Yet for all the new and interesting happenings on Gracechurch Street, Elizabeth could not help but yearn for a touch of fresh air. Yesterday's journey had caught up with her, and she had awoken from a fitful sleep with an overwhelming restiveness that only a long walk could satisfy. Sadly, the streets of Cheapside, while featuring many fine warehouses, homes, and shops, were far too busy to accommodate this desire. *Perhaps there might be another part of London where I may take a quieter stroll with Maria and Jane*, thought Elizabeth, resolving to speak to her aunt.

Breaking her gaze from the view, Elizabeth looked over at her older sister. Jane was sitting on the sofa next to her, quietly sewing something delicate for one of their Gardiner cousins. The dull morning light shone upon Jane's downcast face, her beautiful lashes dark against her pale skin. Unaware of Elizabeth's observation, Jane stopped her work. She sighed softly and turned the little garment over in her hands, her slender fingers searching for a wayward stitch that needed unpicking. *Jane has eaten next to nothing this morning*, Elizabeth noted. *She looks so wan*. Her cheekbones were sharper, and her gown hung more loosely from her frame. A flutter of compassion pulled at Elizabeth's heart. Being separated from her sister had meant that her physical transformation was more pronounced to Elizabeth's

eyes. Jane's natural brightness appeared greatly dimmed, and there was a heavy sadness in every one of her movements.

Elizabeth contemplated how best to act. Ever since Mr Darcy's revelation that Mr Bingley was unaware of Jane's presence in London, Elizabeth had been plagued by the desire to speak openly, but a moment of solitude had not yet been found. The principal obstacle to Elizabeth and Jane's sisterly congress came in the unassuming form of Maria Lucas. As pleasant—and as uncomplicated—as Maria's company was, her presence meant that all three were required to share a room. Elizabeth had not wished to hold such a sensitive conversation within Maria's earshot. Thankfully, Maria was engrossed in her own letter writing on the far side of the room, making it the perfect moment for Elizabeth to broach the topic.

“Jane, dearest, are you well?”

Startled, her sister looked up. “Why yes, of course. Why do you ask?”

“You have hardly said a word since Maria and I returned from Kent.”

“Forgive me. I should have asked you more about your trip. Staying under the same roof as Mr Collins cannot have been easy.”

For the briefest instant, Elizabeth considered confessing everything. As she looked at Jane's earnest expression, however, she did not know where to begin. Mr Darcy's appraisal of their family had been so mortifying, his confession of his involvement in her sister's affairs so sensitive, that she did not think she could add to Jane's suffering.

“I can honestly say that Charlotte's company was a pleasure,” she offered at last, “and married life has undeniably improved our cousin's company.” She continued saucily, “Marriage has helped him overcome his desire to be betrothed to me—and our relationship is all the better for it.” Jane's lips twitched into a smile. Buoyed by her success in raising her sister's spirits, Elizabeth continued, “But I did not enquire after you so we can discuss the Collinses' marriage. I ask how you are faring because I have never seen your lovely face so unhappy.”

Jane blushed at Elizabeth's words. “I do not know what you mean. I am perfectly content staying with our uncle and aunt.”

Undeterred, Elizabeth pressed on. “You need not keep any secrets from me. I know you too well. You cannot disguise your disappointment. Do you still think of Mr Bingley?”

Jane silently turned her attention back to her stitches, turning the embroidery around in her hands. “And what of him? The message was clear.

Mr Bingley was never mine in the first place.” Lips trembling, Jane passed the needle through the fabric, still unable to meet Elizabeth’s gaze. “When she called upon me, Miss Bingley strongly hinted that Miss Darcy would be a more suitable match for her brother. She even offered to send him my best wishes should he ever be fortunate enough to secure Miss Darcy’s hand.”

Anger coursed through Elizabeth’s veins upon hearing this information. Miss Bingley’s deception of her own brother was dreadful; to pay Jane a visit and pretend that his affections lay elsewhere was abhorrent. She was suddenly struck with the very great desire to wipe the smirk off Miss Bingley’s face. She reached out and held Jane’s hand.

“You are talking of *Miss Bingley*. What do you know of *Mr Bingley*’s intentions? Has he ever suggested that he views Miss Darcy with any particular regard?”

Jane paused. “Well no, he never mentioned her—except to say that she is a highly accomplished musician and rather tall for her age.”

“You see! You have no proof of his attachment to Miss Darcy! Only what Miss Bingley would have you believe.”

“You are beginning to sound like Mama.” Jane shook her head, tears filling her eyes. “Please desist. This is too painful to discuss. If Mr Bingley loves me, then why does he stay away?”

Elizabeth paused, the answer suspended on her lips. *He does not know you are here*. Carefully, she replied, “Perhaps there is a reason that prevents him from visiting?” A tear rolled down Jane’s face and splashed on Elizabeth’s hand.

Shoulders hunched, she said quietly, “He does not love me. That is the reason. There can be no other explanation.” Elizabeth’s heart filled with sorrow. To know the truth behind her sister’s pain and yet to be so powerless to stop it was unbearable.

Squeezing Jane’s hand, she said, “Can we not call on Miss Bingley again? Perhaps at a time when her brother might be in?”

Jane shook her head. “No, I will not.” She continued, her voice wavering in her attempt to steady it, “My heart has suffered enough humiliation. Please allow me to keep my dignity.”

Gently, Elizabeth raised her hand to Jane’s face and wiped the tears from her beloved sister’s cheek. “Do not reproach yourself—you could not have behaved with more dignity,” she replied softly. *And there can be no one with a more deserving heart*. Never before had Elizabeth felt so protective of her

older sister. Jane was like an injured sparrow—wounded, bruised, and too scared to fly. A sound from the other side of the room indicated that their conversation had attracted the notice of Maria.

“Goodness, whatever is the matter?” she exclaimed upon seeing Jane’s tearful expression.

Desirous to save Jane from repeating her innermost pain, Elizabeth interjected swiftly, “Nothing that a little peace and quiet cannot solve. Come Maria, we shall leave Jane to her needlework.” Giving her sister a sympathetic smile, she rose to link arms with Maria. “Let us discover what my aunt is planning.”



Elizabeth’s aunt Gardiner was writing at her little desk in the corner of her own sitting room. She smiled at Elizabeth and Maria when they entered. “Girls, you are just in time! I am attempting to organise my week as best I can. I have promised Hannah a visit to the marionette theatre as a birthday treat, but Flora has grown so big that I need to buy some more fabric for her dresses. I have not yet decided which to do today. What would be your preference?”

“You are too generous,” said Elizabeth, smiling broadly.

“We are at your disposal.” Maria nodded enthusiastically next to her.

Mrs Gardiner returned Elizabeth’s smile with one of her own. “Generosity is not my motive—I take great pleasure from your company. It is good to have more laughter and happiness about the house.”

Her words prompted Elizabeth to cast her mind back to Jane, whose quiet stillness spoke of the deepest sorrow. *If only Mr Bingley were to know of Jane’s presence in London.* It might be enough to nudge him into renewing their acquaintance. That Mr Bingley had loved Jane once could not be doubted.

“Perhaps we should go shopping.” Mrs Gardiner continued with her planning. “A pair of shoes await me at Wainwrights. And I need to pass through Mayfair to return a call to Hannah’s godmother.”

Remembering her previous desire for a walk, Elizabeth’s ears pricked at her aunt’s suggestion. “Mayfair?” she repeated. “Are you there often?”

“More often than I would like. Mrs Bradshaw’s company is more of a

necessary duty than a visit of pleasure. I do not like to spend too much time there.” Mrs Gardiner’s face twisted into a grimace. “I was there last month, when Jane wished to call upon an acquaintance in Grosvenor Street.”

Elizabeth digested this new information with interest. A glimmer of an idea crept into her mind. Grosvenor Street was where the Bingleys resided—Jane had not mentioned visiting anyone else during her stay with the Gardiners. It was only one street—surely it could not be so hard to explore. What if she were to chance upon Mr Bingley? *Is it possible?* She bit her lip. It was an absurd notion. Yet the image of poor Jane would not leave her. For her sister’s sake, anything would be worth a try.

Adopting what she hoped was an innocent tone, Elizabeth addressed her aunt. “I do believe Jane mentioned that visit in her letters to me.” Here, Elizabeth paused. She did not wish to lie, but she could not stand by and watch Jane suffer. Seizing the moment, she continued, “Her description of Mayfair was so vivid. Perhaps I could take my sketchbook—I could make a drawing for Charlotte. She and I often discussed Jane’s letters. I am sure she would love a picture.”

Maria started at this piece of information. “You did? I should not think Charlotte would be the least bit interest—”

Elizabeth squeezed Maria’s arm before cutting her off. “You must have been absent for those conversations.” Swiftly turning back to her aunt, she said, “If you were planning to travel through Mayfair, perhaps you could drop us near where you left Jane? Maria could accompany me. And a servant too, if you wish.” She paused again. “Perhaps Jane could stay at home. She mentioned to me that her head was sore.” At this, Mrs Gardiner narrowed her eyes. Thankfully, she chose not to interrogate Elizabeth further.

“Very well. I shall call for the carriage.” Mrs Gardiner scrutinised Elizabeth. “What should I tell Jane?”

“You must say that we are all going shopping and insist that she stays to rest. The quiet will do her a world of good.” A thrill of anticipation rushed through her as she imagined Mr Bingley learning of her sister’s presence in London. “Indeed, I have every hope that Jane’s spirits will soon be restored to their former happiness.”

CHAPTER FIVE



“Good gracious, the houses are as impressive as you described!” Maria gazed breathlessly at the buildings around them. Elizabeth glanced at her friend. Maria was blissfully unaware of the real reason why they were walking, sketchbooks in hand, around an unfamiliar part of London. They had been dropped off at the gateway to the railed gardens in Grosvenor Square with the promise that they would meet back at the designated spot in two hours. The clocks had just chimed eleven, and the rain clouds had all but disappeared. Mrs Gardiner’s youngest maid, Frances, would accompany them, for Mrs Gardiner would not be satisfied unless they were assisted by someone familiar with London’s streets. Elizabeth had been pleased to note that Frances was the sort of servant possessing a total lack of curiosity; she was utterly disinterested in anything that Elizabeth or Maria did.

“You must stay together,” Mrs Gardiner had warned as she bid them an affectionate adieu. “This may be an affluent, quieter part of London, but you should keep to the larger roads and be on constant lookout for pickpockets and beggars.” Elizabeth had simply nodded, so lost was she in her scheming. It was only as she began to peer down the noisy streets lined with imposing houses that she fully appreciated her aunt’s wisdom.

“Wherever shall we go first?” Maria opened her notebook and began to make a sketch of the embellished cornices adorning one particularly majestic house. Elizabeth felt a twinge of guilt. Her younger friend was entirely too naïve to suspect there was any other motive to visiting this fashionable corner of London. *And what exactly is your plan?* a little nagging doubt whispered.

How do you intend to find Mr Bingley?

“We shall go this way,” replied Elizabeth, shaking off her apprehensiveness. *If only I had found a way to persuade my sister to disclose Mr Bingley’s direction.* She linked arms with Maria as they strolled the square. Frances trailed behind, obviously pleased to have an unexpected reprieve from her household duties.

Grosvenor Square was smaller than Elizabeth had expected but every bit as fashionable as she had imagined. In its centre was a statue of King George I astride a rather grumpy-looking horse. Trees and neatly kept shrubs were scattered about the surrounding gardens, the air filled with the fresh smell of wet grass and newly trampled mud. Rain had fallen earlier that morning, and swirling puddles now littered the roads leading from the square, their flat surfaces creating a mirror to the blank sky above. Reflections of grand houses peered up from the water, their impressive stillness only broken when a carriage clattered through them—the ripples splashing the feet of unfortunate passers-by. Piercing reverberations snapped forth from a nearby coachman’s whip, alarming Maria, and Elizabeth felt her friend’s grip tighten as the carriages rattled past. With some trepidation, they eventually crossed to the quieter side of the road.

“Let us try here,” said Elizabeth, holding back a sigh of relief as she finally found the beginning of Grosvenor Street. Maria obediently opened her little book and began to make observations. While her friend was occupied, Elizabeth broke away and slowly walked down the road. The enormity of her task suddenly overwhelmed her. *This is foolhardy,* she chastised herself. *How precisely do you intend to encounter Mr Bingley, and what will you even say to him when you do?*

Squaring her shoulders, she shook away her doubt. Her task was not impossible—she had already accomplished a great deal. An impulsive suggestion meant that she was now on the road where Mr Bingley was known to reside. She was free to stroll the street under the guise of admiring its buildings. How many times had she successfully feigned unassuming innocence in her lifetime? Surely she could convince the supremely unsuspecting Mr Bingley that it was fate and not design that brought her into his path. She caught sight of her reflection in a window. *You must be careful,* Elizabeth told herself with a wry smile. *There is a very real danger that you are turning into Mama.*

The houses on Grosvenor Street possessed an understated elegance that

was quite to Elizabeth's taste. Fashionable porticos framed the entrances, and long columns stood proudly between intricately carved masonry. She wandered farther down the road, peering up from her bonnet at the impressive buildings. *What kind of person would live here?* Somehow she found it hard to imagine modest Mr Bingley residing comfortably in one of these grand edifices, but of course, the home belonged to Mr Hurst. Servants bustled about the houses, liveried footmen calling out instructions to one another. A gentleman's laugh drew her attention, and for a moment she thought it was Mr Bingley. She drew out her watch; nearly thirty minutes had passed since she had said goodbye to her aunt. A few more turns about the road and soon it would be midday. Perhaps Mr Bingley would be returning from a morning ride. Or Miss Bingley might have deemed the hour fashionable enough to go shopping. She shuddered at the thought of renewing *that* acquaintance. *Hateful spider*, thought Elizabeth. *I would love to see her expression upon learning of Jane and Mr Bingley's reacquaintance.* She sighed. *If it ever happens.* The futility of her task struck her anew. Perhaps it was time to get out her sketchbook after all. She could find a quiet spot to make some quick outlines. After putting her aunt to the trouble of dropping her here, it would not do to return with a book full of empty pages.

She passed by a large, handsome townhouse with a freshly polished door. Something about it caught her notice, and Elizabeth was momentarily distracted from her quest to find Mr Bingley. She stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the main entrance. The windows were unshuttered, and there was enough hustle and bustle coming from the servants' half-basement to suggest the house was in use. Yet the rooms on the upper floors seemed quiet, almost undisturbed. *How odd.* Perhaps the owner was a man of business and had many affairs to settle. Or maybe there had been some unfortunate news, and the family were in no humour to receive guests. Or perhaps its residents simply preferred solitude. They were clearly very rich, by the look of the ornate wrought-iron balconies and stuccoed facade. Placing her hand on the black railing, Elizabeth wondered why the house had even attracted her attention. Returning her gaze to the road, she stretched her neck in search of Maria, but her friend was nowhere to be seen.

"Maria, where are you?" she called, her brows knitted in confusion. She had not meant to leave her so far behind. Elizabeth's heart began to hammer in her chest. She looked to and fro. The street was quiet, but she could not see Maria's distinctive bonnet with its yellow ribbon. She spotted Frances

leaning against a wall. Maria was not with her. Two young boys scampered past, their dirtied faces smiling at whatever mischief they had undoubtedly caused. A stout footman called out after them. There was still no sign of Maria. A carriage rumbled by, splashing Elizabeth's boots with rainwater. Panic took hold. *Foolish girl*. Elizabeth did not know whether she meant Maria or herself. They should never have come here. It had been a ridiculous idea. This was a mistake.

"Maria," Elizabeth called again, attempting to make her voice sound a little more authoritative against the background of the impressive Mayfair lane. Where had her young friend gone? "Maria, you are needed. You must come directly!"

"Yes, Lizzy?" A voice at her elbow made her jump.

"Wherever have you been?" It took all of Elizabeth's reserve not to take Maria by the shoulders and give her a good shake, so frightened was she by her friend's disappearance.

Maria looked at her innocently, unaware of Elizabeth's alarm. "There was a fanlight above that door that looked just like Mama's lace handkerchief, and I decided to sketch it. I thought you would be pleas—"

Maria's eyes widened at something behind Elizabeth's shoulder.

"What is the matter?"

"Good gracious, whatever is *he* doing here?"

Elizabeth spun round. Standing at the top of the steps was the same handsome face that she had no expectation of ever seeing again. It was Mr Darcy, as still as a statue, with a deep blush blossoming over his face. Instantly paralysed with mortification, Elizabeth felt her own face flush red. *Whatever must he be thinking?* An overwhelming urge to run seized her. Stepping backwards, she reached out for Maria's hand.

"We should leave here immediately," she heard her own voice say, but in truth she did not know whom she was addressing. Maria was by Elizabeth's side now. She was speaking to Elizabeth, but her words were lost to the clamouring noise of the suddenly busy street.

Desperate to flee, Elizabeth paid her no notice. Everything around her seemed to fade away. It all happened in an instant, but time slowed as she saw Mr Darcy's eyes open wide, his hat and gloves discarded to the floor as he rushed down the steps towards her. He was calling out to her, but she could not hear his words over the growing thunder of an oncoming carriage. His steps had quickened, and now he was nearly upon her. The screech of the

wheels grew louder, and then, somewhere behind her, a woman screamed. The last thing she felt was the pressure of hands around her waist, and the cold, hard, stony mud as her body slammed into the ground.

CHAPTER SIX



Unsteady hands ran through Elizabeth's hair. She opened her eyes slowly. Swimming through her vision was a masculine face, its expression full of concern.

"Elizabeth...Miss Bennet...are you hurt?" A deep, familiar voice spoke to her. She turned towards it. It was Mr Darcy, on his knees beside her, his hands gently resting on either side of her head. His clothes were muddy, and splatters of dirt clung to his face and hair. With a tremendous effort she shook her head, paying no attention to the sharp darts of pain shooting up her neck.

"Forgive me, Miss Bennet. Are you well enough to stay here? I shall return to you soon." He glanced at the small group of people gathering around a crumpled shadow on the road. "I am afraid..." He paused, clearly at a loss for what to say. "I am afraid that your friend..."

As he spoke, someone in the crowd moved aside. A mud-splattered yellow ribbon lay strewn across the road, its pattern hidden under spots of freshly spilt blood. Elizabeth inhaled sharply at the sight. Her ribs screamed in agony, and she instinctively put a trembling hand to her side.

"Maria. *Dear God.*" Elizabeth tried to stand, but she could no longer feel her feet. She pushed herself into a seated position, a wave of nausea passing through her, and it was all she could do not to gag. On seeing her distress, Mr Darcy placed his hand on her shoulder. It was a simple gesture, but the firm pressure soothed her instantly.

"They are saying that she is alive, Miss Bennet," he said gently, looking over at the gathering crowd. "But she was struck by the carriage." The pressure of his hand grew greater. "You must stay where you are and do not

move.” Mutely, Elizabeth obeyed. Her eyes were fixed upon the ribbon trailing across the ground. She watched as Mr Darcy strode across and quickly dispatched the growing number of onlookers, giving orders to his servants, who had come to assist him. The commotion around her grew louder. *Can this be real?* A terrible light-headedness gripped her body every time she moved, requiring her to place her hands on the ground to steady herself. Water oozed through her splayed fingers; the icy, wet cobbles of the road were painfully cold under her touch.

Everything around her assumed a dreamlike quality. Mr Darcy bent low over Maria’s body and carefully, in one motion, scooped her into his arms with the utmost care. Turning, he walked past Elizabeth from her seat on the pavement and directly up the steps. Looking up, she gasped when she caught sight of poor Maria. Her dear friend’s eyes were fluttering, and her face was a deathly white, save for an angry, red swelling snaking its way across her forehead. Nausea flowed through Elizabeth again, and she fought the urge to lie back in a faint.

Mr Darcy disappeared with Maria into the dark hall, followed by several footmen who were awaiting his orders. For a moment, Elizabeth was alone. Or at least she felt alone. The people who had gathered to gawk at Maria now turned their gaze towards her. Surrounded by strangers, she had never felt more isolated than under their scrutiny. She stared back at them, uncertain of what to do next. Beside her, a movement caught her attention. It was Mr Darcy, his face grim, standing above her with his hand outstretched. Gratefully, she slipped her hand into his and used it to haul herself from the ground. The world lurched as she attempted to stand, and she felt the warmth of Mr Darcy’s arm about her waist. She did not know what to say. His hand tightened around hers, and she allowed her body to be supported by his.

“Miss Bennet, you must come with me. You have had a terrible shock.” His voice was quiet but firm.

There was no question of disobeying it. She nodded wordlessly and allowed him to help her up the steps. As he did, the pain travelled along her ribs, and she bit her lip in an effort not to cry out. Amidst the crowd of people, she recognised the horror-stricken face of Frances. She opened her mouth to call out to the maid, but she could not find the words. The door at the top of the steps opened wider, and warmth flooded her body as she hobbled across the threshold. Several maids were on hand to assist her, but Mr Darcy waved them aside as he carefully guided her towards an elegant

room somewhere to their left. Murmurs from the servants whispering amongst themselves reached her ears. *What must they be saying?* Elizabeth feared the worst. The image of Maria lying in the street flashed again in her mind.

“I am so sorry,” she whispered. There were no adequate words to describe the depth of her remorse. “Please accept my deepest apologies for —”

Mr Darcy cut off her words with a gentle shake of the head. “The carriage was travelling too fast. You could not have seen it.” Feeling wretched, Elizabeth shut her eyes. She was not thinking of carriages, rather of her unfortunate presence in Grosvenor Street. Opening her eyes, she looked down and touched her dress. Amongst the splatters of mud were rough splinters of wood. Droplets of dirty water pattered along the floor as she limped towards a chair.

“Tell me what is happening.” Her voice fought against the oncoming tears.

Mr Darcy still had his arm about her waist as he gently eased her towards the seat. He stood back, surveying her anxiously.

“Are you sure that you are uninjured?”

“I am sore, but my injuries are nothing in comparison to poor Maria.” A sob caught in her throat.

“She was just at your side when the carriage came upon you...” A muscle twitched in Mr Darcy’s jaw. His eyes did not meet Elizabeth’s as he continued, “I attempted to prote...er...to move you both, but the carriage glanced against poor Miss Lucas, and she was brought to the ground with tremendous force.”

Elizabeth nodded again, tears splashing down her cheeks. Clenching her hands, she willed her emotions in check. “How badly is she injured?”

Mr Darcy shook his head, his face grave. “We do not yet know. I have sent for the doctor, and my sister’s companion is with Miss Lucas now.”

“I must go to her directly.”

“You should stay where you are. You are too ill to move.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Please understand that I need to see her.”

Mr Darcy stood firm. “I am sure that you are not well enough.” Elizabeth disregarded his words and attempted to stand. Her legs failed her, buckling underneath her weight. Mr Darcy was only just in time to catch her before she fell to the floor. Tears running down her face, she allowed him to ease her

back into the chair.

Upon seeing her distress, Mr Darcy knelt awkwardly next to her. “You must tell me how I can ease your suffering.” He reached his hand out as though to take hers but then thought better of it. Instead, he reached inside his waistcoat and pulled from it a pristine handkerchief. Wordlessly, he pressed it into her hands. A knock on the door called him away, and Elizabeth found herself alone once more. A deep, throbbing pain drummed against her temple. She buried her face into Mr Darcy’s handkerchief. The magnitude of what had happened engulfed her, and she sobbed bitterly.

Mr Darcy’s rather overwhelming presence was replaced by a woman’s approach, her face kind and her manner gentle. “You are Miss Bennet?” she asked.

Wincing as she wiped her eyes, Elizabeth choked back her tears. “Yes, my name is Elizabeth Bennet. Please forgive my intrusion and accept my apologies for this upset.”

“You are not to worry about a thing. I am Mrs Annesley, Miss Darcy’s companion. I have come to reassure you that your friend has said a few words to me.”

Relief flooded through Elizabeth. “Can I see her?” she asked.

“She is in a great deal of pain. A doctor will attend her presently. It is better that she does not move.” Nodding, Elizabeth looked down at her hands, unsure of what to say. Mrs Annesley continued in her soft voice. “Is there anyone I can contact on your behalf? Your family should know what has befallen you.”

“Yes, of course. We are staying with my uncle and aunt. They are in Gracechurch Street. My aunt—Mrs Gardiner—means to collect us at one o’clock in Grosvenor Square. There is a servant—Frances. She should be able to help.”

“It is close to midday.” Mrs Annesley patted Elizabeth’s hand. “I shall ask one of the servants to find your maid and wait in the square to intercept your aunt.”

“You are too kind.” Elizabeth’s voice wavered tearfully. “I do not deserve such attention.”

“Mr Darcy insists that you should have every care.” Mrs Annesley fixed Elizabeth with a compassionate smile. “And he is not a man to be refused.” Elizabeth blushed, knowing, as she did, the full and frank manner in which she had refused Mr Darcy. She shivered.

“Why, my dear, your dress is wet and filthy!” Mrs Annesley inspected Elizabeth’s clothes. “We must get you something clean and dry to wear.”

“Please, I do not wish to impose—”

“Nonsense. Miss Darcy is away, and I am sure Mr Darcy will not object. Miss Darcy is very tall for her age, and there is doubtless something that might fit you.”

The knowledge that Miss Darcy was not presently at home—and therefore would not be witness to this catastrophe—gave Elizabeth some solace. “Thank you. You are very generous,” she said quietly, “but I honestly cannot accept your offer. I must go to Maria directly.”

Mrs Annesley gave Elizabeth another smile. It was still kind, but it was rather firmer than before—her life as a companion had plainly equipped her with the necessary skills to deal with impulsive young women. “I do believe you should change, Miss Bennet. You will be of no use to your friend if you should fall ill yourself.”

Elizabeth could not argue against the older woman’s reasoning. Her desire to see her friend outstripped her embarrassment. “You are correct, of course. As soon as I am ready, I wish to see Maria.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



The door to Darcy's study clicked shut behind him. After the commotion downstairs, a moment's peace was required. Fighting back the tremor in his hands, he slumped back against the door. That Elizabeth was here, in his home, was nothing short of extraordinary. She had been in his thoughts all morning. That was nothing new. He had decided to go for a ride to clear his head after the previous night's drinking. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought he would see Elizabeth again—let alone so soon and in front of his own home of all places. His treacherous heart hammered at the memory of her startled face. Why had she been here?

He squeezed his eyes shut, attempting to block out Elizabeth's horrified expression when she recognised him in the doorway. It was impossible. The image of her, pale and frozen to the spot, returned to him once more. That blasted carriage had been travelling recklessly. From his position at the top of the steps, he had been able to sense the danger in a way that she could not. The squeal and screech of the wheels still echoed in his ears. *If only she had not backed away.* A fresh wave of disquiet flowed through him, causing his fingers to tremble. It had been *his* presence that had caused her to step back into the road. This was all his fault.

Pushing away from the door, he paced around the room restlessly until he stopped by the mantelpiece. Peering into the large mirror, he surveyed his dishevelled reflection. He hardly knew himself. Small clumps of mud streaked through his hair, and his complexion was pale. If he had been but a moment quicker, then poor Miss Lucas would not be suffering so. *And if you had been a step later...* He shook his head again. Elizabeth's rejection of him

had been excruciating, but that pain was nothing to the horrible realisation that she might have been taken from him before his very eyes. In those terrible few seconds, he had known what it was to truly lose her—for the only woman he was ever to love to nearly perish in his arms. He physically trembled at the thought. Steadying himself against the mantelpiece, he bowed his head. *Elizabeth is safe*, he told himself. *She is in your home, under your care, and she is unharmed*. Providence had been kind today. Returning his gaze to the mirror, he set his jaw. *You cannot compel her to love you, but this is your chance to put right any pain that you have caused*. A noise somewhere in the house caught his attention. *And Elizabeth should not bear the burden of Miss Lucas's injuries alone*. Reaching out, he touched a portrait on the wall next to the mirror. His mother's beloved face stared back at him.

“Wish me luck,” he murmured.



Descending the staircase, he was met by his housekeeper, Mrs Beecham.

“What can you tell me? How grievous are the young lady's injuries?” he asked quickly.

“She is resting in the green guest room. The cuts on her face were thankfully shallow, and I have asked Jenny to clean them.” Mrs Beecham paused. “The poor thing will be dreadfully bruised, and it would be kinder to attend to her now than to wait for her to be fully aware of what is happening.”

Darcy nodded grimly.

Mrs Beecham continued, “The doctor has been called, but it would be wise not to move her in the meantime.”

“That is very prudent.” Darcy paused. “And Miss Bennet—the other woman. How does she fare?”

“She does not seem to be badly injured.” Here, Darcy's housekeeper gave him an approving smile. “You acted very heroically, sir, if you will allow me to say so.”

Darcy took no notice of her praise, anxious as he was to hear more of Elizabeth's condition. “Not too badly injured,” he repeated. “But the doctor should examine her nevertheless.”

“If she consents to it. Perhaps it would be better to wait until her family arrives. I have spoken to the maid that was accompanying them. She will wait

with one of the footmen in Grosvenor Square to let the family know where the two young ladies are.” Mrs Beecham pursed her mouth. “It appears that the elder lady’s family reside in Gracechurch Street, and the two young women were in Mayfair to take a walk.” Her lips pinched tighter. “Heaven knows why. They both seem to be respectable women, sir, even so.”

Her comments caught Darcy’s attention. “Yes, of course they are respectable,” he said sharply. “Miss Bennet is a gentleman’s daughter, and Miss Lucas’s father is knighted.”

Mrs Beecham’s eyebrows raised. “They are known to you, then?” she asked.

Colour rose to Darcy’s face. “Yes, we became acquainted in Hertfordshire.” Mrs Beecham blinked, clearly trying to hide her curiosity. Darcy did not feel compelled to explain his relationship with Elizabeth to his housekeeper, yet to characterise her as some passing acquaintance was excessively vexing. “Please see that they have every comfort.”

Mrs Beecham opened her mouth as though to add another observation, but she must have seen Darcy’s expression and thought better of it. “Yes, of course, sir.”

“Where is Miss Bennet?”

“In the morning room with Mrs Annesley.”

“I shall go there directly. Inform me when the doctor arrives.”

“Of course, sir.” She paused. “Do you wish to change before you go?”

Darcy looked down at himself. His waistcoat was spattered with muddy splotches, but he was hopefully dry enough to be presentable. Absently, he smoothed his hands over his coat, debating what to do. It was no use. The pull to see Elizabeth was too great. “Tell Harrison to prepare a change of clothes. I do not intend to be long with Miss Bennet.”

Mrs Beecham nodded. “Certainly, sir. I shall inform you of any changes regarding Miss Lucas’s condition.”



The fire was ablaze in the morning room when Darcy entered. Sweeping his eyes about the place, he noted that a large leather armchair had been moved closer to the hearth. Trying to disregard the hammering feeling in his chest, he took a tentative step forwards. As he did, Elizabeth’s elegant profile came

into view. Taking another quiet step, he realised she was gazing into the fire, the unnatural stillness of her posture suggesting that she was still afflicted by some degree of pain. Unwilling to startle her, he cleared his throat softly. Her head turned hesitantly at the unexpected sound, and a beautiful flush swept across her neck when she realised who it was. His heart nearly leapt from his chest as her tearful eyes met his. That she should be suffering was unbearable. Any action to alleviate her sorrow must be undertaken at once.

Taking a deep breath, he broke the silence. "Miss Bennet. You must allow me to..."

Elizabeth's eyes widened with horror, and the flush spread from her neck to her cheeks. Darcy faltered, remembering too late the last time he had spoken the same words to her. An unwanted heat prickled at his neck. *Heavens above! Speak to her, man.* Pulling up a chair so he sat facing her, he tried again, determined to overlook the fact his ears were now burning hot. In a gentle voice, he said, "Are you well? You must tell me at once whether there is any service in my power that may assist you."

Some of the worry cleared from Elizabeth's expression as he spoke. Running her fingers along the edge of the chair, the tension in her shoulders eased, and she smiled shyly at him. The apples of her cheeks were now a delicate pink, her eyes gleaming.

"You have performed the greatest service to me—I cannot express my gratitude more fully, Mr Darcy. You saved my life. I am sure of it."

Her gaze softened as she addressed him, and Darcy felt his lungs constrict. For her to look at him with such warmth was more than disarming—it rendered him nearly immobile. In that moment, the feel of his hands about her waist flooded his memory, and his throat felt suddenly dry.

Collecting himself, he waved her praise away. "Please do not thank me. I acted upon instinct."

A shadow fell across Elizabeth's face, and her lovely eyes averted to the floor. "Yet I want to thank you all the same," she replied quietly. Nervously, she tapped her fingers along the arm of the chair. "Do you have any news of Maria—Miss Lucas, I mean?"

"Your friend is being tended to by one of the maids until the doctor arrives." Elizabeth nodded. Darcy continued, "I believe she should be kept still as a precaution."

Her face suddenly pale, Elizabeth shivered. "Thank you, Mr Darcy. I wished to visit her after I changed clothes, but Mrs Annesley did not know

whether it was possible.”

For the first time, Darcy broke his gaze from her face and noted that she was wearing a dark silk dress that had been Georgiana’s. It was far too big for her and consequently hung from her elegant figure. About her shoulders was a warm shawl, which she had unconsciously drawn closer to herself. Everything about her spoke of vulnerability. Even the dark leather chair seemed overly large in comparison to her slender frame. Darcy could not bear to see her so forlorn.

“Miss Bennet, you should rest,” he said softly. “I shall inform my servants of your accident, and you may stay here.”

Elizabeth began to shake her head. “I could never impose myself on your hospitality in such a way.”

“It would be no trouble to me.” *Good Lord, try not to sound like you are begging*, he reprimanded himself. Inwardly cringing, he continued, “I would be greatly reassured to know that you were rested.”

Elizabeth chewed her bottom lip. “I thank you for your concern, but my only priority is poor Maria.” Her eyes darted to the space just over his shoulder. “Perhaps you could speak to Mrs Annesley so that I might be taken to her bedside?” A discreet motion in the opposite corner signalled to Darcy that he and Elizabeth were not in fact alone. Over on the far sofa was Mrs Annesley. He silently gave her an appreciative smile. Clearly it was she who, with her customary sensitivity, had taken charge of Elizabeth’s welfare. Rising from her seat, Mrs Annesley came over to where Elizabeth was sitting.

“Let me look at you, Miss Bennet. You were dreadfully pale, and I did not think you well enough before. You seem a little stronger now.” She carefully helped Elizabeth to her feet, pulling the shawl tighter as she did so. “I shall show you to your friend,” she said in a motherly tone. With her arm around Elizabeth’s waist, her eyes twinkled as she smiled down at Darcy. “No need to worry, sir. I shall take good care of the lovely Miss Bennet.”

Darcy nodded wordlessly, his cheeks suddenly hot. He had not behaved indiscreetly, surely? Mrs Annesley had never given him such a knowing look before. The clock chiming on the mantelpiece reminded him of his need to wash and change before Elizabeth’s relatives arrived. *It will not do to greet them looking like a beggar*. He rang for Harrison, relieved for a distraction from his tumultuous heart thundering in his chest.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Elizabeth slowly followed Mrs Annesley from the morning room. The older woman slipped her hand into the crook of Elizabeth's arm, gently guiding her through the hall and up the main staircase. The throng of curious servants had disappeared, and all Elizabeth could hear was the rumble of the carriages on the street in front of the house.

"Miss Lucas is in one of the guest bedrooms." Mrs Annesley spoke softly. "The doctor will be here soon." She paused, a wry smile playing on her lips. "He rarely dawdles when Mr Darcy sends for him."

Elizabeth nodded, scarcely taking any notice of Mrs Annesley's words. "I pray that he will not be much longer."

"Your concern for your friend does you credit." Mrs Annesley patted Elizabeth's hand. "But you must be careful not to wear yourself out. Do not forget you have had a nasty shock also."

Elizabeth met Mrs Annesley's gaze with a grateful smile. "You are very kind, but I am well enough," she said, disregarding the soreness throbbing through her neck and shoulders.

"You should inform me if you begin to feel unwell." Mrs Annesley's eyes swept over Elizabeth and came to rest on her face. "Mr Darcy wishes to know. He desires for you and your friend to have every attention."

All this from a man whose proposal I refused. Shame clawed at Elizabeth's throat. "Mr Darcy is too generous," she replied quietly.

"He seemed to know you. Are you acquainted with him?" Mrs Annesley's tone was light, yet she held Elizabeth's gaze a touch longer than was comfortable.

“Yes, we met in Hertfordshire. Mr Darcy was helping his friend Mr Bingley, and we met on several occasions at Mr Bingley’s estate.”

Mrs Annesley nodded as she assisted Elizabeth to ascend the second flight of stairs. “Miss Darcy mentioned the name Bennet when she spoke of Mr Darcy’s letters.”

Elizabeth’s ears burnt when she heard this. *What must Mrs Annesley be thinking?*

“What a stroke of good luck for you and your friend that your accident should happen so close to Mr Darcy’s house. You will be hard-pressed to find a more honourable man.”

Elizabeth nodded miserably. “Yes, I am very fortunate. I cannot contemplate what would have befallen us if Mr Darcy were not at hand. Although, of course, I am sorry it happened at all.”

“You must not blame yourself. I have faith that all will be well.” Mrs Annesley motioned towards an elegantly panelled door. “You will find Miss Lucas in there.”



Poor Maria was lying lifelessly on the bed when Elizabeth entered the room. Pillows had been positioned either side of her head, many of which were stained with dirt and splashes of blood. A maid stood to one side of the room, wringing out blood-soaked linens into a pan. A modest chair was placed near the bed. A lump in Elizabeth’s throat prevented words as she sat at Maria’s bedside. Running along her poor friend’s forehead was a large swollen mark, evidently from where the carriage had caught her. Her face had been cleaned, and Elizabeth could see the grazes along her temples. Elizabeth supposed they were from where Maria had fallen on the ground. *This could have been me.* She drew in her breath sharply. *If Mr Darcy had not acted as he did...* Reaching out, she squeezed Maria’s hand. To her great relief, Maria’s eyes fluttered open. Her voice was faint. “M-Mama?” She tried turning her head, but the pain was plainly too great.

“No, dearest, it is Lizzy.”

“Lizzy?” Maria’s brows furrowed, and she winced.

“Do not move. You must keep very still and rest.” The redness on Maria’s forehead was already tinged with darkness, ready to bruise. Maria

nodded weakly. She shut her eyes once more and turned her head back into the pillow. Elizabeth gazed anxiously at her friend. *Will she improve?* Elizabeth prayed for the doctor's arrival. *And what if there is lasting damage?* A dam that had been building inside Elizabeth broke. Bowing her head over Maria's motionless fingers, she buried her face in her hands as hot tears splashed down her cheeks.

CHAPTER NINE



A note to Darcy's door alerted him to the arrival of Elizabeth's relation. Harrison had discovered the woman's name from their young maid. He was expecting a Mrs Gardiner—and that she was Elizabeth's aunt by marriage. Fortunately, the doctor had arrived about a quarter of an hour ago, and he hoped to have some good news to share. He raked his fingers through his curls, attempting to disregard the tightness around his neck. *Has Harrison fixed my cravat too tightly?* Darcy knew himself to be presentable, yet he somehow felt unprepared for this meeting. *Will Elizabeth's aunt be like the rest of her family?* Mrs Bennet's shrill voice involuntarily echoed in his ears, and he shuddered. No sooner had that thought entered his mind, than Elizabeth's voice followed it: "*Your selfish disdain for the feelings of others.*"

He pulled nervously at his cuffs. So secure was he in his own importance, it had never occurred to him that his company might not be truly welcomed. *You must demonstrate to Elizabeth that you are capable of civility.* A sigh escaped his lips. *Even if her relatives are tradespeople.* He stopped himself. Perhaps this is what Elizabeth meant. *Am I really so arrogant?* A flutter of nerves roiled in his stomach. Making a good impression on Mrs Gardiner was paramount if he was ever to succeed in improving Elizabeth's opinion of him.

Mrs Gardiner entered the room, her expression pinched with worry. She was much younger than he had imagined. Darcy immediately offered her a chair, which she politely refused, saying instead, "You must excuse my intrusion, Mr Darcy. Pray tell me what has happened?"

In a solemn voice, Darcy explained all that had occurred. When he arrived at the point of his involvement, the words to describe his actions were

not forthcoming. Using the vaguest of language, he was able to characterise his participation as that of an obliging bystander without telling an outright falsehood. Mrs Gardiner nodded as he spoke, every question of hers adding to his first impression that she was a sensible, well-bred woman. Gradually, her body eased, and Darcy saw some of the colour return to her face. He offered her a seat once more, and this time she accepted, grateful to sit now that she had been reassured of Elizabeth's and Miss Lucas's welfare.

She exhaled deeply. "Please may I see them?"

"I understand that the doctor is with them presently. He will come here as soon as he has finished," replied Darcy. Mrs Gardiner opened her mouth as though to protest, and he hastily added, "My sister's companion is acting as their chaperon. And Dr Oldham has been my family's physician in London since I was a boy. I thought it prudent that they should be examined as quickly as possible. Please accept my apologies for not waiting."

Mrs Gardiner's lips curved into a smile for the first time since entering the room. "Your words reassure me. Indeed, I am confident that Dr Oldham will be the very best."

For a moment, Darcy thought she was mocking him, but her expression was sincere.

She evidently caught his confusion and said, "You are probably unaware, but my father is a good friend of your family doctor in Derbyshire."

"You know Dr Abbot?"

"He lives but fifteen miles from my parents' home. As a young man, my father was the curate at the church in Lambton. Dr Abbot kindly wrote a recommendation on my father's behalf when the vicar in Rowsley died."

"Your father must be Mr Gregory." Darcy recalled a mild-mannered man with a fine set of whiskers. "I remember him a little. His dry humour made him a great favourite of my father's."

Mrs Gardiner's eyebrows raised, her cheeks pink. "He would be delighted to hear such kind words, if you will permit me to repeat them."

It was Darcy's turn to feel ill at ease. "Of course," he said awkwardly. His angry words from that disastrous proposal returned to haunt him. '*Could you expect me to rejoice in the inferiority of your connexions?*' This genteel, kindly woman was one of Elizabeth's relatives whom he had chosen to scorn. He felt thoroughly ashamed.

Mrs Gardiner continued in a gentle tone, "Dr Abbot always spoke very highly of your father." She caught herself, apparently sensing Darcy's

discomfort at the direction of the conversation. Her expression softened. Saying no more, she chose instead to smile compassionately at Darcy. He returned her smile with one of his own, uncertain how to reply. A knock on the door signalled that the doctor was at hand, and he answered promptly, glad for the interruption.

After the proper introductions, Dr Oldham took great care in reassuring Mrs Gardiner of the young ladies' respective conditions. Miss Lucas had clearly fallen awkwardly, as her ankle was very swollen. He could not detect any breakages or fractures in her limbs, but he was of the opinion she should not be moved. The cuts and bruises to her face were unpleasant, but he was encouraged by how alert she was so soon after the accident. At present, there did not seem to be any obvious danger, but her family should be informed nevertheless. When it came to Elizabeth, apart from some nasty bruises, there were no obvious injuries, but it was clear that she should also rest. Unfortunately, it had been impossible to dissuade her from remaining at Miss Lucas's bedside. Dr Oldham exchanged a look with Mrs Gardiner. "I expect that does not surprise you."

"Not in the least. Though if Lizzy is being stubborn, that is a welcome sign." She smiled cheerily at Darcy, who was doing his best to hide his relief at the doctor's reassurances regarding Elizabeth. He did not notice Dr Oldham turn to address him.

"You did very well, Mr Darcy." Dr Oldham peered at him from under his bushy brows. "I understand that it could have been a great deal worse."

Mrs Gardiner started at this information. "Whatever do you mean?" Darcy's unease grew. He did not answer, instead offering a desperate prayer that Dr Oldham would take the hint and stop talking. The garrulous Dr Oldham took absolutely no notice of Darcy's silence.

"Do you not know? Such a modest man! I understand that he acted very heroically." The wrinkles around Dr Oldham's eyes deepened as he tipped his chin proudly at Darcy. "Your father would be very pleased with you. Such gallantry!"

Mrs Gardiner's eyes widened. She turned to Darcy, her gaze curious.

Finally, he said, "It was nothing. I was on hand to assist Miss Bennet... and by extension, Miss Lucas."

"Nothing, indeed! Mr Darcy threw himself in front of a carriage to save the young women! That is what everyone is saying."

Darcy did not wish to look at Mrs Gardiner, so embarrassed was he by the

doctor's effusive admiration. When he did, he saw that her eyes were shining with approval.

“Throwing myself in front of a carriage is something of an exaggeration,” he said, fervently searching his mind for a new topic of conversation. He swiftly turned his attention to Mrs Gardiner. “Now that you have learnt the extent of their injuries, you must be desirous of seeing Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas. I shall ring for Mrs Annesley. She will take you upstairs.”

Mrs Gardiner, quite speechless with astonishment, simply nodded her thanks. Dr Oldham chatted blithely, hardly noticing who was listening or not. Mrs Annesley arrived promptly to assist Mrs Gardiner. Darcy breathed a sigh of relief as both women left the room. His meeting with Elizabeth's family had been better than anticipated. Or at least he hoped so—ever since that awful proposal, he had been wracked with self-doubt. Darcy set his jaw. *A man's strength lies in the manner in which he overcomes his weaknesses.* Turning his attention back to Dr Oldham, he devoted himself to discovering all that was needed to secure Elizabeth's comfort, and that of her friend.

CHAPTER TEN



Elizabeth turned her head to see her aunt and Mrs Annesley enter the bedroom. Words could not express her relief. Tearfully, she stood from the bedside and pulled her aunt into an embrace.

“Foolish girl!” Mrs Gardiner pushed Elizabeth away and gazed into her face. “What possessed you to step into a busy street?”

“I— It was an accident. Oh, what will be done?” Elizabeth buried her face in her hands.

“I have spoken to the doctor, and Maria is not to be moved. I shall write to her family and send it by express. I have been reassured that there is a very good chance of her making a full recovery, and I shall be sure to communicate that to her parents.” Elizabeth was too guilt-ridden to speak. Mrs Gardiner turned her attention to Maria, who was now sleeping after her painful examination by the doctor.

“The poor dear has had a nasty knock,” she said, smoothing her hand over Maria’s unbraided hair.

“Someone should stay with her, if you will forgive my opinion.” Mrs Annesley’s voice broke the moment. “Miss Lucas will awaken in an unfamiliar house. She does not know me, and it may be very distressing for her to be surrounded by strangers.”

Mrs Gardiner replied, “Thank you, Mrs Annesley. That is very wise. Of course, I shall speak to Mr Darcy to ask his permission, but I do believe that would be preferable.” She turned her attention back to Elizabeth. “Lizzy, you should remain. You must give Maria all the comfort that you can.”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened in horror. “I cannot stay!”

“Why not?” Mrs Gardiner’s brows furrowed. “I think it a sensible plan—Maria needs a familiar face nearby.”

For what felt like the hundredth time that morning, Elizabeth felt her cheeks burning. “I cannot impose on Mr Darcy’s generosity.”

“Of course, your uncle will repay him any costs he may incur. I shall leave Frances too, if it is allowed. She may help you.” Unable to speak, Elizabeth turned her face to look back at Maria.

Mrs Gardiner’s eyes narrowed at her niece’s silence. “Unless there is another reason why I should not ask for Mr Darcy’s help?” A tear rolled down Elizabeth’s cheek. Mrs Gardiner’s lips tightened. Saying nothing to Elizabeth, Mrs Gardiner addressed Mrs Annesley. “Please permit me to have a private conversation with my niece.” Nodding discreetly, Mrs Annesley quit the room.

“Lizzy, what are you keeping from me?” For all the sympathy in her expression, Mrs Gardiner’s tone was firm.

She bit her lip. “Mr Bingley does not know Jane is in London.”

“And how is that relevant to why you cannot remain with Maria?”

Elizabeth realised her scattered thoughts had travelled back to that awful proposal, to the reasons why she had refused it, and to what she had learnt since—none of which she was prepared to share with her aunt. Any moment now, Mrs Gardiner might even ask just how she could be so certain of Mr Bingley’s ignorance. It was vital that she distract her from that line of questioning.

“At least, he cannot possibly know, else he would have called upon Jane. I knew that he resided in Grosvenor Street.”

Comprehension swept across Mrs Gardiner’s face. “You thought of walking about the busy streets of London with nothing more than the hope you might see him?” She frowned. “And I always thought you to be the cleverest Bennet sister!”

Elizabeth nodded miserably. “I deserve every reprimand.” Mrs Gardiner stared long and hard at her niece.

At last, she said, “By your tears, I can see you are sorry. But Maria was entrusted into our care, and for that, she should be our first concern. I have settled on our course of action.”

Elizabeth looked at her expectantly.

“It was by your design that Maria was put in harm’s way, so it must be you who takes responsibility for her recovery. Indeed, you have not given me

any reason why you should not—except your own guilt that it happened in the first place. I would think you might wish to atone for your errors.”

Elizabeth opened her mouth to protest, but no sensible means of refuting the argument escaped.

“I shall ensure that Jane does not visit you here. She has suffered enough. The last thing she needs is to be reminded of all that is past. I shall take Frances back with me, and she will return with some clothes. Hopefully, your stay will not be of long duration.” She reached over and tenderly tucked the coverlet more closely over Maria. “Besides, Mr Darcy does not seem as unpleasant as you previously led me to believe.”

“No indeed,” Elizabeth replied softly, unable to look at her aunt directly.

Mrs Gardiner gave her an inquisitive look. “It sounds as though you owe him a great deal.”

Elizabeth remained silent. From her sickbed, Maria let out a small whimper of pain as she moved her head from side to side. Elizabeth reached out and stroked her hand.

Very quietly, she said, “I shall look after Maria. You are quite right. It is the proper thing to do.” She turned to gaze imploringly at her aunt. “But please can it be you that asks Mr Darcy? I am not equal to it.”

“Very well.” Mrs Gardiner reached out her hand to Elizabeth. “But give me another kiss before I go.” She smiled. “I am thankful that you were not hurt. Let us not part with a quarrel.”

Elizabeth gave her aunt a grateful embrace, the twinges at doing so reminding her of her injuries. Mrs Gardiner was correct; caring for Maria would be the best reparation for her foolishness, and she deserved every hidden ache. Unbidden, Mr Darcy’s anxious expression as he held her face in his hands returned to her. It was a powerful memory. That he should be so civil towards her was extraordinary. She followed Mrs Gardiner to the door. *Perhaps it is not just Maria to whom I must make amends.* Bidding her aunt goodbye, Elizabeth did her best to suppress the overwhelming feeling clutching at her chest.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Darcy paced the room. The hour was now three. Ever since saying goodbye to Mrs Gardiner, he had shut himself in his study in a valiant attempt to seem busy. Accomplishing anything, however, had been next to impossible. Every coming and going of the servants had been distracting. He had attempted to write a note to Miss Lucas's father to explain all that had occurred. The balance between telling the truth and not wishing to unduly alarm Miss Lucas's family had been excessively troublesome. It also did not help that Elizabeth was now staying until her friend was well enough to be safely moved. He clenched his hand around his pen before setting it down on the desk in front of him.

How often had he pictured her in this house? The two of them, crossing the threshold as man and wife. After Kent, he had believed her to be lost to him forever. But now she was here, in a room somewhere above his head, and all he could think about was how in God's name he was to make amends for his behaviour. Would she ever forgive him? He could only hope.

A growl of hunger reminded him that he had hardly eaten, and he wondered whether Elizabeth might be feeling the same. In an attempt to expend some of the restive energy that consumed his body, he went to find Mrs Annesley, who had returned to the morning room after a conference with his housekeeper.

Darcy crossed his hands behind his back.

"Mrs Annesley, is there any news from the two young women?"

"Little has changed, sir. Miss Lucas has stirred since Dr Oldham's visit, and she has been persuaded to eat a bit of food. She has a dreadful headache

and is resting now.”

Endeavouring not to sound too interested, Darcy continued in a light tone, “And pray tell me, how is Miss Bennet?” The corners of Mrs Annesley’s mouth flickered up. Clearly Darcy’s acting skills needed refinement.

“Miss Bennet is much better, sir, though she seems very tired.”

“Did she say whether she required anything?”

“She did not, but I was under the impression that she did not wish to ask.” Darcy’s heart sank when he heard this. *She despises me still.* His dejection must have been evident, as Mrs Annesley quickly added, “It is my belief that she does not wish to impose upon your hospitality.”

“Miss Bennet is to be a guest in my house, and thus she should not feel in the least bit obliged to me,” Darcy replied. He stopped, suddenly very conscious of how officious he sounded.

Mrs Annesley replied in her customary diplomatic tone, “Perhaps she should be invited to dinner. I hope I do not presume too much with my suggestion.”

“Yes, please let Miss Bennet know that she is very welcome to dine with us.” He hesitated. “I mean to say, if Miss Bennet desires to have company.”

“I am sure she would be very pleased, sir.”

“It is an excellent suggestion,” said Darcy. Drawing himself up to his full height, he continued, “When you speak to Miss Bennet, I wish for you to discover her favourite dishes, then ask the cook to make their closest approximation.”

“Of course, sir. I also wondered whether I should attend to Miss Bennet, in the absence of Miss Darcy? I know the Gardiner maid has not long returned with a change of clothes. Miss Bennet must surely require a reprieve from her responsibilities, and Miss Darcy’s clothes were a touch too large on her. Sarah may look after Miss Lucas while Miss Bennet eats.”

Darcy nodded his answer, his mind racing at the possibility of being so close to Elizabeth once more. He anxiously uncrossed and recrossed his hands behind his back. *What if she refuses to join me?* Elizabeth had the power to make him feel so discomposed.

“May I make another request, sir?” Mrs Annesley interrupted Darcy’s thoughts. “Am I permitted to write to Miss Darcy to tell her what has happened?”

Here, Darcy hesitated. He did not want Georgiana to worry unnecessarily.

Apparently sensing his reticence, Mrs Annesley continued, “It is only

because I do not wish for Miss Darcy to hear of it from another source.”

“How would she learn of it?”

“There were many witnesses.” Mrs Annesley’s eyes widened. “And gossip is about the only thing that spreads in London faster than disease.”

Darcy nodded grimly. That was undeniably true.

“My intention is to write a softened version of events—to prevent Miss Darcy from unduly worrying. And to let her know that Miss Bennet from London and Miss Bennet from Hertfordshire are one and the same.”

This caught Darcy’s attention. “What are you saying about Miss Bennet?” he asked sharply.

Mrs Annesley blinked innocently. “Miss Darcy mentioned the name Bennet to me from one of your letters. She does not often talk about your correspondence with me, and thus the name remained in my memory.”

Darcy thought for a moment before replying, “Very well. You may inform Miss Darcy of what has occurred, but...” He paused. Something pulled at his heart. It was too tempting, just for a short while, to have the pleasure of Elizabeth’s company all to himself. In the past, they had been surrounded by her unsuitable family or his overbearing aunt. In all likelihood this might be his only chance to reverse her ill-opinion of him. He continued, “But perhaps wait until tomorrow. We do not know how Miss Lucas will fare tonight. I would rather give her a letter full of hopeful news.”

“The letter can wait until the morning. I shall go now to enquire after Miss Bennet. She seems like such a lovely woman. I am sure she will be delighted to be asked to dine with us.” Darcy watched Mrs Annesley close the door, wishing he had her confidence.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Elizabeth's heart hammered a dreadful tattoo. Her pulse throbbed at her neck, and she took a deep breath in an attempt to subdue the fluttering in her stomach. *It is only dinner.* And she would not be completely alone with Mr Darcy; the soft-spoken Mrs Annesley would be present as well. A delicious meal with respectable company was hardly purgatory. Yet, she could not help feeling anxious. She absently twisted a ringlet of hair around her finger. Her body was still sore, but she felt much better than she had earlier. One of the maids had dressed her under the attentive eye of Mrs Annesley and—withstanding the swirl of bruises taking shape under her rib cage—she felt halfway to being presentable. Mrs Annesley was at her elbow, helpfully showing her the way, and Elizabeth was grateful for the older woman's calming presence.

“Please follow me.” Mrs Annesley passed through an elegant lobby before directing Elizabeth into the dining room. Elizabeth tried to disguise her wonder as she looked around her. Crisp, white table linen covered a large mahogany table, the setting of which was simple and restrained; delicate blue-white porcelain plates were nestled in between solid silver candlesticks. Above her, the cut glass of the chandelier glistened. *And to think this could have been my home!* All this understated grandeur might have been familiar to her. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. When Mr Darcy had asked for her hand in marriage, all that she had heard was his arrogance. Now that she was here, in his house, the full compliment of Mr Darcy's proposal struck her forcibly. *He had wanted to share all this.* Elizabeth did her best to quell the flurry of nerves trembling through her.

Mr Darcy stood as they entered. He was as impeccably dressed as ever. So composed was he that Elizabeth felt as though she could have dreamt the events from the morning. He did not seem outwardly too troubled by her presence except, Elizabeth noted, the tips of his ears were a burning scarlet colour. She smiled nervously at him, unsure how to proceed. As she did, his expression softened into one of pleased surprise before he quickly schooled his features into his familiar reserved mien.

“Come, Miss Bennet.” Mrs Annesley smiled. “A place has been set opposite me—in Miss Darcy’s usual seat.”

Unable to protest, Elizabeth felt herself blush once more; she could hardly take the place of mistress of the house. She took her seat, more conscious than ever of Mr Darcy’s proximity, sitting as she was at his right-hand. An uncomfortable silence immediately followed. Elizabeth did not know of what to speak, and by Mr Darcy’s expression, his mind was travelling along a similar vein. It was Mrs Annesley who broke the awkwardness.

“Miss Bennet tells me that she is feeling much better. You must be glad to hear of it, Mr Darcy.”

“Undoubtedly.”

Silence again. Elizabeth saw Mr Darcy straighten the knife and fork on either side of his plate. She wondered what must be running through his mind.

Undeterred by the lack of conversation, Mrs Annesley addressed Elizabeth, “I trust Miss Lucas is better too?”

“I called upon her before dinner and spoke to her a little. Her leg and face are still sore, but she is more comfortable than before.”

“That is very good news. You must be very pleased.”

“I would say relieved is a more accurate description,” Elizabeth replied. “But yes, I am pleased.”

“What did you make of Doctor Oldham?”

“I think very well of him. He reminds me a little of Maria’s father.”

“How so?”

“They both have a kindly disposition...” Elizabeth paused, searching for a diplomatic turn of phrase. “...And they are both rather fond of talking.” A small bark of laughter came from Mr Darcy’s direction, and both women turned to him.

“Do you find Miss Bennet accurate in her comparison, Mr Darcy?”

“I believe there is some similarity between them,” Mr Darcy said. There was a slight pause before he added, “But in truth, I did not make sufficient effort to become acquainted with Sir William. I do not know him as well as I ought.”

There was something in his tone that Elizabeth could feel more than she could understand. The small gesture of humility in his observation touched her greatly.

She could not help smiling at him then, before replying to Mrs Annesley, “Mr Darcy is very kind. But in truth, there is not much more you need to know about Sir William other than he has been to St James’s, and he is overfond of the word ‘capital’.”

Mrs Annesley pursed her lips, presumably in an attempt to hide her own laugh. “He sounds like a character.”

“Maria’s father is not the most complex soul, but he is kind and amiable,” said Elizabeth.

“Qualities that are found in the best of men,” Mr Darcy said solemnly.

Elizabeth glanced at him. His face was pensive, and she was suddenly very conscious of every accusation she had ever made against him.

“A friendly, open nature is a highly prized characteristic,” she said carefully. “But so are traits such as bravery and strong moral principle.” She could hardly meet Mr Darcy’s eyes as she spoke, yet she sensed the pleasure he took from her words. “Those attributes are just as important as being sociable yet much harder to find evidence of.”

“I quite agree, Miss Bennet.” Mrs Annesley’s eyes drifted in Mr Darcy’s direction, and Elizabeth was very grateful for the arrival of the first course.



“Do you read, Miss Bennet?” Mrs Annesley enquired. Elizabeth looked up, distracted from the most delicious roast beef she had ever eaten. Her nerves had only just begun to settle. Mr Darcy had said very little during dinner, worrying Elizabeth to see him so quiet, fearing that her presence was causing him unwanted discomfort. Yet even though Mr Darcy did not have much to say, Elizabeth was of the impression that he was silently attending to her. There was not a moment where the servants would leave her plate unfilled or her cup empty, and all this was done with a discreet nod or look by him. To

fill any silence, Mrs Annesley had taken to asking Elizabeth questions about her life, and the two women had passed the meal in amiable conversation. They had been talking about the merits of Hertfordshire, and Elizabeth could tell that Mrs Annesley's question had caught Mr Darcy by surprise as much as it had her.

She felt his gaze upon her as she answered. "I do read, but it can be difficult when there is so much I wish to do."

"You sound like Miss Darcy. She loves reading yet struggles to find the time for it."

"You must be very busy with her. I have heard that she is very accomplished."

"My sister adores music." Mr Darcy's voice cut through their conversation.

Elizabeth turned to him, fearful that she had caused offence.

He must have seen this in her expression, as he continued hurriedly, "She once confessed that if she could spend the whole day at her pianoforte, she would do so. It is her haven from the pressures of the world." He hesitated, seemingly struggling to find the right phrase. "My sister is shy and lacks confidence in her own opinions."

There was a light in his eyes when speaking of his sister, and Elizabeth was reminded of her own affection for modest Jane.

"It sounds as though music is her sanctuary."

"That is exactly it, Miss Bennet."

"Does she sing?"

"Not often, and certainly never in company."

"But she has a pleasant voice?"

"She is lovely to hear—very low and tuneful—but I am impossibly biased." Mr Darcy's face broke into an easy smile. Deep dimples formed on either side of his mouth, and Elizabeth had never seen him so handsome. He shifted his broad frame, and his expression relaxed, his whole body bespeaking brotherly pride. He tilted his chin towards Elizabeth, his dark eyes alive with pleasure as he anticipated her answer.

"Being impossibly biased is every good brother's privilege." Elizabeth arched her eyebrows playfully, which earned her another smile. Mr Darcy leant a little closer towards her as she continued in a more sincere tone, "But I only ask as I prefer singing to playing, and I might be able to suggest some songs that would suit her voice."

“That would be very thoughtful.” Mr Darcy’s deep voice spoke quietly, and for a moment Elizabeth felt as though they were the only two people in the room.

“Miss Darcy is a talented pianist,” Mrs Annesley spoke up. “And to hear her play is a delight. Do you have anything that brings you such joy?”

Breaking her attention from Mr Darcy, Elizabeth addressed Mrs Annesley, “Well, I do love to read. But for me, the only escape is to be out of doors. There is nothing in nature that does not captivate me.”

“It comforts you to be in the open air?”

“Like music, the natural world has an inherent beauty. I cannot be happier than when I am roaming the countryside discovering it. If I could spend the whole day exploring a new area, I would do so without a second thought.”

“You sound just like my sister.” Mr Darcy bestowed his dimpled smile upon Elizabeth again, and she felt a warmth flood through her body.

Despite blushing furiously, she grinned mischievously. “She is clearly of superior intellect.”

Mrs Annesley laughed alongside Mr Darcy. The mention of Miss Darcy reminded Elizabeth of Mr Darcy’s letter, and she looked back down at her food, suddenly very aware of why Miss Darcy might be so uncomfortable around new people. *How best to let Mr Darcy know how sorry I am for Mr Wickham’s cruelty?* Lifting her fork, she pushed her food around her plate, finally saying gently, “I am very glad, you know, to hear that Miss Darcy has found solace in her music. She is but young.” Her eyes met Mr Darcy’s briefly as she added in a soft voice, “I am sure that her confidence will improve with time.” She glanced back at Mrs Annesley. “With such a lovely companion, I am sure Miss Darcy could only flourish.”

Mr Darcy nodded. “Mrs Annesley has done wonders with Georgiana, especially...” He paused, his expression suddenly severe.

Especially after Mrs Younge’s deception. That was what he wanted to say, Elizabeth was sure of it. *He must have been so worried for her.*

Giving him a compassionate look, she supplied, “Especially after all that she has been through.” Mr Darcy gazed into her eyes then, a look of understanding passing between them.

“I would be very grateful if you could recommend some of those songs to me,” he said at last.

“What a lovely idea.” Mrs Annesley set down her fork. “Perhaps if I say to Miss Darcy that they are on your recommendation, she might gain the

courage to sing them.”

“Oh, I do not think my opinion will hold much sway.” Elizabeth’s brow furrowed. *Surely I am not known to Miss Darcy?* Shaking away her confusion, she said, “In turn, you must recommend some books for me. I have read my way through my father’s private collection, and I yearn for new words and ideas.”

“It is Mr Darcy that you should apply to. He has an extensive library.” Mrs Annesley smiled encouragingly at Mr Darcy, whose gaze had not left Elizabeth.

“I should be happy to be of assistance.”

Elizabeth did not know what to say. After every angry word that had passed between them, she was astounded by his generosity. She took a sip of her drink to soothe the papery dryness in her throat before replying.

“Thank you, Mr Darcy. I would be grateful to have something to read when I sit with Maria.” Elizabeth’s eyes sought out the clock. “I have been away from her long enough. I thank you again for your hospitality, but I do believe I should return to my friend.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“Is it true what everyone is saying?” Maria gingerly shifted herself up so she was propped up by the pillows. Tendrils of honey-blond hair tumbled from her dishevelled plait, and shadows darkened under her watery eyes. Her forehead looked very swollen and tender. Elizabeth regarded Maria with sympathy. At least the cuts along her temple looked less angry in the morning light.

“You will have to give me a little more than that.” Elizabeth’s bruised ribs still ached as she leant over and pulled the coverlet farther up over her friend. “Whom do you mean by everyone, and what exactly have they been saying?”

“That Mr Darcy carried me in his arms into his house and placed me in his bed.” Maria’s voice lowered. “Sarah—the maid—said Mr Darcy rescued us from a runaway carriage. We were but a moment from certain death.”

Elizabeth’s mouth twisted as she hid her smile at this melodramatic embellishment. “Mr Darcy behaved very heroically. He did save us from harm, and he did carry you in his arms to the house—but not to his bed,” she added quickly as Maria’s eyes widened with alarm. “I do not know about a runaway carriage, but I believe it was travelling faster than it should.”

“I cannot believe Mr Darcy of all people was the one to rescue me.” Maria sighed, sinking her head back into the pillow. Casting her eyes about the room to ensure it was empty, she whispered, “I am sorry I cannot recall it—did he look very handsome with me in his arms?”

“No,” replied Elizabeth a little too quickly. “He did not.” Upon seeing Maria’s puzzlement, she conceded, “Well, no more than usual.”

“Did I put my arm around his neck? How close was I to his face? Oh, how I long to remember it! It sounds so very thrilling.”

“I would rather forget.”

“You cannot mean that!”

“I most certainly do. You gave me a dreadful scare.”

Maria took little notice of Elizabeth’s concern. “Do you think Mr Darcy will have to marry me?”

“I beg your pardon!” Elizabeth’s mouth dropped open. “Whatever makes you say that?”

“I once overheard Mama and my aunt Lucas talking about our former maid, Hannah. They said that Hannah was found in Joshua Montford’s arms, and then Mama said, ‘*well I suppose they will have to marry.*’”

“No, Maria, you are quite safe from Mr Darcy.” Elizabeth concealed a smile at her friend’s innocence.

“What a pity! I think I would rather like to be Mrs Darcy. Imagine being the mistress of this fine house.”

“Would you not be scared? You always said he was too severe.”

“He cannot be so bad if he saved us.”

“No indeed.” Elizabeth contemplated Maria’s observation.

“Of course, I would not *expect* to marry a man like Mr Darcy. I know that he would have to marry well—far better than you or I.”

Keen to change the topic from Mr Darcy’s matrimonial expectations, Elizabeth replied, “You must not be so self-critical, Maria. You would be a worthy wife to any man. But we must first get you mended. It would not do to be limping down the aisle.”

“I shall have a limp?” Maria’s face was aghast.

“Oh no, of course not,” reassured Elizabeth quickly. “Forgive me, it was a poor joke.”

Maria smiled weakly at Elizabeth’s remark, carefully shifting her weight from side to side in the bed. As she did, she grimaced with pain.

Instantly remorseful, Elizabeth asked, “And how is your leg today?”

“It is my ankle that hurts the most.” Maria let out another gasp as she tried to move her leg under the covers. “I am sorry, but I do not think I could bear a carriage journey.”

“And I do not wish you to move before you are ready.”

“You must hate being here. I know how much you detest Mr Darcy.” Maria pursed her lips. “I am sorry that you should have to endure his

company for my sake.”

“I do not detest him.” Warmth involuntarily spread over Elizabeth’s cheeks. “I could not hate someone who would risk his own safety to save the life of another.”

“But you always said how proud and disagreeable he was.”

“Opinions can be changed,” Elizabeth replied quietly. Maria’s words had struck a nerve, and she was thankful that a knock at the door interrupted their conversation.

It was Sarah, the talkative maid from the night before. She was standing in the doorway, face red.

“Mr Darcy says these are for you and Miss Lucas,” she said, bobbing a curtsy. Elizabeth reached out and took whatever Sarah was holding from her hands. Turning it over, she felt the hard, smooth cover of a book next to softer pages of loose paper.

“Mr Darcy said that Miss Lucas might like to look at Miss Darcy’s newest fashion plates.” Sarah smiled. “And that you might like something to read at Miss Lucas’s bedside.”

“Thank you, Sarah. And please convey my thanks to Mr Darcy.”

“I shall when he returns. He said to let you know that he regrettably has a business meeting.”

“Of course.” The news that Mr Darcy would not be at home should have been a relief, yet the unexpected tightness in Elizabeth’s chest felt something like disappointment. Bidding Sarah goodbye, she returned to Maria whilst inspecting the gifts from Mr Darcy. The items consisted of one large book and several illustrations of dresses.

Upon seeing the drawings, Maria promptly let out a thrilled squeal followed by a sharp gasp of pain. Elizabeth carefully passed the plates over to her. “And what did Mr Darcy give you?” Maria asked.

Elizabeth turned the book over to read the front cover. “Poems, by William Wordsworth.”

“Poems! You poor thing. How dull.”

Elizabeth smiled at Maria. “Not at all. Wordsworth is a poet who takes inspiration from nature.”

“Have you read this book before?”

“No.” Elizabeth delicately ran her finger down the rough leather of the spine before carefully cradling the book in her lap. “But I have always longed to.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The carriage rattled to a stop in front of Darcy's house. He descended from it quickly, impatient to return home. The morning had been a waste of time. He had postponed his annual meeting with the family solicitor too many times to be considered polite, and he had felt honour-bound to keep to his appointment. It had taken every ounce of his concentration to attend to what the peevish Mr Cartwright was saying and not allow his mind to drift back to how bewitching Elizabeth had looked last night. It had seemed an age before he had been able to make his escape.

In the solitude of his carriage, he permitted himself to revel in the beauty of her expressions as they had conversed over dinner. His heart danced in his chest when he recalled how compassionately she had spoken of Georgiana. It gave him hope that his letter had persuaded her of the truth regarding Wickham. A thrill of anticipation drummed through him as he approached his own door. On the other side of it, somewhere in his house, was Elizabeth. He hoped that she might not be too fatigued by her caring duties so that they might dine together again tonight.

"Have there been any visitors?" Darcy asked the footman who was standing stiffly in the doorway. "And anything in the way of letters?"

"Well sir..." Samuels hesitated, his cheeks turning a dusky crimson under his side whiskers. Darcy's eyes narrowed at his servant's uncharacteristic reticence. Samuels took a deep breath, his eyes firmly fixed upon a spot on the wall opposite. "It appears that Miss Bennet's uncle arrived earlier, and there was a little confusion as to who he was."

"How so?"

Samuels shifted nervously on the spot when he heard the angry edge to Darcy's voice. "It was not I who greeted him, sir, so I cannot say directly, but I believe that he was mistaken for one of the upholsterers." Swallowing hard, he continued, "It was just that Mr Gardiner's name was not recognised, and his card said Cheapside, same as the warehouse where Miss Darcy's deliveries came from, and..." He trailed off.

"And where is he now?"

"I believe Miss Bennet heard what was happening and came to greet him. Mrs Annesley was there, and she was able to explain the confusion. I am very sorry for any upset, sir. Mr Gardiner was very understanding."

"Well, that is incredibly lucky for you or whoever opened the door to him," Darcy bit back. "I am less so." He thrust his coat and hat in Samuels's direction. "Mr Gardiner is to be treated with the greatest respect. Be sure to communicate that message to all of my household."

"Of course, sir."

"And you must tell me at once where they are."

"In the drawing room, sir—" Whatever Samuels was about to say next was lost as Darcy took long, hurried strides down the hall.

The door to the drawing room was shut, but Darcy could hear voices talking behind it. He groaned inwardly, praying that his servants had not been too discourteous. *What must Elizabeth be thinking?* All of his previous good humour was rapidly disappearing, and a flutter of nerves twisted inside him. Rapping his knuckles on the door, he hurried into the room and straight towards Mr Gardiner, who had risen to greet him. Elizabeth was also there, her cheeks flushed when she saw who entered.

"I must beg your pardon, Mr Gardiner." Such was his desire to apologise that Darcy could not wait to be introduced properly. "I have just learnt of a terrible misunderstanding upon your arrival."

Mr Gardiner smiled awkwardly. "Do not trouble yourself on that account. It is of no consequence."

"But it matters greatly to me. Rudeness from my servants is unforgivable." He motioned for Mr Gardiner to sit.

"I thank you, sir, for your consideration." Mr Gardiner cast Darcy a benevolent glance before saying, "You may add it to the very long list of services that I wish to thank you for."

Out of the corner of his eye, Darcy sensed Elizabeth shifting uneasily in her chair.

Mr Gardiner continued, "I have heard a great deal about you, Mr Darcy. All that I have heard fills me with gratitude. It is a great comfort to know that my niece and Miss Lucas are so well cared for."

Darcy waved Mr Gardiner's compliment away with an embarrassed flick of his hand. "I acted as any man would."

"I do not wish to begin this conversation with a direct contradiction, but I highly doubt that." Mr Gardiner spoke respectfully, but there was a steely firmness to his voice. He gestured towards Elizabeth. "You were acquainted with my niece prior to this accident—last winter as I recall. At that time, however, I would not have expected such a warm welcome in your home. Plainly, we were all in error."

Darcy hesitated, unsure of how to reply to this.

Elizabeth appeared to sense his unease. She looked up at Darcy from under her lashes in a way that made his pulse race before addressing her uncle. "We grew better acquainted when we met again in Kent."

Mr Gardiner did not seem to notice anything amiss in Elizabeth's manner. He was clearly very anxious over what he was to say next. "Mr Darcy, I wish to ask something of you, yet I feel the awkwardness of settling personal matters with someone I am little acquainted with."

Wishing to put the affable Mr Gardiner at ease, Darcy said, "Do not feel troubled. I am more sympathetic to your struggles than I may appear."

Mr Gardiner's eyebrows raised at Darcy's remark.

Realising too late how his comment might be misconstrued as rudeness, he quickly added, "Not that I believe you to be struggling. I mean to say that I am never easy in new company." A shadow of a smile played over Elizabeth's soft lips as he added this last part, and Darcy was sure that he was not the only one in the room recollecting the last time he admitted to such a vulnerability.

"It surprises me to hear that, Mr Darcy. But, as they say, still waters run deep." Mr Gardiner gave Darcy a courteous nod.

Elizabeth was smoothing down the folds of her dress as her uncle spoke. She looked very uncomfortable at this meeting, and Darcy had a fair idea as to why. He had made his disapproval for her relations so offensively known. An overwhelming desire to make amends seized him.

In a serious voice, he said, "I was once told that many deficiencies can be overcome when one takes the trouble to practise." He continued, in the humblest of tones, "Since that moment, I have vowed to be more open in my

manner. Please talk to me as you would a friend. What were you discussing before my arrival?"

Elizabeth's dark eyes grew wide as she heard him speak of friendship towards Mr Gardiner. "My uncle wishes to speak to you regarding a delicate matter, and he wanted my opinion as to your likely response."

"And what did you say?"

"That I do not know you well, but I know enough to guess your answer."

"I speak, of course, of duty." The chair groaned as Mr Gardiner leant forwards.

"Duty?" Darcy could not disguise his confusion.

"But of course. You have my assurances that all will be settled."

"What will be settled?" Darcy was certain that Mr Gardiner would think him a simpleton, such was his manner of repeating back everything that was said, but he was at a complete loss as to what they were discussing. Elizabeth's eyes dropped to the floor once again. For a brief instant, Darcy entertained the ludicrously hopeful notion that Mr Gardiner expected him to marry Elizabeth.

Mr Gardiner must have sensed Darcy's bafflement as he helpfully supplied, "I wish to settle the cost of the medical expenses and any damages to your property."

Hiding his disappointment, Darcy said abruptly, "You must not trouble yourself."

"But I do not wish to be obliged to you."

"And there is no need to feel indebted." Darcy inwardly chafed. As if he would ever demand payment for the honour of assisting Elizabeth in her hour of need!

Mr Gardiner gave Darcy a courteous smile, which did not fully match the determination in his eyes. "I do not wish for you to suffer any inconvenience. Not when it is within my power to provide redress."

Darcy did not know how to answer. Accepting Mr Gardiner's money was out of the question, but he had no desire to engage in an argument. Instinctively, he looked to Elizabeth for guidance. Her eyes met his, and he hoped she could see his struggle.

Face flushed, Elizabeth said, "My uncle is greatly vexed by the notion that he will not be able to repay you for the great kindness that you have shown myself and Maria."

"Lizzy told me that it would be impossible to get you to accept," came a

grumble from Mr Gardiner's direction.

Elizabeth gave her uncle a warning glare. "And that it might offend you to be asked." She looked at Darcy so imploringly that he felt certain that he would agree to renounce Pemberley if it were she that commanded it.

Taking a deep breath, he smiled reassuringly at Mr Gardiner. "I am not offended. I would wish to do the same if I were in your position. However, anyone who knows me will attest to my stubbornness when I have set my mind to something. I will not hear of payment." He gave Mr Gardiner his most earnest look. "Besides, it is not my desire to begin our acquaintance talking of debt."

There was a heavy pause. Mr Gardiner glanced back at Elizabeth before looking steadily at Darcy. Something about Darcy's look or manner must have been convincing, as Mr Gardiner nodded in defeat. "You have my heartfelt thanks and respect, sir." He raised a begrudging eyebrow before waggling his index finger in pretend indignation. "Noble as well as heroic, eh? You must slow down Mr Darcy—you give the rest of us men a bad name."

Darcy laughed at this, surprised at how aimable he found Elizabeth's uncle.

"You will have to perform some chivalrous act for Aunt Gardiner when you return home," Elizabeth teased. "Perhaps a cloak over a puddle will suffice."

"Let us not get carried away." Mr Gardiner let out a good-natured laugh. "I do not think adding to the laundry would place me high in my wife's affections."

Grateful that a battle of wills between Mr Gardiner and himself had been averted, Darcy was pleased when the conversation turned to safer topics. They passed another half an hour or so in this way before Mr Gardiner took his leave. Elizabeth did not speak much when in the presence of her uncle, but Darcy could not help but notice how her eyes would often move in his direction, and how she would smile privately to herself when they did.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Darcy glanced at the clock in his study. Elizabeth had returned to Miss Lucas's bedside some time ago. On the desk was a blank sheet of paper. His hand hovered above it, the pen twitching in his grip. Darcy had not yet corresponded with Bingley since his return to London, and the weighty task before him could no longer be postponed. It was not known how long Miss Lucas would need her friend to care for her, and he desperately wished to address Elizabeth's criticisms regarding Mr Bingley before she left. His instinct told him that this was a conversation to be had face to face—to hide behind a pen would be an act of cowardice, and Bingley deserved more from him.

Perhaps I should ask Elizabeth for advice? He shook his head. *No. This was my error, and I must own all of it alone.* Stretching, he began to write a note requesting a meeting within the next day or so. He had not got far when a knock at the door broke his attention. It was his butler, Mr Simmons, looking uncharacteristically ruffled.

"Is anything the matter?"

"It is Colonel Fitzwilliam. He has just arrived."

Darcy suppressed a groan. He was long accustomed to his cousin's propensity to turn up unannounced.

Mr Simmons continued, "And he has asked for his belongings to be sent to his usual guest bedroom."

"So show him to it." Darcy had little patience for Fitzwilliam's demands.

"It is impossible, sir. Miss Bennet and Miss Lucas are there."

Darcy curved his lips into a wry smile. *How could it have escaped my*

memory? “Then please escort him to another guest bedroom. Perhaps the blue chamber.” *The one with a draughty chimney*, he added privately. *Mayhap then he will learn to send a note prior to his arrival.* Mr Simmons bowed gratefully, and Darcy checked the time once more. He wondered how long it would be before his cousin made his opinions known.

A mere two minutes later, Darcy was treated to an uproarious commotion of male voices and hurried footsteps. The door to his study burst open, and his cousin’s thickset frame filled the doorway.

“Good gracious, Darcy, what’s all this?” Fitzwilliam strode into the room and slumped heavily into the chair on the other side of Darcy’s desk. “According to your servants, there are two women currently staying in my favourite bedroom.” He grinned wickedly. “Well done! I was thinking just the other day that you could use a little female entertainment. You were so boorish at Rosings.”

Darcy looked at Fitzwilliam in alarm. “Keep your voice down. It is not what you are implying.”

Fitzwilliam leant in conspiratorially. “Are they pretty? I dearly hope so. I am in grave need of a pleasant face after weeks of nought but de Bourgh women.”

“You are not listening.” Darcy glanced at the door, fearful that this conversation should be overheard. His cousin continued, undeterred, “Well not *every* face in Kent was as ugly as our relatives. That Miss Bennet was *certainly* aimable. If only she should have a fortune...what a delightful wife she would make! A woman who could make you laugh and put a smile on your face—if you catch my meaning.” Fitzwilliam waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Saying nothing, Darcy rose swiftly and locked the door to his study.

“Good Lord, do you mean to make me your prisoner?” Fitzwilliam raised his hands in mock surrender. “Spare me, Darcy—I promise not to grumble about being put in the coldest room in the house.”

Darcy cast his eyes heavenwards and flung himself back down in his chair.

Taking absolutely no notice of Darcy’s exasperation, Fitzwilliam said, “Now, remind me, what were we discussing?”

“Miss Elizabeth Bennet...” Darcy began. Fitzwilliam opened his mouth, but Darcy cut him off. “...is staying in my house. Accompanied by Miss Maria Lucas.”

Fitzwilliam pursed his lips into a silent whistle. "Lord above. I did not see that coming. She always seemed so well bred." He quirked an eyebrow at Darcy. "And *Miss Lucas*? I did not think her much more than a mouse. They always say it is the quiet ones that surprise you."

"Fitzwilliam!" Darcy slammed his fist on the desk so forcefully that the ink jumped from the inkwell. "For the love of all things holy, keep that tongue inside your head, or I shall instruct my cook to cut it off and add it to tonight's dinner." Fitzwilliam's eyes nearly popped out, but thankfully he said no more.

Darcy continued, "There is no distasteful arrangement between myself and the two young women who are staying in one of *my* guest bedrooms." He gave his cousin a pointed look, which earned him a huff in return. "There was an accident virtually upon my doorstep, in which Miss Lucas was injured. It was agreed that Miss Bennet should stay until Miss Lucas was well enough to be moved."

"A trial for you, I am sure." Fitzwilliam gave Darcy a wry smile.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, you did not seem appreciative of Miss Bennet's rather bountiful charms."

This made Darcy pause. "You thought I disliked her?"

"You hardly spoke to her, and you did very little to make her feel at ease. I daresay she was quite uncomfortable with you—what with all the standing around silently and persistent glowering in her general direct—" He stopped and eyed Darcy carefully.

A knowing smile broke across his face. "You *admire* her."

"Lower your voice!" Darcy hissed, feeling his cheeks flaming. "You do not know what you are talking about."

"Deny it, then." Fitzwilliam flexed his shoulders and assumed a posture of such smug superiority that Darcy was very tempted to box his cousin on the nose.

"There is nothing to deny," Darcy said. "As you said, she was never at ease around me."

"But she could be—if you took the trouble to look less like you have a fire poker rammed up your backside and actually conversed with her properly."

Darcy paid no attention to his cousin's remark, choosing instead to look down at his hands as he drummed his fingers against his desk.

Finally he said in a low voice, "She detests me."

"You are exaggerating."

"I know she does."

"How can you be so sure?"

"She told me."

"What? When?"

Darcy sighed. He could not hide his torment any longer. Keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the desk, he said quietly, "When I asked her to marry me."

For the first time in all the years Darcy had known him, Fitzwilliam was speechless. As often as he had longed for such behaviour from his cousin, this time the silence was unbearable. Darcy clenched his jaw before finally meeting Fitzwilliam's eye. "As you can guess, it did not go the way I had hoped."

"Clearly." Fitzwilliam regarded Darcy with sympathy. "Forgive my surprise, Darcy. Do you mean to say you have fallen in love with *Miss Elizabeth Bennet*? I did not see that coming either."

"Neither did she," Darcy said flatly.

"What happened?"

In the briefest of sentences, Darcy outlined his disastrous proposal. In truth, it was too gut-wrenching to relive every particular. He could not bring himself to repeat Elizabeth's true opinion of him but said enough to let his cousin know that however poorly she viewed him, she was entirely justified.

"And now she is staying in your house?" asked Fitzwilliam.

"That is correct." Darcy fiddled with a pen on his desk.

"So what is your plan?" Fitzwilliam leant in towards Darcy. "Surely you must be trying to impress her."

"Did you not hear me? She is here by chance, tending to her injured friend."

Fitzwilliam waved his hand impatiently. "All the more reason why you should unlock your study door and try your hand at *wooing* your fair maiden."

"I have been doing all I can to make amends," he replied hotly. "And I locked the door so that if I decided to shut your mouth permanently, there would be no witnesses."

Disregarding the warning in Darcy's voice, Fitzwilliam gave him a sly grin. "But you should be pleased that I am here!"

"How so?" Darcy recognised the look of mischief on his cousin's face.

He eyed him warily—dear as Fitzwilliam was, he did not have a sterling record when it came to acting in Darcy's best interests.

A wicked glint shone in Fitzwilliam's eyes. "I shall help Miss Bennet to fall wildly in love with you."

"Fitzwilliam, be serious. You are hardly an expert. The only affection you receive is from the girls in Covent Garden. It is not love if you have to pay for it."

"Says the man who told his heart's desire how awful her family, connexions, and prospects were." Fitzwilliam snorted with laughter until he saw Darcy's pained expression. "Seriously, Darcy. I shall help you. If there is anyone to make you seem more like a human and less like an automaton, it is I." He reached over and gave Darcy a sympathetic pat on the arm. "I should like you to be happy almost as much as I would like Miss Bennet to be my cousin-in-law." Fitzwilliam's mouth twisted into an irreverent grin. "Besides, imagine our aunt's face if you do not marry Cousin Anne."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“**M**y dear Miss Bennet!” A familiar voice caught Elizabeth’s attention, and she drew her head up from the book she was reading. It was Colonel Fitzwilliam, standing at the entrance to the drawing room. She smiled brightly when she saw him, pleased to see his round, jovial face. As he entered the room, she realised that he was followed by Mr Darcy. She rose to greet them both. Colonel Fitzwilliam beamed at her as she did so.

“It is lovely to see you again, Miss Bennet,” he exclaimed affectionately. “Although I wish it were under different circumstances. You have had a dreadful time of it.”

Swallowing back her guilt, Elizabeth replied, “Poor Maria has suffered far worse than I.”

“I trust she is on the road to recovery?”

“Yes, I thank you.” She returned to her seat, with the colonel sitting on the sofa opposite. “I thought I would sit here and read while she is sleeping.”

“On your own?”

“Reading is rarely a pursuit for two people,” Elizabeth countered, arching her eyebrows playfully. She caught sight of Mr Darcy, who was still lingering in the doorway. Something about the hesitation in his manner caused her to smile at him before she turned her attention back to Colonel Fitzwilliam. “Do you live with Mr Darcy?”

“I do not, Miss Bennet, although my cousin may argue a case to the contrary.” Colonel Fitzwilliam beckoned to Mr Darcy impatiently. “Stop loitering over my shoulder, Darcy, and take a seat.”

Elizabeth saw a dark cloud pass over Mr Darcy's face—he was clearly unimpressed by being told what to do in his own home. Nevertheless, he came and sat down on the sofa next to his cousin.

Apparently ignorant of his cousin's mood, Colonel Fitzwilliam continued speaking airily, "I often stay with Darcy for a night or two when I pass through London." His face broke into a grin. "I must say, it will be nice to talk to you without our dreadful aunt interrupting."

Elizabeth swallowed a peal of laughter. She caught sight of Mr Darcy's unsmiling face. Mindful that Lady Catherine was his aunt also, she swiftly schooled her features into a serious expression. "You cannot mean that."

"I most certainly do." The corner of the colonel's lips twitched mischievously. "And let us not pretend otherwise. You are the only person I have ever met who is unafraid of the great Lady Catherine de Bourgh."

Heat swept across Elizabeth's neck. *My impertinent manner never does go unnoticed.*

She did not wish to further provoke Mr Darcy's displeasure and so replied, "There are very few people that I fear. It is an uncommon flaw, and one that often leads to more trouble than good."

Fitzwilliam laughed heartily at Elizabeth's riposte, but she did not miss his calculating smirk in Mr Darcy's direction. She wondered whether Colonel Fitzwilliam had been privy to any of Mr Darcy's matrimonial plans. From Mr Darcy's foreboding countenance, he was evidently unhappy at his cousin's arrival.

"Do you fear Darcy?" Colonel Fitzwilliam's question broke through her thoughts. Elizabeth choked back her surprise at his direct question.

"Fitzwilliam!" Mr Darcy gave his cousin the most blistering scowl Elizabeth had ever seen.

"Of course not," Elizabeth said quickly. Both men looked at her with surprise. Desirous to lighten the conversation, she curved her lips into an arch smile. "Mr Darcy is far too restrained to be considered a threat."

Fitzwilliam laughed uproariously at this, but Mr Darcy did not. Instead, a veil of sadness crossed over his eyes, and he turned his head to the window. Compassion filled Elizabeth. She had no idea that her words would have such an effect. She added gently, "I know so little about Mr Darcy that it is impossible to pass any judgment." As she spoke, Mr Darcy returned his gaze back to the conversation, but his expression was still grave. Elizabeth's heart sank. Had her jest really hurt him so?

Colonel Fitzwilliam was still talking. He reached out and gave Mr Darcy a playful tap on the knee, which Elizabeth could tell annoyed him greatly. "Allow me to assist you. As one of Darcy's closest relatives, I am in possession of a great number of tales about him. What would you like to know?"

"Fitzwilliam, you must not make Miss Bennet uncomfortable."

"And you should not tease your cousin." Elizabeth shut the book in her lap.

"But it is undeniably amusing to do so." Colonel Fitzwilliam winked at her. "Darcy does not know how to be mocked."

"It is never easy to be the object of ridicule." Mr Darcy's rich voice spoke firmly as he addressed his cousin.

He looked so ill at ease. Elizabeth could not help but remember their conversation about this very subject at Netherfield Park. She wondered whether he was thinking of it too.

Anxious to remove the pinched expression from Mr Darcy's brow, she addressed Colonel Fitzwilliam. "Mr Darcy is very fortunate. I am adept at teasing, and he may call me to his defence." Concealing her blush, she smiled encouragingly at Mr Darcy.

"A-ha!" Colonel Fitzwilliam rubbed his hands together. "I accept your challenge, Miss Bennet."

"I did not mean that you *should* tease him, rather that I could help Mr Darcy if you did." Elizabeth looked at the colonel in alarm.

"I am sure Miss Bennet desires to be left undisturbed—" Mr Darcy spoke up, positively squirming in his seat.

"Pish posh." Colonel Fitzwilliam waved his hand at Mr Darcy. "Miss Bennet, did you know that this dark-headed, handsome fellow before us was once in possession of a set of curls so fair every nursemaid called him 'Cherub'?"

"Miss Bennet does not want to hear about this." Mr Darcy's face was bright red.

Elizabeth dearly wished to laugh, but her heart would not allow it. Chin raised in mock defiance, she said, "Is that your best? Mr Darcy, you may sleep soundly tonight, knowing the meagre limits of your cousin's arsenal." She smiled at him, eager for him to be at ease once more. A mischievous spirit took hold of her. "Besides, you must have countless childhood stories about the colonel that you could use as revenge."

Mr Darcy met her gaze then, the corner of his mouth curving upwards. “I am afraid I cannot regale you with anecdotes of Fitzwilliam’s infancy. He is my senior by some years.” The dimples round his lips deepened. “As evidenced by the abundance of silver in his whiskers.” Elizabeth laughed merrily, which caused Mr Darcy’s face to light up with pleasure.

“We all must grow old.” Colonel Fitzwilliam grinned back at Mr Darcy. “And ‘wisdom belongs to the aged.’” He addressed Elizabeth once more. “Naturally, I have more ammunition. As we are speaking of sobriquets, would you like to know what Darcy was called at university?” Before Elizabeth could answer, he continued, “He obtained the name ‘Silver’. Not on account of his vast wealth, you understand, but because everyone agreed that he has the emotional range of a dessert spoon.” Here the colonel roared with laughter.

Poor Mr Darcy looked so embarrassed that Elizabeth hid her smile.

“That is not so awful.” She squared her shoulders. “I am sure that there could be worse. I wonder if *you* are ever called anything amongst your friends.”

“Nothing repeatable in polite company.” Mr Darcy’s eyes were gleaming now. “Come, Fitzwilliam, we must leave Miss Bennet in peace.”

“I shall leave if you tell us a joke.” The gold of Colonel Fitzwilliam’s buttons flashed against the scarlet of his jacket. He winked at Elizabeth. “Prove to us that you have more depth than a pretty piece of silver.”

Darcy narrowed his eyes before replying coolly, “Colonel Fitzwilliam of the 49th regiment.”

Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes, snorting derisively. “Have you lost your wits? I asked you for a joke.”

“And I obliged by supplying your name, for surely *you* are the biggest joke I have ever encountered.”

As Mr Darcy said this, he turned to Elizabeth, all reserve gone from his countenance. A smile lit up his face; its effect was like the sun peeking from behind a cloud. It transformed him. She had never known him to look so handsome, so carefree. At that moment, she felt as though she *could* be his wife, sitting together in their drawing room, sharing a joke at his cousin’s expense. A heady lightness flowed through her, and she was grateful for Colonel Fitzwilliam’s laughter as a distraction.

“I do not think you need my assistance when it comes to Colonel Fitzwilliam.” Elizabeth did her best to hide her discomposure.

“But it is welcome all the same.”

Mr Darcy’s dark eyes shone as he spoke to her, causing Elizabeth’s heart to race. Colonel Fitzwilliam elbowed Mr Darcy.

“Come, Darcy. You have won your way as usual. Let us leave Miss Bennet to read...” he glanced quickly at the book “...her poems instead.” Mr Darcy’s eyes flickered over Elizabeth’s lap, a look of pleased recognition playing across his face before taking his leave.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



“**Y**ou must refrain from your abominable scheming.” Darcy spoke quietly to prevent Mrs Annesley from hearing. Luckily, she was attending to her embroidery on the other side of the room.

“Whatever can you mean?” Fitzwilliam replied lightly. Both men were sitting in the drawing room. Elizabeth had eaten upstairs with Miss Lucas this evening, but she had promised to come down as soon as her friend was comfortable.

“Reliving every embarrassing detail from my youth will not charm Miss Bennet,” Darcy growled under his breath.

“I thought it was a fine plan.” Fitzwilliam helped himself to another glass of wine. “She was quick to defend you, was she not?”

Darcy could not argue with that point.

“You need to make yourself approachable,” Fitzwilliam continued, taking a loud sip. “Let her see that there is more to you than scowls, insults, and churlishness.”

Darcy opened his mouth to protest but found he could not. “You are unfortunately correct,” he said gloomily. “However, my dignity has been severely wounded these past few weeks. I am not sure how much more it can withstand.”

“For your fair Elizabeth, I am sure you can tolerate a great deal more.”

“It is *Miss Bennet* to you.” Darcy scowled at his cousin. “And do not forget it.”

A movement at the door signalled that Elizabeth had arrived. Darcy did his best not to leap from his chair to greet her. At his elbow, he could hear his

cousin chuckling at his eagerness, which he disregarded. Elizabeth spoke to Mrs Annesley before coming towards them, looking as lovely as ever. Dark ringlets framed her face, and her cream dress swept low to reveal the delicate tips of her shoulders. The brown of her eyes contrasted with the ivory of her skin. *She is so beautiful*, he thought. There was a brightness about her—more so now that she had rested. She was like a jewel, twinkling in the candlelight. Her face lit up when she saw him. *Perhaps Fitzwilliam was correct after all*. Darcy felt a surge of nerves wrestling inside him. *Perhaps all that was needed was a little humour to break the tension between us*.

“Are you well, Miss Bennet?” Colonel Fitzwilliam motioned for Elizabeth to sit next to him—an action that irked Darcy immensely.

“Quite well, thank you.” Elizabeth gathered up her dress as she took her seat. Darcy watched as she and his cousin conversed, annoyed that he could not find a way to join in without interrupting. He turned to look into the fire, hoping for a flash of inspiration, when he heard his name. He looked up at them.

“I was just informing Miss Bennet, dear cousin, about your dance master.”

Darcy groaned aloud. “Will you desist from these stories from my youth?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Elizabeth bite her lip to hide her grin. Fitzwilliam’s advice that he should let Elizabeth see a different side to him echoed in his ears. Bracing himself for whatever was coming next, he softened his tone as he said, “What nonsense have you been spouting now?”

A devilish smile spread across his cousin’s face. “I was simply telling Miss Bennet how you paid for Mr Coulthard’s medical expenses after he injured his ankle—in a similar manner to your actions regarding Miss Lucas.” He continued innocently, “Unless there is another version of this story—one you would rather not share?”

Darcy opened his mouth to curtail Fitzwilliam’s exploration of his past, but then he caught sight of Elizabeth’s lovely eyes as she gazed expectantly at him. It was no use. He could not leave her curiosity unanswered.

“It was *I* who hurt his ankle.” Darcy took a deep breath. “To this day, I cannot do the *chassé* step. And I am wracked with anxiety every time I attempt it.”

Elizabeth smiled at his confession. “You hide your nerves very well. I have always thought you to be a fine dancer.”

“Have you?” Darcy replied, his chest swelling with pride at her

compliment. "I shall be sure to reassure Mr Coulthard that the pain was worth the while."

"There! Did I not tell you that Darcy is excessively generous! And he says I only ever criticise him." Fitzwilliam smirked at Darcy. "I could not be friends with a miserly man."

"I sincerely doubt a miserly man would befriend you," Darcy retorted, "given your propensity to eat and drink your way through a household."

Elizabeth's shoulders shook with laughter at their bickering. "I am almost glad I do not have a brother. I do not think I could keep up. Is this what you are truly like when you are away from your aunt?"

"I am a terror," said Fitzwilliam proudly. "Darcy is correct. I make myself far too comfortable." He motioned towards Darcy. "And this one is far too honourable. He would do anything for a friend."

Elizabeth looked at Darcy. Behind her shoulder, the colonel caught his eye and gave him an over-exaggerated wink. A deep foreboding filled Darcy. *What the devil is my cousin going to say next?*

"But you already know of Darcy's loyalty," Fitzwilliam continued cheerfully. "You remember of course Mr Bingley, whom Darcy saved from an ill-advised marriage." He gave Darcy an encouraging nod. "Darcy acted very quickly. The family was awful, as I understand. What was it you said, Darcy? A large family, and not a jot of sense among them."

The expression upon Elizabeth's countenance was one that Darcy would never forget. It was as though she had been physically struck in the face. Her look of pain was unbearable to witness. He hated himself for being the cause of it. He almost wished that she would turn round and berate him for his incivility. Anything would be better than this awful, wounded silence. He watched in horror as a tear slid from her dark lashes and splashed its way down her delicate cheek.

"Miss Bennet, I have upset you!" Fitzwilliam exclaimed, his brow creased in confusion.

"No, I-I..." Elizabeth faltered. "I realised that I am tired...and I should return to Maria. Forgive my silliness, and I hope...hope you have a pleasant evening." With that she got up from her chair, not saying a word to Darcy, not even glancing back at him, and swept out of the room. The hush that descended was palpable. Even Mrs Annesley put down her needlework.

"What did I say?" Fitzwilliam looked bewildered. "She was all laughter a moment ago!" He turned to Darcy, speaking in a lower voice. "I thought it

might make you look more compassionate—that you are always thinking of how best to help your friends.”

“Compassionate?” Darcy dearly wished to throttle him. “You thought it would make me look *compassionate*?”

“That you act in the interest of others.” Fitzwilliam raised his eyebrows, completely unaware of the damage he had caused.

“So it was *you* who told Miss Bennet that I separated Bingley from a potential match?”

“Why, yes. What has made you so angry?”

“Bingley fancied himself in love with Miss Bennet’s *elder sister*, you utter cork-brain,” Darcy hissed under his breath.

By this point, Mrs Annesley had risen from her chair. Darcy kicked Fitzwilliam in the shin to prevent him from speaking further—an action that gave him great satisfaction.

“Shall I ask after Miss Bennet?” Mrs Annesley enquired, pointedly paying no attention to Fitzwilliam, who was making a show of rubbing his leg.

Darcy paused. He felt so lost. The thought of Elizabeth crying alone was insufferable, but what could Mrs Annesley do to help?

“Please let me know if she is well, but do not trouble her if she is resting,” he said at last.

After she had gone, Fitzwilliam turned round and pounded Darcy on the arm. “For my leg.” He scowled. “Although you deserve worse.”

Biting back a curse, Darcy glared at his cousin. “That was unnecessary,” he growled, rubbing his biceps. “I know I am a beast of the first order.” He gazed glumly at the space where, moments before, Elizabeth had sat. *She had been so upset*. He clenched his jaw. “What am I to do?”

“You should talk to her.”

“The damage is done. You saw her tears.”

“Do you truly wish to marry Miss Bennet—given all that you have told me about her family?”

Elizabeth’s face returned to him, moments before the carriage came hurtling towards her. *I cannot lose her*. It was the only thing of which he was certain. Now that he had tasted love, every other sensation paled in comparison. “I cannot forsake her,” he replied. “Lord knows I have tried.”

“Then you must act swiftly.”

“I think we have established that my best chance with Elizabeth is to

never utter another word in her presence,” Darcy replied, slumping further into his seat.

“You must write to Georgiana and ask her to return home.”

“What on earth for?”

“So she may befriend Miss Bennet, and you will have an excuse to call upon her when she returns to her relatives in Cheapside.”

“Her relatives in Cheapside...” Darcy repeated, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. He stood up and went to sit at the small writing desk in the far corner of the room.

Fitzwilliam looked at him with satisfaction. “You agree with my suggestion?”

Darcy answered him absently. “I need not write to Georgiana. She is due back tomorrow. My heart would be gladdened if she would befriend Elizabeth.” He took out his writing materials. “I fear she will be too shy, but I should like them to meet all the same.”

“Then what are you writing?”

Darcy looked up from desk, his expression serious. “An invitation.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Arrrogant, arrogant, hateful man. Elizabeth tore her brush through her ringlets. *And to think I was beginning to think him civil.* She looked at her reflection. Red rims encircled her eyes, and her cheeks were glistening in the flickering candlelight. At least she had been able to mostly hold on to her tears until she reached the bedroom. *Heavens above, what would the great and all-knowing Mr Darcy make of the poor, lowly Miss Elizabeth Bennet sobbing over some offhand comment he made to his cousin?* Some of her emotion subsided, and she wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. *Why should I feel ashamed? I did not seek Mr Darcy's good opinion. Why did he propose to me if everything about me is so offensive?* She pulled off her bracelets, fighting the urge to slam them against the polished wood of the dressing table. She looked at herself once more in the mirror. *You are not made for misery, she told herself. Soon you will be gone from here—far from the critical eyes of that insufferable man.*

A quiet knock and soft voice alerted her to Mrs Annesley's presence. Elizabeth hastened to the door, rapidly blinking. It would not do to be caught crying.

"Are you well, Miss Bennet?"

"Yes." Elizabeth attempted to hide the misery from her voice, shivering as the cool air danced across her forearms.

Mrs Annesley paused. "Mr Darcy wished to know."

A flash of anger ran through Elizabeth. *Now he considers my feelings?* "I am well enough, Mrs Annesley. Please tell Mr Darcy that he should not waste another moment considering my happiness."

“I shall reassure him of your need to rest,” Mrs Annesley replied diplomatically. “I am sure that it will put his mind at ease.” She paused, before saying gently, “I have not seen him so worried in a long time. Your welfare must mean a great deal to him.”

Warmth crept along Elizabeth’s neck. “I am sure you are mistaken.”

Mrs Annesley looked at her thoughtfully. “Do you know, Mr Darcy reminds me of my own dear James. Always so silent and serious. My late husband was terribly nervous when courting me, and he would often say the wrong thing at the wrong moment. I was not sure that I liked him when we first met.” She sighed. “But that was a lifetime ago. Life is precious, Miss Bennet. For some of us, it ends far too quickly. I am so glad I looked past poor dear James’s nerves. My only regret is that I did not do it sooner. We might have had more time together.” A shadow of sadness flitted across her face before her features resumed the expression of a woman long used to concealing her pain.

Elizabeth gave Mrs Annesley a moment to regain her composure before softly enquiring, “And what was it that made you look past your initial poor opinion?”

Mrs Annesley gave Elizabeth a rueful smile. “He never gave up.”

Elizabeth fell silent. To love someone and lose them must be unbearable. From somewhere in the room, a bed creaked. Elizabeth turned her head towards the noise, fearful that their conversation had disturbed Maria’s rest.

The noise must have caught Mrs Annesley’s notice also. Gathering herself, she said, “Perhaps Miss Lucas could join us tomorrow if she feels stronger. A footman could assist her if her ankle is still sore.”

“I think that will please Maria—I shall ask her as soon as she awakens.”

“I shall inform Mr Darcy. You may be unaware, but Miss Darcy is due to return tomorrow also. Mr Darcy has mentioned his wish to introduce you both to her.”

Elizabeth’s heart sank when she heard this. How was she to face Mr Darcy after this evening’s humiliating set-down—and before his sister too? She managed a tight smile before bidding Mrs Annesley goodnight. Returning to the dressing table, she remained in contemplation of Mrs Annesley’s observation. *Was she suggesting that Mr Darcy deserved another chance?* During the time she had spent in his care, she had certainly seen a different side to him, to the point where she had almost forgotten how disparaging he could be. *Why should Mr Darcy’s remarks bother me so?* Her

reflection returned her determined stare.

Let him judge me, she told herself. I do not need his approval.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Aside from the usual pleasantries, Elizabeth had not said a word to Darcy for precisely one hour and twelve minutes—as measured by the sonorous pendulum clock taking note of every heavy silence—and every second had been exquisite torture. She and Miss Lucas had joined Darcy in the morning room, where he was awaiting Georgiana’s arrival. Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mrs Annesley were also present. Darcy was sure that Mrs Annesley suspected his true feelings—she was forever bringing Elizabeth’s attention to a particular feature of Darcy’s home, which was politely complimented before a swift change of topic. Even Fitzwilliam had received something of a frosty reception. On the surface, Elizabeth was all smiles towards his cousin, but her lukewarm response to Fitzwilliam’s jokes suggested that he was far from her good graces. Her silence towards Darcy twisted inside him like a soldier’s bayonet.

It did not help that Elizabeth looked more alluring than ever. There was a fire about her that had been missing since her unfortunate accident. Her enormous dark eyes sparked with a flinty determination, while her lips curved into a beautiful curl as she spoke; her bearing, her body, every movement, every gesture, all called to him more acutely now than ever before. *When did I become so attuned to her mood?* She had disguised her ill-opinion of him so well in all their previous contretemps. Now he knew the depth of her scorn and felt her distance beneath her cool exterior.

What witchcraft is this? The more she shunned him, the more he desired her good opinion. In a moment of madness, he considered dropping to his knees and begging for her forgiveness in front of everyone in the room.

Mrs Annesley had called Elizabeth's attention to a portrait by the window. She had risen to take a closer inspection, and from his seat, Darcy could see her perfect figure silhouetted in the light. With a tremendous effort, he tore his eyes away and cast them about the room, desperate for a distraction. His gaze fell upon Miss Lucas. The unfortunate young woman had been helped to a chair by the fire earlier that morning, her leg now propped up with cushions. Elizabeth had draped a shawl over her shoulders, but he could tell by Miss Lucas's stiff posture that the young lady was still in some discomfort. He was reminded of the time he fell from his first pony—the week of bedrest had been dreadful. Miss Lucas was young, close to Georgiana's age. *It cannot be pleasant to be ill in a stranger's house.* He rose and drew up a chair beside Miss Lucas. Her pale blue eyes widened, and all the colour drained from her face.

Attempting what he hoped to be an approachable smile, he said, "Miss Lucas, I trust you are feeling better?"

Anyone witnessing this conversation would surely think that Darcy had invited Miss Lucas to dine on dog entrails, for her expression was one of utter horror. *Perhaps her hearing has been affected by her ordeal?*

Clearing his throat, he smiled once more, this time talking a touch louder. "I do hope that everything is to your liking. Is there anything that I might do to assist you?"

This time, Miss Lucas must surely have heard him, as she shook her head and let forth a squeak which Darcy deduced signified *no*. He grimaced privately. Inconsequential chit chat had never been a strength of his. He glanced around, hopelessly searching for a topic of conversation.

The fire in the grate had begun to fade. Stretching out, he thrust the poker towards the scattering of flames. "Let me stoke this for you, Miss Lucas." Feeling intensely awkward, Darcy ploughed forth with all the determination of a doomed captain aboard a sinking ship. "Did you have any plans for your stay in London?"

"N-no, Mr Darcy." Miss Lucas's voice was no louder than a whisper. Shifting about on her chair, some of the papers she had been perusing came loose and fluttered towards the floor.

"Let me help you with those." Intensely grateful for a distraction from his disastrous attempt at civility, Darcy fell to his knees, aware that Miss Lucas would be unable to reach down. Crouching low, he patted his hands underneath Miss Lucas's chair, stretching his fingers to recover what she had

lost. As he began to sit back on his ankles, he was suddenly very aware of a great silence filling the morning room.

Everyone was staring at him. Fitzwilliam's face was filled with bemused puzzlement; Miss Lucas was looking at him as though he had grown an extra head. Mrs Annesley maintained her customarily motherly air...and Elizabeth...well, hers was an expression that Darcy could not fathom. Some of the icy chill had blown from her mood, and she did not look so angry as before. He was not sure what he had done to effect such a change, but he was excessively relieved nevertheless. He smiled awkwardly, wishing that he was in a more dignified position.

Saying nothing, Elizabeth returned to Miss Lucas. She also bent down low, still not looking directly at Darcy but close enough for her beauty to overpower his senses once more.

"Poor Maria. Let me assist you." She began to gather up the leaves of paper that had fallen on the other side of Miss Lucas's chair.

By God, she is heavenly. Darcy almost forgot his intended task. She must have known that he was looking at her, for she glanced up from her labours, acknowledging him with a tight smile.

"It was very generous of you, Mr Darcy, to lend us your sister's fashion plates. We have both enjoyed looking at them." Her lashes fluttered, and Darcy saw the flush of heat across her neck and chest. Those deep, expressive eyes softened as she returned his gaze, yet there was still a firmness about her lips. He wished dearly that she would speak easily to him as she had before.

Call me Darcy, he thought. Call me Fitzwilliam. Call me a conceited, puffed-up buffoon. Say anything to me, but do not give me your polite disdain.

His mouth unbearably dry, he said, "Can it be called generosity when I take the greatest pleasure in being of service to you?"

A host of emotions played across Elizabeth's face. "Your words surprise me," she said at last.

He stood and reached out to help her up. Her delicate hand slipped into his own, and he felt the delicious pressure of her fingers against his. *Speak now, thought Darcy. Speak up, man, or forever regret your inaction.*

"There is another service that I wish to perform," he said quietly. Elizabeth was standing close to him now. She had dropped her hand from his, but his words had caught her full attention. He continued, hoping she could hear the apology in his voice. "I have invited Mr Bingley to dine with us. I

await his response. I hope I do not presume too much when I ask you to join us." He paused delicately. "Perhaps... I understand your sister is in London. If she should wish...that is to say...I would be delighted to extend the invitation to your sister, aunt, and uncle."

Whatever Elizabeth had expected Darcy to say, it obviously had not been this. Eyes shining, she nodded her thanks. She passed the remaining fashion plate over to Miss Lucas before taking a seat near him.

"What time do you expect Miss Darcy to arrive?" Her manner was still cool, but at least she was initiating a conversation with him.

Trying to disguise his overwhelming sense of relief, Darcy replied, "Imminently. However, I am not hopeful—my sister is fond of sleeping and does not like to hurry in the mornings."

"I sympathise." Elizabeth dropped her reserved mask as her face split into a broad grin. "Lydia and Kitty will not be roused from their beds if they do not wish it, and Mary can take a lifetime eating her breakfast—" She stopped. "Forgive me. I imagine you do not wish to hear about my family."

"On the contrary." Darcy affixed Elizabeth with his most sincere look. "My own family was rather small and...and excessively formal. I would find it most diverting to hear about life in a large family where..." He trailed off, struggling to find the correct phrase.

"Where we are all so headstrong and boisterous?" Elizabeth supplied, smiling archly. For a moment, he thought she might be offended, but he could hear by the lightness of her tone that she was teasing him.

"I was going to say, where everyone has such warmth towards one another." For once, he had found the right words, as Elizabeth's shoulders eased, giving him the confidence to add, "Any insight into the inner workings of a sixteen-year-old female mind would be greatly appreciated. I wish to attain the upper hand before Georgiana's arrival."

Elizabeth laughed—a sound that gave him untold pleasure, not least because it meant that her anger towards him had softened. She turned slightly in her chair, her body unconsciously mirroring his.

She tilted her head to address Miss Lucas, who had been watching their exchange open-mouthed. "What truths shall we shock Mr Darcy with?"

Miss Lucas let out another petrified squeak and sat dumbstruck as Elizabeth began to regale them with a host of entertaining anecdotes.

Her manner was so captivating that Darcy could only look upon her in admiration. It was so pleasant for her to talk to him in this way. He could not

be sure that he was entirely forgiven, but a cessation of hostilities had been called; he planned to make the most of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY



Miss Darcy was nothing like Elizabeth had imagined. Mr Wickham had painted a picture of a proud, scornful girl. Now that the young lady was in front of her, Elizabeth found herself cursing the unscrupulous Mr Wickham for his malicious falsehoods. Miss Darcy was an angel. Her sweet nature had been all too evident on her return home when, upon seeing her older brother, her face had lit up with unaffected delight. As soon as Miss Darcy was conscious of Elizabeth's presence, her whole manner became serious. It seemed to Elizabeth that Miss Darcy was adopting the manners of a gentlewoman without having any of the confidence that comes from being a woman of status and wealth. *She is nought but a shy, awkward child.* Her heart felt full of protective anger that Mr Wickham should manipulate a sweet girl to avenge himself against Mr Darcy.

After their proper introductions, Miss Darcy took a seat near her brother. Mrs Annesley had disappeared, presumably to assist with the unpacking of Miss Darcy's travelling cases. Elizabeth sat close to Maria, anxious that she should not be left unattended. Her position meant that she was opposite Mr Darcy and his sister. She inferred that they had not seen each other since his time in Kent, judging by the questions she was asking him of their aunt and cousin. The reason for Elizabeth and Maria's presence must have already been explained to Miss Darcy, as she had very kindly brought some books for Maria to read during her convalescence. Colonel Fitzwilliam came over to join them, standing by the mantelpiece and injecting humour into their conversation with impressively accurate impersonations of Lady Catherine—causing even the awestruck Maria to giggle. Elizabeth was surprised by how

similar Mr Darcy and his sister were, despite the difference in their ages. Like her brother, Miss Darcy was tall, though she naturally lacked Mr Darcy's broad, strongly built frame. Neither said much, choosing instead to listen very carefully to those around them. Both had dark, intense eyes framed by expressive eyebrows. And both, Elizabeth realised, were in possession of a smile so faultless that it could stop one dead at twenty paces.

Indeed, thought Elizabeth, *Miss Darcy is truly lovely*. She watched as the girl tentatively asked Maria questions about her recovery. *And Mr Darcy is so different around his sister*. Gone were his stiff reserve and haughty expression. He had an easy masculinity about the way he moved, made all the more obvious when in contrast to his sister. Miss Darcy was the undeniable apple of his eye. The care with which he spoke to her and the protective way he guided her through her obvious shyness had a great effect upon Elizabeth. It was as though he were an entirely different person, and she felt captivated by the transformation.

There was a natural lull in the conversation, and Miss Darcy looked over at Elizabeth. By the colour of her cheeks, she clearly wished to speak to her but did not know how to proceed. A desire to show kindness prompted Elizabeth to leave her chair and sit next to Miss Darcy.

The delight Mr Darcy took from her gesture was evident. He bestowed upon Elizabeth the most heart-stopping smile before steering their conversation towards familiar subjects. After a short while, he excused himself to talk to the colonel by the mantelpiece.

Elizabeth wondered whether she should feel slighted by this but soon realised the compliment he paid by leaving her to converse with his painfully shy sister. With some gentle questioning, Elizabeth was pleased to see Miss Darcy's confidence grow. They discussed a little of Miss Darcy's journey, and soon the conversation turned to the dangers present in London.

"London roads are so busy." Miss Darcy's dark eyes were filled with worry. "I was horrified when Mrs Annesley told me of your accident. Are you recovered?"

Touched by Miss Darcy's heartfelt tone, Elizabeth said, "I am sore and bruised, but I am bodily intact." She could not help a mischievous grin. "Though my dignity has taken a knock."

"What do you mean? Are you weary from your caring duties? Would you like another maid to assist you? Say the word and it will be done."

"No. Not at all." Elizabeth was quick to clarify her remark. "Looking

after Maria is no hardship. I meant that it has been hard to recover in another person's house—though I cannot fault your brother's hospitality.”

The last statement prompted Miss Darcy to light up with a genuine smile. “It speaks of your kindness, Miss Bennet, that you stay to look after your friend.”

“It is the least that I can do, given that it was my fault we were on this road,” Elizabeth replied with a smile of her own.

“How so?”

Miss Darcy's question threw Elizabeth off-balance. She could hardly admit her true reason for being on Grosvenor Street. Assuming a confident air, she said, “This part of London has long fascinated me. We were making sketches.” Eager to change the topic from her presence in Grosvenor Street, she said, “The square is particularly lovely.”

Miss Darcy nodded enthusiastically. “We should take a walk there.” She hesitated. “But I must ask my brother first.” She continued hastily, “Not because he is a tyrant and must always know what I am doing. It is because...” She stopped, her face red, and Elizabeth realised that she did not wish to witness Miss Darcy struggle to finish her sentence.

Although she had only met Miss Darcy no more than a half an hour before, she instinctively reached out to take her hand and give it a fortifying squeeze. “I am sure that Mr Darcy is fiercely protective of those he holds dear.” She smiled encouragingly. “I do not wonder at his wish to protect you.”

Collecting herself, Miss Darcy looked down at where their hands were joined. Elizabeth's simple gesture of friendship had clearly affected her. “You are very right of course. My brother is too good.” Appearing to take courage from Elizabeth's calm compassion, she continued in a braver tone. “I would very much like to take a turn about the square with you. It is only a short walk from here, and perhaps we could be accompanied by Mrs Annesley or one of the footmen.” Shyness overtook her again. “B-but I would understand if you wish to remain with Miss Lucas.”

Elizabeth smiled; Miss Darcy's uncertainty in establishing their acquaintance was utterly endearing.

“It would be a pleasure to spend more time with you.” She gave Miss Darcy's hand another squeeze. “We could go this afternoon. Maria's ankle is still very sore, and it is likely she will need to rest after being out of bed all morning.” She gazed out of the window at the soft sunlight. “Perhaps we

could buy some flowers for her.”

Miss Darcy wrinkled her nose in confusion. “From a street seller? My brother always orders flowers directly from the florist. He makes sure that there is at least one yellow bloom in my room, for it is my favourite—” She stopped, turning her head to find Mr Darcy who, Elizabeth now realised, had been surreptitiously watching their exchange from afar. “When I arrived, Mrs Annesley said I must wait before being shown to my bedchamber. I did not think much of it at the time, but now I wonder why she might have said such a thing.” She gave her brother a mock scolding look. “What have you done?”

Mr Darcy’s lips twitched, plainly attempting to keep a straight face. “Why do you suspect me to have done something?”

“I can tell from your expression that you have.” She broke her hand from Elizabeth’s and rose to give her brother a kiss on the cheek. “You are wicked to keep surprises from me.”

Mr Darcy’s face flushed red; he was evidently unprepared for Elizabeth to witness this moment of affection.

It was impossible for Elizabeth *not* to be affected by his embarrassment. “Even *I* can tell you are being evasive, Mr Darcy,” she said, laughing.

A light shone in his eyes as he addressed his sister. “Well, the house is in need of decorating, and where better to begin than your room?”

This earned him another kiss from Miss Darcy as well as a jubilant squeal as she threw her arms around his neck. “Oh, but you are too good to me.”

“I cannot be wicked and good. You talk of impossibilities.” Smoothing down his crumpled cravat, Mr Darcy was obviously flustered by his sister’s hug.

“It is *you* that is impossible.” Miss Darcy gave him a look of utter devotion. “What a brother I have!” Blushing prettily, she broke away from Mr Darcy and addressed Elizabeth. “Miss Bennet, would you like to come and see the surprise?”

Elizabeth paused, feeling like an interloper yet fearful of disappointing Miss Darcy by refusing. “Are you sure you wish me to accompany you—perhaps Mr Darcy would like to see your response for himself? After all, it is his gift to you. I do not wish to intrude.”

“Oh I am sure he would not care. You do not mind, do you, Brother?”

The sound of his name broke Mr Darcy’s gaze from Elizabeth’s face. It was evident that he had not been attending the conversation, as he clearly did not know how to respond.

Colonel Fitzwilliam saved Mr Darcy from finding an answer. “Miss Bennet, you should go. *I* shall stay and entertain Miss Lucas. Darcy, you may sit by the fire and think about all the ways in which you are the best brother in the world.” He winked at Elizabeth and Miss Darcy. “As if he were not vain enough.”

Elizabeth glanced at poor Maria, whose round face now resembled a plump tomato at the prospect of holding a conversation with the colonel and Mr Darcy.

Mr Darcy appeared to notice Elizabeth’s concern. “I shall ring for Mrs Annesley.” He gave Maria a reassuring look. “So you will not be put to sleep by my cousin’s dull conversation.”

Satisfied that Maria would not be left to fend for herself, Elizabeth rose to link arms with Miss Darcy. “Come,” she said with a laugh. “Let us see what your impossible brother has done.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Something about Miss Darcy's room made Elizabeth want to cry. She could not explain it. Having no prior knowledge of what it had looked like before, she could offer very little opinion as to the changes apart from saying that everything looked very elegant as each modification was pointed out. Bright and spacious, it was far grander and finer than anything she had ever had at Longbourn or at her aunt and uncle's house. A delicate green floral pattern covered the newly papered walls, and the curtains and furniture were all different shades of warm golds and light yellows. Even the pictures on Miss Darcy's walls had been reframed. A new rosewood jewellery box inlaid with mother-of-pearl was on Miss Darcy's dressing table, containing hairpins for which she apparently had once expressed a preference. On the soft folds of Miss Darcy's new quilt sat a small parcel of music.

Will anyone ever do anything so kind for me? she wondered. Mr Darcy was obviously very thoughtful when it came to those he loved. *Would he have done the same for me?* Suddenly she pictured herself linking arms with Mr Darcy, concocting goodness-knows-what for Miss Darcy. An overwhelming feeling threatened to engulf her as she looked at the lovely young woman who would have become her new sister.

The door to this life was shut the moment you refused Mr Darcy's proposal.

"Would you like to borrow anything for dinner? You could wear one of these." Miss Darcy was at her dressing table now, inspecting her new hairpins.

Elizabeth's eyes widened. "Oh no, it would be presumptuous of me to wear something that has been given to you as a gift."

Miss Darcy's eyes dropped. "Of course," she said, her shy demeanour quick to return. "We do not know each other well enough. I-I do not have many close friends, so forgive me if I overstepped."

Fearful that she had inadvertently been hurtful, Elizabeth reached out and touched Miss Darcy lightly on the arm. "Do not apologise for having a generous heart. It was very kind of you to offer them to me. I only refuse out of respect for your brother. I do not think he would be happy to see his gift to *you* in *my* hair."

"I honestly do not think Fitzwilliam would mind. He has absolutely no interest in jewellery or hairpins. He only takes notice when I say that I like something."

Elizabeth laughed at this description. "I am beginning to wish I had a brother. It would be nice to receive hairpins, rather than have them stolen by my sisters."

Miss Darcy nodded. "Fitzwilliam said you had four sisters." She sighed wistfully. "It must be nice to have a large family."

"Yes, indeed." Elizabeth could hardly contain her surprise. *Mr Darcy spoke of my sisters to Miss Darcy?* Burning with curiosity, she wondered what else he might have said. She did not have to wait long for her answer.

"He wrote about you in one or two of his letters. He said that you stayed at Netherfield Park, tending to your older sister, and..." She paused. Elizabeth braced herself, remembering all of the impertinent comments she had flung at Mr Darcy. She did not wish to guess how he might have characterised her during her stay.

"He said you were a model of compassionate grace." Miss Darcy's eyes glowed with admiration.

"He said that of *me*?" Elizabeth was not sure she had heard correctly.

"Why yes. That is why I am so thrilled that you are here—that I should finally get to meet you. Fitzwilliam rarely discusses any of his opinions in his letters. All I usually hear about is what he ate or how long the journey was." She brightened. "You can tell me everything that happened in Hertfordshire—and of course Kent—that Fitzwilliam has not shared."

Her words filled Elizabeth with alarm. "Please let us not talk of Kent before your brother," she said swiftly.

"Why not?"

Unable to fully look Miss Darcy in the eye, Elizabeth stretched out her arm and took a delicate filigree hair comb from the dressing table. Pensively, she turned it over in her hands before saying quietly, “Why talk of Kent when we could talk of London? I long for a walk if you still wish to take a turn about the square, Miss Darcy?”

“Oh, please call me Georgiana.”

Elizabeth looked up and saw Georgiana’s face. Her expression was earnest, desperate to be liked. *Gracious, but she resembles her brother,* thought Elizabeth. *Though, when he looks at me, I can never be sure what he is thinking.*

Giving her new friend Georgiana a reassuring smile, she replied, “And you must call me Lizzy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“I simply cannot believe Mr Darcy spoke to me.” Maria inhaled deeply. “I hardly knew what I was about.”

Elizabeth glanced furtively at the clock. Now safely settled in her bedroom, Maria’s voice had returned; she used it now to extol every one of Mr Darcy’s virtues at considerable length. By Elizabeth’s estimation, she had been listening to Maria talk about him for at least twenty minutes without cessation. It was excessively irritating.

“I never saw a man so handsome, Lizzy—did you?” Maria sighed. “He is even more so when viewed up close.”

“Do not be ridiculous. You talk as though he is a painting.” Elizabeth winced; her tone was harsher than she intended. Maria’s harmless prattle did not deserve such a set-down.

Fortunately, Maria did not notice, so lost was she to the perfection of Mr Darcy’s form. “No, of course. He is not a painting.” She absently twirled her finger around a curl. “He is more like a statue. What was the name of that Italian one? The one you and Charlotte showed me in a book.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes heavenward. “Michelangelo’s *David*?” She attempted to soften her exasperation. “I must disagree. Mr Darcy is not seventeen feet tall, nor is he made from marble.” She added with a saucy grin, “Nor does he stand about in the nude.”

“Oh, but he should be sculpted.” Maria gave another breathless sigh, unaware of Elizabeth’s mischief. “Do you not agree that he is good-looking?”

Elizabeth gave a private smile. “He is tolerable, I suppose,” she replied. That he was the best-looking man she had ever met was not something she

was ready to admit to Maria.

“Oh, how can you say that? And he is so thoughtful, too.” Maria shifted herself about in the bed. “I feared that he might be annoyed when I was careless with Miss Darcy’s fashion plates. I nearly burst with surprise when he went down on bended knee.”

Desperate to change the subject, Elizabeth said, “Have you had much correspondence from your family?”

“Two letters from Charlotte and one from Mama. She says that my poor father has been delayed on urgent business at home, but he will pay a visit as soon as he is able. He wishes to express his heartfelt thanks to Mr Darcy.”

Mindful that the conversation was steering back to the one man whose name—apart from Mr Wickham’s—she would be happiest to avoid, Elizabeth asked, “Is your ankle feeling any better? Do you wish to dine with us later?”

“It is still sore, but I do not think it is as swollen. Oh but Lizzy, I cannot dine with Mr Darcy. Can I tell you what happened when you left with Miss Darcy? He said I should name the second course for tonight’s dinner, and he would ask his chef to make it especially.” Maria’s eyelashes fluttered. “Of course, my heart was racing with the thought that I might choose the wrong thing, so I became quite flustered and told Mr Darcy that I wished to stay in bed. He reassured me that I was to let his housekeeper know my preferences, and he promised me they would be sent to our room.”

It was no use, Elizabeth resigned herself. Just as ‘all roads lead to Rome’, so too did Maria’s conversations return to Mr Darcy. Accepting that there was no other topic of interest, she said, “Did you and Mr Darcy discuss anything else?”

Maria blushed. “He asked me about Charlotte and whether she was content at the parsonage.”

“And what did you reply?”

A look of mortification upon her face, Maria put her hands to her cheeks. “Oh Lizzy, I am afraid I was too overcome to answer—I simply nodded.”

Elizabeth stifled a laugh as she imagined their conversation. At least Mr Darcy had found someone that he could not insult. *And it was very thoughtful of him to seek Maria’s comfort*, she conceded. *There is certainly a man of compassion beneath that proud mask.*

“How was your time with Miss Darcy?” Maria looked at Elizabeth expectantly.

“It was very agreeable. She insists that we call her Georgiana and has asked if she may call you Maria. I said you would like that very much.”

Upon hearing this, Maria became so swollen with pride that Elizabeth thought her friend might burst. “And was it a pleasant walk with Miss Dar—Georgiana?”

Elizabeth paused. *How to answer?* It had been lovely. Miss Darcy—Georgiana, as she was now to Elizabeth—was by no means a great conversationalist, but she had been a sweet and avid listener. As with many reserved people, it had been very easy to make her laugh. They had walked arm in arm about the park, trailed by a footman and maid, while Elizabeth had amused her with anecdotes from Meryton as well as observations about the passers-by. Georgiana had even wiped away tears of mirth at Elizabeth’s impersonation of Mr Collins. How was she to capture this feeling? The novelty of a blossoming friendship, the leaves rustling merrily in the wind against the backdrop of the houses surrounding Grosvenor Square, the freedom of walking in a place where she did not know the minutiae of every resident; it had been intoxicating.

Even when Georgiana spoke about her brother, Elizabeth had not felt the same restless unease that had been plaguing her since Kent. Curious to learn more, she had asked a few tactful questions, and without meaning to, Georgiana had revealed more than she had intended about Mr Darcy’s character. In her eyes, there was no better man than her brother. There was nothing that he would not give her—Elizabeth lost count of how many times Georgiana referred to Mr Darcy surprising her with a thoughtful gift. *Yet she does not seem spoilt*, thought Elizabeth. *Simply grateful to have such a kind man as her brother and protector.*

The sunshine had held out, and the ladies had lost all track of time before finally returning home to prepare themselves for dinner. It was only as they had walked towards the steps that Elizabeth had felt a surge of something great. Standing in the place where she had landed in a heap under Mr Darcy, she was acutely aware of everything that might have been. This could have been her life. The sensation of his hands on her body burnt through her. *And he might have been mine, too.* All this and more flowed through her as she struggled to form her reply to Maria’s question.

“I could not have imagined such an afternoon,” she said at last. This answer appeared to satisfy Maria’s curiosity, as the conversation was soon turned back to the man who consumed the thoughts of both.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Darcy did all he could to attend to his cousin's conversation, but it was impossible. Any moment now, Elizabeth would arrive, and he would have the pleasure of her company once more. Apparently, Miss Lucas was in some discomfort, and so Mrs Annesley had gone to sit with her this evening, much to his relief. Miss Lucas was pleasant enough, but holding a coherent conversation with her was nigh on impossible. He hoped that his invitation to Bingley had pleased Elizabeth. Darcy had not forgotten the anguish his actions had caused. *I must find a way to apologise to her*, he thought. *And I must pray that she accepts it.*

"You could attempt smiling." Fitzwilliam's voice broke his thoughts. "It does wonders for your expression." His cousin looked at him slyly. "It gives the impression that you wish to converse with people rather than contemplating their demise."

"I beg your pardon." Darcy frowned at his cousin.

"There you go—the fearsome Darcy scowl. You have proved my point quite nicely." Fitzwilliam resumed his exasperatingly smug expression, and Darcy could not help but feel his cousin was enjoying this a little too much.

"I have been making more of an effort to appear approachable!"

Fitzwilliam rolled his eyes. "Try harder. To say you can be intimidating is something of an understatement." He continued, "I would wager that is why Miss Bennet has caught your eye. I sincerely doubt there is anyone that minx fears."

Darcy opened his mouth to defend Elizabeth, but his cousin's words made him reflect. *Is the allure of Elizabeth the fact she does not want me?* He

was accustomed to having his own way in all matters. *Is it merely the thrill of the chase?* Before he could reply, a movement at the door signalled Elizabeth's arrival, and any doubt vanished from his mind.

If he had thought her pretty before, it was nothing to how she appeared tonight. The ivory of her dress emphasised the delicate porcelain of her skin. About her neck was a simple choker; the reflective ribbon drew his eyes along her slender throat. *What I would give to run my fingers along the curve of her neck.* Her eyes glittered like uncut diamonds as she laughed and joked with Georgiana. He sighed deeply, unable to tear his gaze from her. She must have felt him looking at her, for she broke away from his sister and turned towards him. Their eyes met, and in that moment, his heart whispered its truth. Come what may, he would never stop loving her.

Pulse racing, he nodded in greeting as she approached them both.

"You look very lovely, Miss Bennet." Fitzwilliam bowed elegantly, his tone a little too appreciative for Darcy's liking.

"I thank you. Georgiana has been fussing over me for at least an hour. I am glad you approve of her efforts." There was a short pause, and Darcy realised that he had been so caught up in admiration that he had forgotten to compliment her also.

"It has been time well spent," he said swiftly. His tone was far more abrupt than he had intended. He took another breath and tried to disregard his cousin's muffled snort of laughter. "What I meant to say is that you look enchanting." Remembering Fitzwilliam's advice, he smiled, and was pleased when he saw how prettily Elizabeth blushed.

Georgiana called her away to the pianoforte, and Darcy watched as they began to merrily muddle their way through a duet.

"It is a good thing you are handsome and rich, for you are clearly no flirt." Fitzwilliam nudged Darcy in the ribs. "How gratifying to know there is something at which you do not excel."

"Are you quite finished?" Darcy muttered. "Your constant hovering makes me ill at ease."

His cousin raised a brow. "Well, I shall make sure that you have a chance to speak to Miss Bennet alone." His tone softened. "The fact that you are terrible at lovemaking will probably play in your favour."

Darcy could not hide his confusion, and so Fitzwilliam clarified, "She will know that whatever you say will come from the heart." He leant in closer, hiding a smirk. "Just advise your heart not to be as honest as it was in

Kent.”



The moment came after dinner. Fitzwilliam made a great song and dance of encouraging Georgiana to play a piece that she had been practising while she was away whilst he turned her pages. Elizabeth had been watching them with a dreamy look of amusement on her face. Steeling himself, Darcy quelled the nervous energy rushing through his body and quietly sat down on the sofa—which unintentionally startled her.

“Forgive me, Miss Bennet.”

“Oh, think nothing of it.” She gave him a reassuring smile. “The music is so lovely. My mind was elsewhere.”

“No.” Darcy took another breath. “I meant, forgive me for the...the comments from before. Fitzwilliam did not know the offence they would cause, nor the pain. I should not have spoken about your family in such a way to my cousin.”

“You should not have spoken about my family in such a way *at all*.” Elizabeth had lost her faraway expression, and Darcy was filled with dismay when he saw her face. She had the look of a soldier readying herself for battle; an argument was the last thing he desired.

“You are correct, of course.” He leant in, speaking so low that she had to tilt her head to hear him. “It was unpardonably rude of me, and it is an error for which I wish to make amends.”

Surprise danced across Elizabeth’s face, his apology apparently taking all the wind from her sails. Looking down at her folded hands in her lap before lifting her beautiful eyes to meet his, she offered him a shy smile. “Thank you.”

His heart leapt when he heard the gentleness in her voice. “You accept my apology, then?”

Elizabeth’s face softened. “Of course.”

The glow from the fire cast warm light over her profile. He had never seen any woman look so lovely. If it were not for the presence of his sister and cousin, he might have reached out and traced his fingers along the delicate contours of her face. The intimacy of the moment must have affected Elizabeth also as, blushing, she turned her gaze back to the instrument. He

could not keep his eyes from her. He wished to speak, but the words were stuck in his throat. Not for the first time, he envied Fitzwilliam's easy manners.

"Mr Darcy, may I request something of you?" Elizabeth surprised him by turning back, her expression serious.

"Of course." Darcy could hardly breathe. *Does she not know that I would do anything for her?*

"From your...your letter..." Obviously embarrassed by alluding to past events, Elizabeth paused before continuing, "Your letter gave me hope that Mr Bingley might still love my sister. I, of course, have hoped that if they met again, it might lead to something more."

Ears burning at the mention of that damned letter, Darcy simply nodded. He dreaded what she might say next.

Elizabeth must have felt his discomfort, for she swiftly continued, "If anything of permanence should come of their forthcoming meeting, then our paths would cross again, perhaps many times over. I do not want there to be any discord between us." She paused. "I wish for us to...to...to begin again."

It took Darcy a moment to understand what she meant. Elizabeth must have taken his silence for displeasure as she said hastily, "Naturally I understand if you do not wish to continue our acquaintance. Circumstances beyond your control brought me here, and you have shown more kindness to me than I could ever have expected. However, I hope that we can begin again as...as friends."

Darcy could not believe his ears. That Elizabeth would extend an olive branch of friendship to him was truly remarkable. A smile spread across his face. "I like your notion very well."

"I am relieved to hear it." Elizabeth returned his smile with an arch one of her own. She continued softly, her eyes alive with a mischievous glint. "Although you may like it less when you realise how mercilessly I tease my friends."

"It is a price worth paying." It took all of Darcy's self-restraint to stop himself from leaning in to capture a kiss from Elizabeth's soft, round lips. Instead, he said quietly, "I would infinitely prefer being teased by you than chastised."

She reddened when she heard this, and he caught himself, fearful that he had overstepped. "Forgive me, I only meant—"

"Two apologies in one evening?" Cheeks still flushed, Elizabeth favoured

him with what could only be described as a coquettish smile. “Let us not get carried away.”

The familiarity with which she addressed him made every hair on his arms stand on end. Her lips parted slightly as though she wanted to say more, but just then the music came to an end. She smiled at him again, this time with a bashfulness that he found intoxicating, before returning her attention to Georgiana and Fitzwilliam. They both rose to walk over to the others.

Fitzwilliam raised an eyebrow, and Darcy gave his cousin a curt nod of thanks. It was decided that the hour was late, and Elizabeth and Georgiana both wished to retire. Darcy watched as the two women he loved linked arms and made their way upstairs. Fitzwilliam was not long to bed either. He managed to give Darcy a self-satisfied look, but in this instance, Darcy was very pleased to have had his cousin’s assistance. Drink in hand, he sat by the dwindling fire. He knew he was grinning stupidly from ear to ear, but he did not care. Elizabeth had sought out his friendship, and that was something worth celebrating.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Elizabeth drummed her fingers nervously against the window ledge. Her aunt and uncle—and of course dear Jane—were expected for dinner that evening. Clutched in her hand was the note she had just received from her aunt. Its contents worried her greatly. According to Mrs Gardiner, Jane had hardly eaten since she had received Elizabeth’s message detailing who would be present at dinner. Even more worryingly still, Mrs Gardiner had hinted that Jane had been physically sick that morning. Elizabeth had no trouble believing it—it was not unheard of for Jane to be unwell when she was suffering with her nerves. *Everyone looks at Jane and sees her beauty,* thought Elizabeth sadly, *but no-one ever appreciates her modest nature.* The letter from her aunt had made her question whether this dinner was a good plan after all; she did not wish for Jane to suffer.

Elizabeth wondered whether Mr Darcy had told Mr Bingley of his falsehood. She suspected not, by the distracted, uneasy look on his face earlier that morning and by the uncustomary tapping of his foot against the leg of the breakfast table. He had all the appearance of a man condemned to the gallows. For an instant she had felt sympathy towards him, until she reminded herself that Mr Darcy only had himself to blame. Still, she conceded, it had been very good of him to arrange this dinner to reunite Mr Bingley and Jane. *If only I knew what to expect from it.*

The sound of the clock chiming the hour brought her attention back to the empty room. Impatiently tapping her fingers against the smooth curve of the wood, she knew she could sit no longer. An impulse gripped her. She had to know what lay in store for her sister.

It had been a few days since Elizabeth had asked Mr Darcy for his friendship, and even in that short space of time, she had felt a subtle change between them. He smiled more in her presence, which gave her the confidence to tease him, and it was more pleasing still to hear him respond with dry, witty observations of his own. As they had spent more time together, she had begun to learn a little of his habits. Her guess was that he would be in the morning room, and she was soon proved correct. The muffled sound of his deep, clipped accents could be heard from the other side of the door. Elizabeth paused. Mr Darcy's voice spoke again, and another answered it—Mrs Annesley. Gathering her composure, she rapped her knuckles against the wood, waiting to be called. Mr Darcy's face when he rose to greet her was a treat; he had perhaps anticipated a servant, and his surprise when he saw her was very great.

"I am sorry to intrude, but I wished to speak to you." She glanced at Mrs Annesley. "I am happy to return at a more convenient time, but I would prefer to speak to you before the guests arrive."

Nodding, Mr Darcy also gave a look to Mrs Annesley, which apparently was all the communication she needed. Excusing herself to write a letter, Mrs Annesley went to a writing desk in the far corner. Elizabeth flashed her an apologetic smile before turning back to Mr Darcy.

"Miss Bennet, are you well?" He indicated for her to sit near him. "Is anything amiss with Miss Lucas?"

"No, I thank you." Taking her place, Elizabeth hesitated, feeling suddenly foolish. "I wanted to discuss the arrangements for this evening."

"What would you like to know?" Mr Darcy's dark eyes were fixed on her face. He was sitting so very close to her—she was sure that he could hear her heart hammering against her ribs. In this moment, she understood something of Maria's torment. She had Mr Darcy's full attention, and—for the first time—she admitted to herself the effect it had on her.

Cheeks warm, she gave her voice a confidence she did not feel. "I wish to know what Mr Bingley thinks of...of this dinner."

Mr Darcy's eyebrows raised, and he looked supremely uncomfortable. She thought for a moment that he might not answer her.

"Mr Bingley knows that your sister will be present for dinner. He is unaware of my..." He ran his fingers through his curls. "...my involvement in his affairs." He paused, and Elizabeth shivered under the intensity of his gaze. "I have invited him to arrive an hour earlier than your family. Please,

would you allow me to apologise to him first?"

"Of course."

"Was I correct to invite Bingley? I do not wish to be the cause of any more pain to your sister." His eyes gazed into hers, searching for her response. "You must tell me at once if you think I have acted in error." His voice dropped. "I know that we have...er, disagreed in the past, but please know that I only ever have Bingley's best interests at heart."

Elizabeth paused before answering. "I think you mean well, but I do not wish to expose Jane to any derision. I wonder at you inviting Mr Bingley's sisters."

"They are a necessary evil, I am afraid." Mr Darcy flashed his gleaming smile. "I cannot invite Bingley without them. I am sure I do not have to explain to *you* how tiresome their company is."

Elizabeth pursed her lips to hide her laughter. "You do not enjoy having your every opinion lauded, Mr Darcy? You shock me," she replied dryly.

"No." He looked at her intently. "I would much rather have my opinions challenged and teased." Heat prickled up Elizabeth's spine, and flustered, she dropped her gaze towards her hands folded in her lap. Mr Darcy cleared his throat, and the moment between them was broken.

"Have I answered your question?" he asked softly.

She lifted her eyes to look at him; his handsome face looked so uncertain that she was inexplicably filled with a desire to reassure him.

"I am relieved that Mr Bingley will be made aware of...of recent events," she said. "In truth, I am more worried about Jane."

"How so?"

The sincerity of his tone took Elizabeth by surprise, and she found herself revealing the contents of her aunt's letter.

Rubbing his hand along the smooth edge of his jawline, he said, "Your sister reminds me of my own. Georgiana did not eat a proper meal for at least a fortnight after—" He seemed to catch himself, perhaps mindful of his present company.

Elizabeth nodded sympathetically. "It must have been dreadful for you. Georgiana seems to be in better spirits now."

Mr Darcy smiled again, his dimples deepening. "My sister's recovery has taken a great deal of time and patience," he said slowly. "But those unhappy events seem a lifetime ago."

"It is often said that time heals all wounds," replied Elizabeth with a smile

of her own. "I know that is the case for me."

"Whoever said that has never been in love." Mr Darcy's voice had a bitter edge, but the vulnerability in his expression caught Elizabeth completely off-guard. "Or had one's heart crushed by his own pride."

"I-I do not know what it is like to be in love," she stammered, unable to find an answer adequate to the intimacy of the moment.

Now it was Mr Darcy's turn to avert his eyes and examine the floor. Seemingly, he had said more than he had intended, for when he looked back at her, the familiar reserve had returned to his features.

"Thank you for coming to me with your concerns, Miss Bennet," he said in a serious voice. "I vow that I shall do all that I can to help your sister feel welcome in my home."

Heartily regretting that she had spoken with such haste, Elizabeth murmured her thanks, motioning that he need not rise to see her leave. As she turned to close the door behind her, she glanced back at him. He was sitting as still as a painting, his handsome profile gazing absently into the fire. Her brief pause drew his attention. As his eyes met hers, she felt her heart sing an unknown melody—a bittersweet, fascinating one—the kind that enters the mind and will not leave it. An alluring, irresistible tune. Flustered, she hurriedly pulled the handle, telling herself that she was not running from it, nor from him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“**F**or heaven’s sake, Bingley, speak to me.”

For a man who preferred silences, the one that Darcy found himself in was excruciating. He had just confessed everything to his closest friend, and it had been worse than he had anticipated. Instead of swearing or jumping about like any other man might be expected to do, Bingley had stood from his chair, as silent and as rigid as a plank of wood, and walked over to the bookcase. He was now standing, hands upon his hips, with his back to Darcy. Head bowed, Bingley disregarded Darcy’s plea, choosing instead to reach out and place his hands on one of the bookshelves in front of him and angrily drum his fingers against it.

Darcy tried again. “I beg of you to accept my apol—”

“For how long has she been in London?” Bingley spun round and stared at Darcy, his eyes narrowing into an accusing glare. “For how long have you and my sisters been lying to me?”

Taking a deep breath, Darcy decided to make a clean breast of it. “About four months.”

Bingley clenched and unclenched his hands in an apparent attempt to stay calm. “May I ask why you saw fit to interfere in my *private* affairs?”

The scathing edge to Bingley’s voice was unlike anything Darcy had ever heard. What answer could he give that would restore their friendship? He exhaled deeply before breaking the silence. “Because I saw in you the path I was afraid to take. I told myself that Miss Bennet did not care for you, yet in truth, I wished to be as far away from Hertfordshire lest I fall under the same spell that you had.”

“You love Miss Jane Bennet also?” The look of pained confusion on Bingley’s face was almost comical.

“What? No!” Darcy fell heavily into the chair next to Bingley. “If you must make me confess, it is Miss Elizabeth who has captured my heart.” He groaned. “I have it on good authority that her awful cousin, that ridiculous Mr Collins, proposed to her. Yet is *he* the last man she would ever marry? No. According to her, I possess that honour. You can imagine how I am feeling, knowing that I am further down in her estimation than that buffoon.”

Upon hearing this, an incredulous smile spread across Bingley’s face. “She refused you?”

Relieved that Bingley was at least talking to him again, Darcy replied grimly, “She did not just refuse me but thoroughly berated me.” He rubbed his hands over his eyes. “If she had reached inside my chest, pulled out my beating heart, and squeezed it in her fist, it would have been less painful.” He gave Bingley a rueful grin. “Pity me, Bingley, for at least *your* Miss Bennet loves you.”

At this, Bingley started. His resentment towards Darcy quickly forgotten, he took a seat near him and began asking him urgent questions about Miss Jane Bennet and how it was that Darcy had come to learn the secrets of his angel’s heart.

Darcy was happy to share all that he knew, and he was happier still to see Bingley’s jubilant nature return. It had been a long while, he realised, since he had seen his friend this content.



The evening was going well. Or at least as well as could be hoped for. As soon as Miss Bennet had entered the room, Darcy had lost Bingley’s attention. There had been no one else of interest to his friend. Miss Bennet did look lovely, he conceded, but she was nothing in comparison to her sister—simply a dove to Elizabeth’s phoenix.

Mr and Mrs Gardiner obviously approved of Bingley by the half-smiles they gave to one another. Miss Bennet, in Darcy’s view, still did not seem greatly enamoured of his friend. *But who am I to discern the inner workings of a woman’s heart*, he thought, *given that I have been wrong in every one of my conclusions?* Miss Bennet had nodded, smiled, and even blushed at all the

right times, and if that was what Bingley wanted, then Darcy would rejoice with him.

As for Bingley's relatives, well, that was a different matter altogether. Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley had scarcely said a word to the Bennets or the Gardiners, and Darcy seethed at their rudeness. Mr Hurst had fallen asleep after dinner on the sofa next to poor Georgiana and Miss Lucas—his snores prompting them to muffled giggles. Darcy could almost have laughed with them if it were not for the boorishness of his behaviour. *It is astounding that Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst see fit to look down on Elizabeth and her family when their own party is capable of such incivility.* The fact that Miss Bingley constantly called upon him for his opinion only heightened his annoyance—touching him repeatedly to gain his notice; it was all he could do not to recoil from the sensation of her fingers against his coat. She must have sensed something of his discomfort, as she eventually left his side to flirt with his cousin—an action which was, presumably, to provoke jealousy but which had quite the opposite effect.

Excessively relieved to be rid of that clawing spider, Darcy returned his attention to Elizabeth. She was sitting with Bingley and Miss Bennet, eliciting laughter with one of her stories. What had possessed him to allude to his broken heart? She had spoken of friendship, and he had returned their conversation to a place where she had not been comfortable. For a moment, he wished she would quit his house and leave him in peace—to be so close to her but to never have her was insufferable. But just as the thought passed through his mind, she caught his gaze and smiled so sweetly that he was sure his heart skipped a beat.

“Darcy, you must join us,” Bingley called out to him, motioning to a place next to Elizabeth. He nodded gratefully at his friend before taking the seat.

“What are you discussing?” he asked, glancing about the group.

Bingley gave him an admiring look. “How it was that you saved the lives of two young women and I am only just hearing of it.” He beamed at Darcy before adding lightly, “It is almost as though you did not wish me to know.” As he said this, he gave a subtle look in Elizabeth's direction, which she thankfully did not notice.

Glaring at Bingley, Darcy replied, “It was hardly a matter for me to drop into conversation.”

“Mr Darcy is too modest,” Mrs Gardiner interjected politely, joining the

group. "I have spoken to my maid who was nearby, and she painted Mr Darcy as the undeniable hero."

"Mr Darcy as the who?" Unable to be away from Darcy for long, Miss Bingley entered the conversation and ungraciously dropped herself down next to Darcy—an action which caused Elizabeth to move farther down the sofa.

Darcy saw Elizabeth take a breath, evidently readying herself for whatever nonsense might tumble from Miss Bingley's mouth.

"Darcy, the hero," Bingley repeated. "I have just learnt that he prevented Miss Elizabeth and Miss Lucas from being grievously injured by a carriage."

Every emotion played upon Miss Bingley's face as she digested this new information. It was all Darcy could do not to laugh. *How unfortunate for her, that her constant scheming is so utterly transparent.*

She obviously decided to settle on this piece of news being a good development, for she exclaimed, "Why, you brave man! Naturally you would rush to their aid." Addressing Elizabeth's general vicinity without directly looking at her, she said, in her most patronising tone, "Those who have been raised in the country are undoubtedly less accustomed to busy London streets." She continued blithely, "Miss Eliza, in London it is generally accepted that one should look about carefully before stepping out into a road."

Affronted by Miss Bingley's rudeness, Darcy opened his mouth to retort, but Elizabeth found her tongue first. In an innocent tone, she said, "Looking around oneself before crossing a road is *de rigueur* in the countryside too, but I thank you for your invaluable insight." She continued airily, "I would not have expected advice from you on the subject, as I rather understood you to despise walking anywhere."

"Not all of us find pleasure in traipsing about as you do, Miss Eliza," Miss Bingley replied, clearly desperate to have the last word. "Though I suppose walking around Mayfair is preferable to *Cheapside*."

A silence followed Miss Bingley's observation. Darcy shifted his weight uncomfortably in his seat; by the unimpressed look on her face, Miss Bingley's barbs had not gone unnoticed by Mrs Gardiner either.

Elizabeth simply smiled. "You will have to be the judge of that," she said coolly. "I know how well acquainted you are with Gracechurch Street."

Miss Bingley cast her eyes across to her brother beside Miss Bennet. Darcy was pleased to see her face redden. Apparently, Miss Bingley's

meddling in her brother's affairs was not a welcome subject. Desirous to take charge of the conversation before Miss Bingley might find her voice again, Darcy quickly began to question Mr Gardiner on some points regarding one of his warehouses—the answers to which were so insightful and interesting that Darcy found himself agreeably engaged by their conversation. Eventually Miss Bingley, unable to find any point of the discussion in which to insert herself, gave up, returning to sit by Hurst, Georgiana, Fitzwilliam, and Miss Lucas.

The rest of the evening passed smoothly. The Gardiners were truly a delight; Darcy was pleased that they had come for their own sake, not just for the fact that they were Elizabeth's relatives. He remembered Mrs Gardiner's connection to Derbyshire, and they had spoken at length about various walks and vistas that they both loved.

Bingley did not leave Miss Bennet's side for the entirety of the evening; one might have called his behaviour rude, if it were not for his expression of spellbound adoration. More than once, Darcy caught Elizabeth watching them, her eyes aglow with happiness. It gladdened his heart that he had at least been able to remedy that particular accusation, and he hoped that she approved of his actions. Apart from the usual formalities, he had spoken very little to her this evening. After their conversation of this morning, he had decided he could no longer trust himself to act or behave sensibly when in her presence. If he were to have any chance of preserving their blossoming friendship, then he must learn to conceal the depth of his love.

“Miss Eliza seems well recovered after her accident. What a pity about poor Miss Lucas.”

An unwelcome voice sounded at his elbow; Miss Bingley had returned to his side. Darcy attempted to overlook the scorn in her words.

Undeterred by his silence, she added, “But I do wonder about them being in Mayfair. They cannot have any connexion to the area.” She gave an exaggerated sigh. “Though it does not surprise me that Miss Eliza found herself on the wrong end of a mishap. She always had such wild manners. Indeed, she should be more careful—she might not have such a benevolent saviour nearby next time.”

Incensed, Darcy turned to Miss Bingley, reproving sharply, “To suggest that Miss Elizabeth or Miss Lucas are in any way responsible for their injuries is abhorrent. Desist, madam, from this line of conversation, or you will no longer be welcome in my home.”

He watched as Miss Bingley's face turned an unattractive shade of puce. Truthfully, he felt no guilt; his sole regret was failing to put Miss Bingley in her place sooner. Unable to articulate a reply, Miss Bingley merely squeaked before stuttering an excuse about finding her sister. Darcy nodded grimly before turning his back on her. As he did so, he noticed a pair of eyes on him, but this time they did not belong to Elizabeth. Smiling beautifully, Miss Jane Bennet gave Darcy a subtle nod of gratitude before returning her attention to Bingley.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Gentle light streamed through the windows, reflecting off the gilded edges of the portraits in the morning room. Jane had not long arrived and was sitting on the chair next to Georgiana, their friend's recovery the topic of conversation—for Sir William had arrived that morning.

“Have you spoken to Maria since her father's arrival?”

“No.” Elizabeth had not wished to further intrude. Witnessing Sir William's response upon seeing poor Maria's bruised face had been too much for Elizabeth's conscience to bear. She had made her excuses, suggesting that they spend some time together without her company. Maria's recovery had been slower than anticipated. There had been talk of removing back to the Gardiners' house, but Dr Oldham had advised against it until Maria could put more weight on her ankle. The impending departure from Grosvenor Street, coupled with her lingering guilt, had weighed heavily upon Elizabeth all morning, however much she tried to distract herself. It had been a relief when dear Jane had arrived, calling in at Grosvenor Street before going out with Mr Bingley and his sisters.

Elizabeth gave her sister a sly look. It had been just shy of a week since Jane had been reunited with Mr Bingley, but the difference in her sister was evident. There was a radiance about her never before seen. *She must truly love him*, thought Elizabeth. *Only love would bring about such a change.*

“Dear Maria has been so brave.” Jane sighed. “I am glad that her family is finally here.”

Georgiana nodded shyly. “Maria spoke to me about her father. He sounds very kind.”

Elizabeth smiled. "He is indeed. And I have never known a man to be more fond of dancing than Sir William." She gave Jane a sideways look. "Apart from Mr Bingley, of course."

Paying no attention to her sister's teasing, Jane said, "It must have been a wrench for him to be so far away from Maria, especially when she has been so unwell." She tilted her head to one side. "I am sure he had his reasons, but it surprised me that he did not come to London as soon as he heard of Maria's accident."

Leaning forwards, Georgiana whispered, "You must not say that I told you this, but Maria confessed that her father is worried about repaying my brother. He has been organising his affairs in case there is a great expense."

Elizabeth and Jane looked at the younger woman in surprise. "Gracious, I had no idea," replied Elizabeth. "But Mr Darcy made it clear to our uncle that he would not accept payment."

"That was very kind of him." Now it was Jane's turn to give Elizabeth a meaningful glance. She turned to Georgiana. "Mr Darcy has an extremely generous nature. Our previous acquaintance with him was only slight. His attention to Lizzy and Maria goes beyond anything, speaking very well of his character."

Georgiana beamed at Jane's praise of her beloved brother. "Oh, but Fitzwilliam is very thoughtful. It does not surprise me that he would refuse payment. He can also be very obstinate when it comes to having his own way."

Jane flashed Elizabeth another knowing look. "Mr Darcy is certainly a very fine man."

Eager to change the subject from Mr Darcy's superior qualities, Elizabeth said, "Speaking of brothers, how do you feel about your impending excursion with Mr Bingley's sisters?"

Jane's cheeks turned a very pretty shade of pink. "I do not know what to expect. Mr Bingley's manners are so easy, yet his sisters..." She hesitated, seemingly unsure of what to say in front of Georgiana.

"His sisters are a vortex, perpetually sucking the joy out of every conversation." Elizabeth finished the sentence for her, causing Georgiana to laugh so hard that she began to cough.

Jane frowned. "It is true that their friendship with me is not what it once was, yet...if Mr Bingley—" She paused, her natural diffidence overcoming her once more.

“If Mr Bingley were to renew his addresses, you would be able to suffer their unbearable company,” Elizabeth supplied with a grin. This time even Jane joined in with their laughter. As the merriment subsided, the clock chimed eleven.

“Gracious, is that the time? I must say goodbye to you both.” Jane stood up hastily.

Elizabeth and Georgiana rose to say their farewells. Gathering her sister in a warm embrace, Elizabeth whispered in Jane’s ear, “Good luck.”

To Elizabeth’s great surprise, Jane squeezed her just as firmly before murmuring, “And the same goes for you.”

Shortly after Jane’s departure, Mrs Annesley arrived, requesting Georgiana’s assistance for some long-neglected duty, leaving Elizabeth alone once more. Shifting about in her chair, she wondered whether Maria was still with her father. At some point, she and her friend would both need to leave Grosvenor Street and return to their previous lives. She looked all around her, wondering how she might feel when she finally had to leave.

This house had a peaceful steadiness about it, one—she then realised—her own family home did not possess. Staying under the same roof as Mr Darcy had not been easy, but it had not been the hardship she had feared. For a moment, she was struck by a ridiculous desire to stay, then lectured herself for being foolish. Craving a distraction, she stood, overcome with an inclination to find her friend.



Elizabeth’s hand twisted round the smooth newel as she descended the stairs. Maria had not been in her room, forcing her to widen her search. The house was unusually quiet. Only the soft patter of Elizabeth’s slippers on the polished floor could be heard. A voice caught her attention—Sir William’s. She took a few steps towards its source, wondering whether he might be with Maria. But the answering voice made her stop—Mr Darcy’s. They were speaking in a room just to the left of where she stood, the door ajar, every word clearly audible.

“I beg of you, Mr Darcy. Please accept this as a token of my gratitude.” Sir William’s voice was wavering, devoid of all its usual blustering joviality.

“I cannot accept it.” Mr Darcy’s voice was firm.

“Its appearance is modest, but I can assure you of its value. The ring has been in my family for generations—”

“And there it will remain.” Mr Darcy spoke again with continued determination. “I have no need for it. You are under no obligation to me. I was honoured to be of assistance.”

“But there must be something I can offer you.” Tears pricked in Elizabeth’s eyes as she heard the emotion in Sir William’s voice. “You saved my daughter, Mr Darcy. There must be some way that I can thank you.”

There was a pause, then the sound of Mr Darcy clearing his throat. “From a young age, I used to walk with my father about our property in Derbyshire whenever the weather and my education would allow it. It was just the two of us. He would speak to me about all manner of things. Since his death, I have often thought about our walks and how much I enjoyed them.” Another silence followed. “Please take a walk with Miss Lucas—when she is well enough, I mean. Take the time to enjoy one another’s company. That is all the payment I require.”

“Mr Darcy, you are too ki—”

“Let us speak no more of it.” Mr Darcy’s severe, aloof tone had returned. There was a movement behind the door indicating that the two men were on the point of quitting the room. Deeply moved by what she had heard, Elizabeth wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand. Quietly, she backed away, not wishing for her presence to be known.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



The sound of the carriage signalled to Elizabeth that her time in Mr Darcy's home was over. A clattering of hoofs echoed from the road in front of the house, and she recognised the thickset outline of her uncle's coachman through the window. Mr Gardiner had arrived earlier than expected, and she felt inexplicably annoyed with him for doing so.

She reminded herself that Cheapside was not in fact too far from Grosvenor Street, and there was every chance she would see her new friends again. But deep in her heart, she knew that it would be impossible to have the easy informality that she had enjoyed during her time here. The mood at breakfast had been solemn. Colonel Fitzwilliam had attempted a few jokes, but they had sounded forced and out of place, and only Georgiana had managed a weak smile. As for Mr Darcy, it was impossible to guess what he might be thinking. His handsome face had regained its surly expression, and curt answers were all that came from his lips. He had taken to drumming his fingers impatiently against the side of his leg every time he was in Elizabeth's presence. Thankfully, Mrs Annesley had proved to be as invaluable as ever, her efficient manner smoothing the strained awkwardness around the breakfast table.

Most of Elizabeth's belongings had been packed the night before, and she had spent the morning helping Maria. Now finally ready to depart, Elizabeth was in desperate need of a moment alone, and so she sat in the same chair that she had been gently guided to on the day of the accident. Closing her eyes, she recalled the tenderness in the way Mr Darcy spoke to her. She could hardly believe he was the same person she had met in Hertfordshire.

Squeezing her eyes tighter, she recollected every moment they had spent together until this point, each memory twisting and turning in her chest until it hurt her to draw breath. Opening her eyes, she glanced at the door. Any moment now, her uncle's arrival would be announced. *Why do I dread it so?* She shivered involuntarily. *Such a short space of time,* she thought, *yet it feels as though I have always lived here.*

She cast her eyes around the elegantly furnished room and smiled wryly as her eyes rested on a miniature of Mr and Miss Darcy in their younger years. *All manner of material comforts surround me, and yet I am not drawn to any of them. It is the kindness of my hosts that has made the greatest impression, and it is that which I shall think upon when I am gone.* The door remained unopened, and she gave a small sigh of relief. No one had come to claim her away; she had a few more minutes to contemplate all that might have been.

A knock and then the moment was broken. "Miss Bennet, your relation is here." It was Colonel Fitzwilliam arriving with Georgiana, presumably to say goodbye. Elizabeth could not help looking past his shoulder to see whether Mr Darcy was behind them.

He gave her a shrewd look. "My cousin is not known for his effusive farewells. He is in conversation with your uncle."

An unmistakable feeling of disappointment rose in Elizabeth's throat. *What was I expecting?* Pushing the bitter taste away, she rose to give Georgiana a firm hug. "I must thank you for your unexampled kindness."

"The pleasure has been ours." Georgiana gave Elizabeth a wistful smile. "I do hope that we might be able to continue our acquaintance. It has been wonderful to have you here, despite the difficult circumstances."

"Nothing would please me more. You must write to me whenever you choose, and I beg of you to forgive the tardiness of my replies. When it comes to keeping up with correspondence, my friends say that I am at least consistent with my inconsistency." Elizabeth was pleased to see Georgiana's mouth twitch into a reluctant grin. "I am, of course, teasing you. You can be assured that I shall reply to you instantly, and you are always welcome to call upon me."

"You should come to visit us in Derbyshire." Georgiana brightened, looking at Colonel Fitzwilliam. "We were saying only the other day how much fun it would be to have you pass the summer with us. Fitzwilliam overheard us talking, and he agreed that you would love the walk to Birchen

Edge on a sunny day.”

“He also said we should not make Miss Bennet feel uncomfortable by putting her on the spot and asking her.”

Georgiana coloured at her cousin’s words. She put her hands to her face. “Of course. I entirely forgot.”

“That is an extremely generous offer.” Elizabeth’s heart pinched longingly at the thought of spending the summer in such a delightful fashion. “But I am at my uncle and aunt’s disposal. I shall have to await their plans.”

“Until then, we live in hope that you may one day visit Pemberley.” Colonel Fitzwilliam gave her a pointed look as he shook her hand goodbye. “My cousin may be woefully inept when it comes to inviting guests to his home, but I trust that he will someday have a wife who might help him to become more sociable. I know that Georgiana and I wish for it.” He glanced meaningfully at Georgiana, who nodded enthusiastically. “Darcy and your uncle are in the study, Miss Bennet. I do believe you should go there if you want to wish him farewell.”

Elizabeth nodded her thanks. Reaching out, she gave Georgiana a final embrace, expressing once more her wish to continue their acquaintance before murmuring goodbyes.



Mr Darcy and her uncle were deep in conversation when she entered the study. Both men rose to greet her, one with much more ease of spirit than the other. Mr Darcy drew a smaller chair from the corner of the room for her.

“Mr Darcy was asking whether I enjoy angling, Lizzy.” Mr Gardiner gave the younger man an enthusiastic nod. “I was merely reliving my youth with him whilst you were finishing your preparations.”

“I did not know you took an interest in fishing.”

“Many years of toiling away in London have suppressed my passion, but it was all I could do when I was a boy.” Mr Gardiner threw Mr Darcy a wink. “Fishing was a way of escaping a house full of females.”

Mr Darcy smiled back. “I do not blame you. There are few things more enjoyable than spending the day along the water.” He addressed Elizabeth. “I am sorry for keeping your uncle from you. You must be eager to be away.”

His comment was so far from the truth that Elizabeth chewed her lip

before answering. "It pleases me to see you both so agreeably engaged in conversation. It is not I who is keen to be away but Maria. This morning, she confided in me how greatly she misses her family."

"Miss Lucas's bravery is to be commended."

"I came to wish you farewell." Elizabeth's cheeks glowed. She did not know whether this would be easier or more difficult in the presence of her uncle. Mr Darcy's mind was clearly thinking along the same lines, as his eyes would occasionally flicker in Mr Gardiner's direction. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry with the impossible task of conveying everything she wished to say. "And to thank you once more for all that you have done."

Before Mr Darcy could reply, Mr Gardiner interjected, "And I must press upon you an invitation to dine with us. I promise we can talk of something other than trout."

Breaking his gaze from Elizabeth, Mr Darcy replied courteously, "It would be a pleasure to call upon you, Mr Gardiner." He paused before saying a little less confidently, "And of course you, Miss Bennet."

"That being said, we must soon be away." Mr Gardiner rose from his seat. "Are you both ready, Lizzy? I am sure that Mr Darcy is a busy man. We must take up no more of his time."

"We are all packed," Elizabeth said before addressing Mr Darcy, "I only require a footman to assist Maria to the coach."

Mr Darcy rose from his seat also. "Allow me to see to it."

As he turned to ring the bell, the only thought that ran through Elizabeth's mind was that she did not want their conversation to end.

"I left the poems on the bookshelf in the guestroom," she said abruptly. Both men turned to look at her in confusion. "The book you were so kind to lend me...in case you were wondering..." She faltered, wishing that she could find something more intelligent to say.

"You may have it." Mr Darcy's deep eyes surveyed her intently. Before Elizabeth could protest, he said, "It would please me greatly to know that it is in the hands of someone who appreciates its beauty."

His tone was as reserved as ever, but there was a tenderness in his expression that spurred Elizabeth to reply, "Truth be told, I would feel more comfortable borrowing it. Perhaps you could come and collect it from me when you call upon my uncle."

Standing tall, Mr Darcy crossed his hands behind his back. His habitual mask of formality slipped momentarily, and he looked at her with what could

only be described as hope. Bowing stiffly, he replied quietly, with just a glimmer of a smile, "I should like that very much, Miss Bennet."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



T rue to his word, Mr Darcy did call upon them in Gracechurch Street. Often, he was with company, such as his sister or Mr Bingley; sometimes he came alone and spent the evening conversing with Mr Gardiner. He never made a show of seeking out Elizabeth, yet somehow there would always be a point in the call where she would find herself talking to him. Each time, they would speak for a little longer. An opinion would be given or a joke would be made that spoke of a greater familiarity growing between them. His was not an open disposition, yet Elizabeth delighted in drawing him out of his natural reserve.

Late spring soon gave way to early summer, and still Mr Darcy continued to call, much to Elizabeth's growing pleasure. The Gardiners had postponed their intended tour of the Lakes until later in the year, and despite her previous enthusiasm for the trip, Elizabeth found she did not mind staying in London instead. Mr Gardiner particularly favoured Mr Darcy's company, and she was gratified to see Mr Darcy appreciate her uncle's genteel, well-bred society. At least she had some relatives of which she might not be ashamed. As Mr Darcy conversed with her uncle, she often found herself in quiet observation of him. *He has a habit of readjusting his cravat when contemplating a difficult question, she noted. And he likes to sit on the striped chair as all the others are too small for his broad frame.*

Sometimes, she felt as though she had dreamt his proposal. *How can he be in the same room as I in such a calm, collected way after my manner of refusing him?* She often wondered what might be running through his mind. *Soon he will return to Pemberley, she had to remind herself. You should not*

look forward to his visits as much as you do.

Aside from Mr Darcy's calls, life for Elizabeth seemed very dreary after she returned to Gracechurch Street. She adored her aunt and uncle, but she often found herself half-heartedly entertaining her younger cousins and wondering what she might be doing if she were still in Grosvenor Street. Maria had returned home with her father as soon as she was deemed strong enough. Sir William, it seemed to Elizabeth, had begun to take a keener interest in Maria, and her friend's confidence had blossomed as a result of his reinvigorated attentiveness. Perhaps it had been prompted by Mr Darcy's insightful remarks, or maybe the terrible weight of witnessing one's own child's injuries; whatever its cause, Elizabeth was glad that the bond between them had grown stronger.

As for her own family, their behaviour was less pleasing. A letter from Mrs Bennet cautioned against Jane leaving London—in her mother's eyes, Mr Bingley was too great a prize to risk losing. Elizabeth's heart had sunk when she had heard the mercenary tone in her mother's letter, but ultimately this plan was of benefit to Jane—and by extension Elizabeth. Mr Bingley certainly did not seem to mind that Jane continued to stay in London. He visited her regularly, and it was clear to Elizabeth that he was still very much in love with her sister. As for Jane, she was very coy. Presumably the public nature of her past sadness had made her reluctant to share her private happiness. She did not have to say much to Elizabeth in any case, for her smiles said more than words ever could. Their betrothal would be announced any day, Elizabeth was sure of it. Nothing would please her more, she told herself. Maria's injuries notwithstanding, her adventure into Mayfair had not been in vain.

Letters from her other family members also arrived from Longbourn, the contents of which made her cheeks burn with shame. Lydia had been permitted to go to Brighton with Colonel Forster and his flighty wife. Elizabeth was certain that she was the only member of her family who could see what a truly terrible idea this was. Kitty's letters were full of lament at the unfairness of being denied the opportunity to flaunt herself in a room full of soldiers; Mary wrote a six-page essay on the perils of young girls travelling without their parents before requesting that her sisters purchase some music that Elizabeth knew would be far beyond her capabilities.

Upon hearing the alarming news of Lydia's excursion, Elizabeth had written to her father to urge him to take heed of his youngest daughter. His

reply had been typically disinterested—he even went as far as to admonish Elizabeth, in his dry sarcastic way, for not sparing his feelings.

After years of hearing about your mother's nerves, he had written, do not mine need a chance to be indulged? Imagine, dearest Lizzy, what I would be suffered to listen to if I did not let Lydia go. Our house is peaceful for the first time in over a decade, and I intend to make use of the tranquillity. And at very little expense to myself!

She sighed, imagining all the awful names that Lydia was earning for herself in some Brighton assembly room, far away from her family's protection. As for her youngest sister, there was no communication whatsoever; the only news of her was what Elizabeth could glean from the letters of others. The cumulative effect of this correspondence caused Elizabeth to be dissatisfied and unhappy with her family. Mr Darcy's condemning objections from his letter plagued her once more, this time more painfully now that she understood their justice. *Total want of propriety.* She re-read those words again and again, the agonising realisation that he was correct piercing through her every time that she did.

On a balmy Wednesday in early August, Mr Darcy came to dinner. Georgiana was meant to accompany him, but she had become suddenly indisposed, and so he arrived alone. Elizabeth's Gardiner cousins held Mr Darcy in awe, and it was highly amusing to see the lengths to which they would go to impress him. For all his reserve, Elizabeth could only commend his fortitude. There were only so many times she could feign interest in Henry's toy soldiers, and Mr Darcy's patience in listening to her cousin's explanation of their various tactical manoeuvres did not escape her notice. Eventually, the children were rounded up for bed—little Freddie had to be verily prised from Mr Darcy's knee. Kind-hearted Jane offered to assist their aunt with the children, and Elizabeth settled herself by the fire to finish off the last of her embroidery.

She glanced over at Mr Darcy and her uncle, pleased to see them in earnest discussion. Some *bon mot* of Mr Darcy's had clearly diverted Mr Gardiner. *How different they are outwardly, she thought, but it is as though they have always been friends.* She returned to her stitches only to have her attention brought back to their conversation.

"Lizzy, Mr Darcy asserts that there is no finer county than Derbyshire," Mr Gardiner called out to Elizabeth. "What do you say to that?"

Looking up, she saw they were both gazing at her expectantly, and she

felt the unspoken invitation to join their good-natured debate.

“I cannot judge what I have not seen,” she replied playfully. “Mr Darcy will naturally show loyalty to his home county—this is, of course, commendable, but his bias must make us doubt the veracity of his pronouncements.” All this was said with no other desire than to make Mr Darcy laugh, and Elizabeth revelled in the sight of his faultless smile.

“You think I am too partial to my birthplace?”

“How can you be so sure of your opinion? The Hertfordshire countryside is very pretty. Who is to say that one county is superior to the other?”

“I am inclined to agree with you, Lizzy.” Mr Gardiner smiled broadly at the pair of them. “Neither of us have ever been and thus do not have the power to refute your argument, Mr Darcy.”

“If you were to visit Derbyshire, I am certain that you would fall to my way of thinking the minute you stepped from the carriage.” Mr Darcy’s eyes lit up when speaking of his home. “The deep, rolling hills divided by the drystone walls. Valleys of green under swirling clouds. Gritstone escarpments jutting out from the land.” He shook his head in wistful remembrance. “There is no other place like it.”

“I have heard that Derbyshire is no different from Yorkshire.” Elizabeth gave Mr Darcy an impudent grin.

“Madam, you have been misinformed.” Mr Darcy adopted a mock grave tone before adding with a twinkle, “And I would caution you against repeating that falsehood in front of a Derbyshire native.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I would not dare. You have made a solid case for your county’s merits, and I find that I cannot contest it. Instead, I shall quote Aristotle and simply say that it is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

“Is that a polite way of saying that you disagree with me?”

“Is there such a thing as a polite disagreement?”

To her rebuke, Mr Darcy smiled broadly. “I believe so.” Something in his manner shifted, and his gaze flickered briefly across her body before returning to her face. There was a hint of something in his eyes. In a lower voice, he said, “And since we are quoting Aristotle, then I believe he also said that wit is educated insolence.”

“And that is just a polite way of calling me impertinent.” At this, Mr Darcy laughed aloud, and Elizabeth felt a wave of warmth prickle across her body.

Just then, Mr Gardiner's attention was called away momentarily by a servant at the door with a note for him. Elizabeth was glad of the lull in the conversation; there was a playful undercurrent that she had been unprepared for.

Mr Darcy must have felt something of it too, as he looked upon her with a serious expression. In a much quieter voice, he addressed her. "One day, Miss Bennet, you might visit Derbyshire, and I would very much like the privilege of showing you all of its charms."

Heart hammering in her chest, Elizabeth nodded. "I-I should like that very well." Mr Darcy's face became alive with an endearing boyish eagerness, at which Elizabeth could only smile.

"Damn and blast!" The sound of her uncle swearing broke the moment. Elizabeth turned to Mr Gardiner in alarm. She had never known him to swear, not least in company. Slumped against the doorframe, he was reading an express, his face drained of colour.

"What is it?" Elizabeth stood to assist him, fearful of what news he might have received. Reaching for his arm, she guided him to the sofa. A dazed look upon his face, Mr Gardiner looked at Elizabeth blankly as he sat down and passed her the letter without thought.

At this point, Mr Darcy stood from his chair and took an awkward step forwards, hovering over Mr Gardiner's shoulder, his eyes never leaving Elizabeth's face. Fingers trembling, Elizabeth swiftly cast her eyes over the page. It was from her father.

My dear brother Gardiner,

I require your urgent assistance. An express arrived last night to inform us that Lydia has run off with an officer. The name of the scoundrel is George Wickham. You met him last Christmas, but you may apply to Lizzy and Jane for a description if you cannot recall his face. It was thought that they went to Scotland, but the inattentive Colonel Forster came this morning to express his apologies and to say that he was able to trace them to Clapham, after which there was no sign of the wayward pair. Worryingly, he believes that there has been no marriage, and to own the truth, I think it unlikely there will ever be one. Wickham is of poor character, and Lydia has no fortune. The motive is lust, and my shame at their conduct has no limit. Her virtue is lost, and so is the good standing of our family. Mrs Bennet

has taken the calamitous news very ill and has not left her bed since. Take pity on us. Whatever remuneration is needed to recover Lydia, it will be paid to you. My intention is to arrive in London tomorrow. I put myself in your hands, and I beg once more for your assistance.

*Yours &c,
T Bennet*

Elizabeth read her father's words with horror, a rushing sound filling her ears. It was the sound of her own heart racing. *Oh Lydia, what have you done? Thoughtless, thoughtless, silly girl.* She looked up from the letter to her uncle, whose face was still ashen, and Mr Darcy, whose brow contracted as he awaited an explanation for their obvious distress.

"It is Lydia." In that moment, Elizabeth saw herself through Mr Darcy's eyes, and the oppressive shame at her family's conduct nearly choked her. "My youngest sister has left all her friends—has eloped. Has thrown herself into the power of—of Mr Wickham."

"Your father would not wish this to be known to Mr Darcy." Mr Gardiner's senses had returned, and he raised a hand in protest.

"It will be common knowledge soon enough." Tears poured down Elizabeth's cheeks. "What reputation does Lydia have to maintain—other than being the silliest flirt in the whole of Hertfordshire? This news will be a scandal to many yet a surprise to none."

Mr Darcy silently regarded Elizabeth as she spoke. From his pocket, he drew out a handkerchief and, moving to sit close to her, pressed it into her hands. "You should not blame your sister too harshly," he said gently. "Wickham has an abundance of charm, and his power of persuasion has duped many a person more worldly than Miss Lydia. My own father had faith in Wickham's character to the very last. Miss Lydia is young. What evil could she know him capable of?"

"Evil!" Mr Gardiner exclaimed. "I must hear everything you know of him in order to determine how best to recover my niece."

Elizabeth met Mr Darcy's eyes. *This is not his problem,* she thought. *He must not embroil himself within it.*

"Mr Darcy was acquainted with Mr Wickham long ago," she said softly, before Mr Darcy could reply. "Mr Wickham abused Mr Darcy's good-nature and used him very ill, and they have had little to do with each other ever since." Mr Darcy gave her such a look then that Elizabeth felt as though she

might be crushed under its weight. It was of gratitude, she was sure, that she had chosen Mr Darcy's version of the past over Mr Wickham's.

He nodded briefly, and in that moment, Elizabeth felt all that was lost. If good character and gratitude were the foundations of love, then the feeling that had been building in Elizabeth came tumbling down around her. Any hope that Mr Darcy would renew his addresses towards her was dashed. And with that realisation came another—that she had been dearly wishing him to do so.

Rising from his seat, Mr Darcy began pacing the room in contemplation, a pensive look upon his handsome face. Addressing Mr Gardiner he said, "Let me assist you. Miss Bennet is correct—I severed all ties with Wickham long ago. However, I may be able to provide some resources. A man such as he only has a limited number of people to trust, and I may be able to supply you with various names to act as a starting point for your search."

Mr Gardiner gave Mr Darcy a curt nod. "I would be grateful for any help—and I would also be obliged to you, Mr Darcy, if you could keep this horrid affair to yourself."

"You have my word."

"I shall need to speak to my wife regarding Bennet's arrival. He comes to us tomorrow."

"Perhaps we may go into your study." Mr Darcy glanced warily at Elizabeth. "Then I may give you the particulars of places that Wickham was known to frequent."

"I shall inform my aunt and Jane of all that has happened," Elizabeth said, her heart heavy. *Mr Darcy can only mean brothels or gambling hells*, she thought, *else he would say them before me*.

Mr Gardiner nodded his thanks, and as the door clicked shut behind them, Elizabeth stood, meaning to seek out her aunt and Jane, but her knees trembled. Reaching out, she steadied herself against the mantelpiece. *What wickedness is this?* she raged inwardly. *What does Lydia have to offer that scoundrel apart from her youth, health, and good humour?*

Suddenly, an image of her sister appeared in her mind's eye—not Lydia as she was now, but a memory from only five years ago, when she was merely ten. Draped around her shoulders was one of Mama's white shawls as she pretended to dance on her wedding day, telling anyone who would listen about her dreams for a wealthy husband and a lively party. Wretched with misery, Elizabeth covered her face with her hands. All of Lydia's hopes

would amount to nothing now.
Just as mine have done.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



The tavern window slammed shut. Behind it, the heightened tones of a woman hurling insults at a man could be heard, the details of their argument lost to the hungry scream of a crying baby. Crooked buildings lined each side of the crowded, winding street, their slanted walls blocking the sun save for the razor-thin shafts of light cutting through the shadows. The stifling stench of London hit Darcy's nose as he gingerly stepped over a gutter, a rat scuttling away as he did so. Walking briskly, he stopped opposite a dirty building, searching for signs that he had found the right place. Several young girls stared at him meaningfully from their positions against the walls, and he drew up his collar, looking firmly away.

Part of him wished to find Miss Lydia here, so this search might be at an end, and yet another part of him dreaded that she might have ended up in a place of such degradation. Pulling the card from his pocket, he glanced at the direction written thereupon. Mr Davidson never did let him down when it came to making discreet enquiries. *Especially if they involved locating Wickham.* He was at the point of knocking on the door when a familiar laugh caught his notice. Looking to its source farther along the narrow, mud-strewn street, he espied his quarry.

Miss Lydia's appearance was less overdone than his last recollections, but she was unmistakably Elizabeth's sister. The man next to her was a face he was unable to forget, despite his best efforts. George Wickham walked in step with Miss Lydia, her ringless hand brazenly linked in the crook of his arm. He had a grin about his face that made Darcy question whether he was entirely sober. Miss Lydia laughed again—a shrill, raucous noise. With a

lustful growl, Wickham spun her round, and Darcy watched in disgust as the scoundrel pressed the girl against the wall and began to kiss down the side of her neck. Each time he did, Miss Lydia's shrieks became louder until Wickham broke away, returning his attention to her lips, kissing her passionately, his hands roaming over her body, paying no heed to the spectacle they were creating.

At least she is not bodily harmed, thought Darcy grimly. Wickham pulled away from her once more and, taking her by the hand, gave a meaningful glance to an upstairs window, where presumably they were to continue their explorations. Still undetected, Darcy watched them disappear up a staircase, Miss Lydia stumbling as she followed her lover. Falling heavily, she crumpled with laughter, and Darcy wondered whether she might be in her cups also. *It would not be the first time Wickham used alcohol to seduce a young girl*, he thought as he watched the distasteful scene.

Making a mental note of the doorway, he slipped away to his waiting carriage. Commanding the driver to make for Gracechurch Street, he flung himself down onto the crimson squabs. Now that he knew the couple's whereabouts, he contemplated his next move. *Wickham will demand money*. Of that, he was sure. *More than Mr Gardiner can afford to give*.

He sighed deeply. He had not forgotten Elizabeth's look of anguish on hearing the news of her sister's elopement. If only he had warned Colonel Forster of Wickham's true nature, Elizabeth might have been spared this pain! Since learning of the scandal, he had not returned to Gracechurch Street, feeling instead that his presence might be seen as intrusive. He knew that Bingley had called upon Jane a few times, but their understanding was more certain, and he was not yet sure of where he stood in Elizabeth's eyes.

Moving about restlessly, he clenched and re-clenched his fists. His mind drifted back to the repugnant display that he had just witnessed. *What must it be like to be Wickham?* he thought. *To behave so badly without consideration as to how one's actions might affect others*. For a preposterous moment, he experienced a pang of jealousy. What would he give to hold Elizabeth in such a way! It would not be in some sultry back alley but rather the privacy of their own chambers. He could run his hands along her perfect body in the intimate silence of their bedroom and revel in the sounds she would make as he caressed his lips along her neck. She would not shriek, like Miss Lydia, but she would look at him with those bold eyes, and there would be no limits to the love that they would show one another.

Sinking back into the carriage seat, he closed his eyes. They had been so close to something new until all this unpleasantness; he could only wonder how she was faring under the strain of it all. Through his daily correspondence with Mr Gardiner, he had learnt that Mr Bennet had taken the shock of his daughter's elopement very badly, and Elizabeth was gravely worried for her father's health. It was not Darcy's wish to add to her burden, and he had consequently asked Mr Gardiner not to make Mr Bennet aware of Darcy's own investigations, lest they fail. Every new piece of information had been communicated via letter. Today, however, he had news, and its delicate nature meant that it was best delivered in person.



Darcy was shown to Mr Gardiner's study upon arrival. Elizabeth's uncle stood in greeting, his fatigue obvious by his bloodshot eyes.

Bundles of letters were scattered about the escritoire, over which Mr Gardiner waved his hand absently. "Forgive the disorder, if you please. With all that has been going on, I have neglected much of my own correspondence, and I am endeavouring to catch up."

"I do not know whether this will add to or relieve your travails, but I must tell you that I have found them."

Mr Gardiner sat down heavily. "They are found?" he repeated faintly. "That is good news indeed. Although Bennet has returned to Longbourn, on Lizzy's insistence. His search has taken him across London, and she believed him in desperate need of rest."

"Did he return alone?"

"Jane accompanied him, but Lizzy asked to remain here—she is asleep upstairs. I thought it prudent to have one of Lydia's sisters here in case..." He paused, sighing deeply. "In case we should need some help with her." He held Darcy's gaze. "You must tell me everything, including the expense you incurred for your troubles."

Relieved to hear that Elizabeth was resting, Darcy pulled out the same card from earlier and handed it to Mr Gardiner. "They are here. You may keep it."

The other man coloured when he saw the street name. "Thank you for your discretion." Motioning for Darcy to take a seat, he placed the card in his

pocket before looking at him intently. "I must ask you—how many times do you intend to save members of my family, Mr Darcy?"

Darcy pulled at his cuffs. "Forgive my interference." Aware that his answer was not sufficient, he continued stiffly, "You must understand the guilt that I feel. For many years, I have known of Wickham's true nature. It was my silence that allowed him to earn the trust of innocent people."

"You are no more responsible for Wickham's actions than I am for Lydia's. If anything, you are less so, for you are no blood relation to that scoundrel."

"But I was in the unique position to make his character known." Darcy clenched his jaw.

"And why, may I ask, did you not?"

Because I did not wish for Georgiana's reputation to be sullied like Miss Lydia Bennet's, thought Darcy bitterly. And my pride demanded I have nothing more to do with him, no matter the cost to others not of my family circle.

"Sheer thoughtlessness," Darcy answered curtly. "Wickham will want payment to marry Miss Lydia. There is no other way of saying this, so you must forgive my candour. My means are greater than yours, and I wish to pay whatever is needed to secure their marriage."

A shadow crossed Mr Gardiner's face. "Do not think for a moment that I have befriended you because I wish to benefit from your fortune."

"That thought never entered my head."

"Then why do you insult me by saying that I do not have the funds to look after my own family?"

"That was not my intention. My experience with Wickham's greed is extensive. I know what to expect and..." Here, Darcy faltered, the sight of Elizabeth's tear-stained face returning to him once more. "And I wish to make amends for any pain that my previous silence might have caused you." He took a meaningful breath. "You or any other members of your family."

There was a moment of silence, then comprehension spread across Mr Gardiner's face. The older man looked steadily at Darcy, in the same way, it seemed to him, that a father might look upon a son. "You wish to spare Lizzy the pain of a ruined sister?" he said slowly.

A muscle twitched in Darcy's jaw. Unable to meet Mr Gardiner's gaze, he fixed on a spot near the gentleman's desk. "That is a delicate subject, and one that I am not comfortable discussing with anyone except Miss

Elizabeth.”

Mr Gardiner nodded, his expression thoughtful. At last he said, “The only way that I shall accept your help is if your actions are born from the love of my niece.”

Surprised by Mr Gardiner’s directness, Darcy gave a sardonic laugh. “I understand your success in business, sir. You drive a hard bargain. You ask me to pay for the privilege by disclosing the innermost workings of my heart.”

Undeterred by Darcy’s harsh tone, Mr Gardiner replied gently, “It is easier to accept a favour from a man whom I might one day have the honour to call family.”

Deeply embarrassed by Mr Gardiner’s warm words of approval, Darcy reached into his pocket and pulled from it several guineas. Clearing his throat, he said, “This will serve as a starting point for Wickham. You will undoubtedly need more.” He paused, unable to articulate all that he was feeling—to Elizabeth’s uncle no less. “My only request is this—please do not make my financial involvement known. I should not want the Bennet family to feel indebted to me in any way, and Wickham will accept less if he does not realise larger funds are at hand.”

Mr Gardiner looked at the coins laid out on the desk in front of him. “You are too generous. I truly cannot thank you enough.” Rising from his chair, he clapped a hand to Darcy’s shoulder as he showed him out. “Your assistance will be our secret, Mr Darcy.” His hand squeezed firmer. “Although perhaps one day, you might like to tell Lizzy yourself.”

CHAPTER THIRTY



“Lizzy, stop pulling. That hurts.” Lydia pushed Elizabeth’s hands away and twirled herself in front of the mirror. “I suppose this dress will do.” She gave an affected sigh. “Although the colour is dreadful and the cut makes me look like a maid of thirty.” Peering at her reflection, she fluttered her eyelashes and gave a coquettish pout. “I simply cannot understand why Papa would not buy me a new gown.”

Elizabeth shared an exasperated look with her aunt, who was on the other side of Lydia.

“You are to be married quickly,” Mrs Gardiner said sharply. “If you wanted a new dress, you should have had a proper engagement like all the other girls your age.”

Lydia rolled her eyes at her aunt’s admonishment. “George says I am not like other girls my age.” She gave her reflection a smug look. “He says he has never known a girl like me.”

Scandalised by the suggestiveness of her younger sister’s comments, Elizabeth replied shortly, “Well, I am sure that Mr Wickham has had enough girls to be a sufficient judge.”

“Oh, do not be jealous. I know that you always preferred George.” Lydia turned to Elizabeth, her eyes wide in mock sincerity. “Promise that you will not be envious once I am married. I cannot help it if George prefers me over you.”

“I shall not be envious—you have my word. Indeed, you are more than welcome to Mr Wickham. I would even go as far as to say that you deserve each other.”

“Do not frown at me. Those wrinkles make you look old.” Lydia returned her attention to the mirror, a self-satisfied look upon her features. “Just think, I am to be married before you. If there is anything you wish to know about married life, you may come and ask me.” She gave a dramatic pause. When she saw that Elizabeth and Mrs Gardiner showed absolutely no interest in whatever expertise she might be at liberty to share, she continued airily, “Of course, you might never marry. La! Imagine being unmarried at your age.”

“I think this conversation should end.” Mrs Gardiner had clearly had her fill of Lydia’s ‘wisdom’. “This dress will do, Lydia. It fits you well enough. You should return to your room before your uncle comes home. Do not forget that he has asked you to spend some time each day in quiet contemplation of your actions. You should go there directly.”

Lydia opened her mouth to protest, but Mrs Gardiner cut her off. “Go now, or you will be confined to your room during dinner as well.”

Elizabeth watched as Lydia flung off the dress, slamming the door as she begrudgingly flounced off to her room. She shook her head, still unbelieving that this was her youngest sister.

“When did Lydia become so changed?” she said sadly, almost to herself.

“She was always wild. Your poor uncle used to fret about it dreadfully.”

“I worry about what will happen to her. Mr Wickham is not to be trusted.”

“You should not trouble yourself in that regard.” Mrs Gardiner’s expression was grim. “Rest assured, every detail has been considered.”

Elizabeth shook her head again. “I still cannot believe my uncle’s generosity. I know of Mr Wickham’s greed. Papa does not have the means to settle whatever he would have demanded. My uncle must have paid a heavy price.”

Mrs Gardiner looked at Elizabeth intently. “Do not worry about the expense to your uncle. An agreement was made and...” She bit her lip, evidently wishing to say more but thinking better of it. Instead, she took Elizabeth by the hand. “I saw your face when Lydia spoke of marriage. You should not listen to her. She has absolutely no idea of love. What she feels for Mr Wickham is a fanciful infatuation, nothing else.”

Elizabeth looked down at where her hand lay in her aunt’s clasp. Mr Darcy had not paid her a visit since the news of Lydia’s elopement had broken.

In a solemn voice, she said, “How does one know when one loves

someone?”

Mrs Gardiner squeezed Elizabeth’s hand. “There are many different ways of answering that question. In my opinion, it is when you realise that there is no better person than they.”

“But look at Lydia—she utterly worships Mr Wickham.”

“What is their relationship built upon? Is there mutual esteem? Marriage is a life together—for better, for worse. Do you have any sense that Mr Wickham will look to Lydia when times are difficult? Or indeed, that she may rely on him?”

“There is little chance of that.” Elizabeth’s shoulders heaved in frustration.

Her aunt looked at her sympathetically. “What made you ask that particular question? I should imagine that you were sick of talking about love, given how much of Lydia’s company you have been subjected to.”

“I do not know. You spoke of love, and it made me wonder how anyone could be sure of another’s regard.”

Mrs Gardiner smiled. “Think of the people who are dearest to you. How do you know you love them? Have you ever questioned your affection for Jane? Or why you cherish Charlotte Lucas’s friendship?” She paused before saying delicately, “Or perhaps there is someone else you have in mind? A man whose good opinion you wish for and whose intellect you respect.” Mrs Gardiner fixed her eyes firmly on Elizabeth. “An honourable man of impeccable character”—she softened her voice, adding—“whose attention you desire.”

Heart heavy, Elizabeth did not reply immediately. “If such a man existed, I would consider myself lucky if he were to love me,” she said at last. “Especially after my sister’s scandalous behaviour.”

“A man worthy of you, my dearest Lizzy, will know what a precious jewel you are.” Mrs Gardiner patted Elizabeth’s hand reassuringly. “And a man like that does not give up so easily.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



The day of Lydia's wedding began with rain. To Elizabeth's mind, it felt like an omen. It was meant to be a bright summer's day, but instead lashings of rain beat against the window panes. An oppressive heat made the tendrils of Elizabeth's hair stick to the back of her neck. Trying to have any kind of wedding celebration was difficult in these conditions, not least when the bride in question was Lydia.

The bad weather had put her sister in a foul mood. Nothing was right, as she reminded them frequently, complaining that her family were not taking sufficient interest in her on her 'special day'. Forming her mouth into a rosebud pout, Lydia had found fault at every stage of her preparations, to the point where Mrs Gardiner had to scold her in the same manner one might discipline an errant child.

As for Mr Wickham, he had been absent for much of the fortnight before the wedding. Indeed, an uncomfortable silence usually followed whenever the man's name was mentioned. Elizabeth had seen him once, waiting to be admitted to her uncle's study. He had flashed her his most charming smile, but his face had soon dropped when he saw her icy expression. She had nodded her head in acknowledgment, then walked straight past without saying a word. How glad she was that she had never surrendered her heart to him! The veil had been lifted from her eyes, and her only feeling was of regret that his true nature had been revealed by his treatment of Georgiana and Lydia.

Another absent male was Mr Bennet. A letter had arrived from him, explaining his desire to stay away. Although she understood his sentiments,

Elizabeth could only feel disappointment that her father had chosen to place the burden of Lydia on the Gardiners rather than own any of it himself. Regular letters from Jane revealed the extent to which her parents' opinions were divided. Her mother longed for Lydia's wedding; her father dreaded it.

Now the day was upon them all, and Elizabeth had sought out a quiet spot in the midst of the pandemonium. Seated at her bedroom window, she watched the raindrops beat steadily against the glass. In her lap was the book that Mr Darcy had lent her. He had never asked for its return, and she clung to the idea that one day he might come back and claim it.

She thought back to their time in Grosvenor Street. *'Time heals all wounds.'* That is what she had said. But time was passing, and now that she understood her true feelings, each moment was alive with the sorrowful regret that Mr Darcy was no longer a part of her life. *And he never will be,* she added sadly. *For after today, marriage to me would require him to become brother-in-law to the lowest kind of worm. I would not wish it upon him. There exist wounds deeper than pride can defend and that time can never heal.*

Thumbing the pages, she wondered what Mr Darcy might be doing right at this moment. *If only I had understood his true character!* A shriek came from Lydia's bedroom, then a scolding to a maid who had evidently not arranged her hair in precisely the way Lydia had ordered. Elizabeth performed a silent prayer for patience. Placing the book carefully next to her bedside, she rose to mediate Lydia's present turmoil.



A lull in the rain allowed them to arrive at the church on time. Helping Lydia descend, Elizabeth caught sight of her own reflection in the carriage window. *How ill I appear!* No wonder her aunt looked at her so pityingly. The ribbon from her bonnet felt too tight around her neck. Or maybe it was the lump of unshed tears causing the constricting sensation in her throat. *Oh, for this day to be over and for all thoughts of Mr Darcy to be gone with it.* Lydia went on ahead, arm linked with an unimpressed Mr Gardiner.

Elizabeth and her aunt walked just behind. "Let us pretend today is respectable," her aunt muttered in Elizabeth's ear, "for now it is upon us, I wish for the marriage act to be performed swiftly."

“I cannot bear another moment with Lydia,” Elizabeth whispered in reply as they all entered the church. “I shall be glad when she becomes Mr Wickham’s responsibility.”

“I wonder how he is feeling at the prospect.”

“We shall soon see.”

As it happened, Mr Wickham did not seem the least bit thrilled to have Lydia as his bride. He looked handsome enough in his regimentals, yet Elizabeth detected an *ennui* in his posture that suggested he felt he had better places to be. As for his bride, Lydia performed all the rites of marriage in a petulant tone that annoyed Elizabeth beyond measure. When it came to the vows in the solemnisation worded ‘*with my body I thee worship*’, she could hardly contain her giggles and fluttered her eyes so suggestively at Mr Wickham that bile rose in Elizabeth’s throat.

She turned her head away from the scene in front of her, gazing across to the transept to her right. From the shadows, a man’s outline caught her notice. Tall and broad-shouldered, she recognised it instantly. *Mr Darcy is here*. What possible reason would he have to attend her sister’s wedding—to a man he openly despised? Pulse racing, she quickly returned her attention to the vicar, but it was no use. Desperate to see him again, she tilted her head, her eyes searching the darkness. He had gone. *Was that to be the last time I am to ever see him?*

Unable to attend to all that the vicar was saying, she leant over to her aunt. “Please allow me to take some fresh air. I shall not stray far from the church.” Not waiting for Mrs Gardiner to answer, she discreetly rose and walked in the direction of where Mr Darcy had once stood.

Golden hues from the stained glass cast a strange light, and she shivered as she passed underneath it. Great flagstone steps echoed under her feet, and as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realised that she was alone in a gloomy vestry. The dull, unloved room was cold and cluttered, with narrow windows that only permitted thin slivers of light. There was no sign of Mr Darcy. Perhaps it had only been her imagination showing her what she wished to see.

A sob caught in her throat. Elizabeth had said that she desired fresh air, but now all she wanted was the privacy to cry alone over her broken heart. Sinking into a long-abandoned pew, she curled her arms around herself, bitter tears flowing down her cheeks. Time passed without meaning, until a sound of polite applause came from the chancel next door. Wiping her face, she

stood up again, anxious that no one should know that she had been crying, and inhaled slowly in an attempt to regain her composure.

As she made her way back up the steps, she saw her aunt, uncle, and sister disappear down the other side of the church, presumably in search of her. She opened her mouth to call out, but a movement at the altar caught her notice. Mr Wickham was still there, in the midst of a heated discussion with a man whose fine figure Elizabeth would never forget. Mr Darcy's back was towards her, and Mr Wickham was too caught up in conversation to notice her approach.

"It was *you* who paid for all this?" Wickham's fists were clenched at his sides. "Had I known it was you, I would have demanded more. You cheated me."

Mr Darcy stood straighter, replying scornfully, "You are in no position to pass judgment when it comes to honourable behaviour." He paused. "But if you truly feel yourself sold too cheaply, an allowance might be made. This allowance will only be paid, however, as long as your wife remains happy. I shall have you watched for as long as you draw breath. You will never know who it is who watches, but they will know you. Make an effort with your wife, and the allowance will continue. Make her miserable, and her misery becomes yours."

A breath caught in Elizabeth's throat. Had she heard correctly? Did Mr Darcy mean to protect Lydia for the rest of her life?

Mr Wickham's reply was angry and resentful. "So this is what you have reduced me to? Accepting your charity for as long as you see fit? You always did fancy yourself lord and master over me. Now you have your way, I suppose. I am forever at your disposal."

"The only condition is that you treat your wife with respect. It is hardly a punitive term."

"Have you *met* my wife? Her company is insufferable, her intellect meagre. You have condemned me to a life with an empty-headed chit of a girl whose only saving grace is that hers is a body built to be enjoyed." To Elizabeth's disgust, Mr Wickham raised both hands in a gesture which left no doubt as to how intimately he knew her sister.

Mr Darcy's shoulders tensed. "Remember you are in a house of God."

"Oh really? I thought there was only one house of God, and its name was Pemberley. The divine being who resides there believes himself to be superior to us mere mortals."

Mr Wickham's tone was of such sarcastic insolence that Elizabeth stepped out from the shadows, trembling with rage. "You forget yourself, sir."

Mr Wickham looked at her in surprise, which quickly turned into poorly disguised civility. "Forgive me, Miss Elizabeth. You have caught us in the middle of a private conversation."

"How strange that you would want to talk to Mr Darcy, after all that you claim he has done against you." Elizabeth could not stop her voice from shaking. "It is as though you have forgotten your past grievances." She continued bitterly, "Or perhaps his offences against you never existed at all."

Mr Wickham opened his mouth, but Elizabeth cut him off. "Do not attempt to defend yourself. You can have no excuse for your behaviour."

Mr Wickham's cheeks coloured. He gave Elizabeth a weak smile. "You do not know what you are talking about, my—"

"I would prefer not to be lectured by a man who preys on young women."

"I did not force your sister to come away with me. Lydia—"

"Is unfortunately now married to you." Anger still coursed through her blood, but she felt some of the passion within her fade. Taking a deep breath, she attempted to regain her composure. "For that you have my civility, but you will never have my respect."

Mr Wickham's eyes narrowed. "You have no right to speak to me in this way." His face contorted into a sneer so disagreeable that Elizabeth wondered how she had ever thought him handsome. "But the Bennet family only value wealth and status—I wonder if you would talk in the same manner to Darcy here."

Elizabeth glanced at Mr Darcy, who had been standing open-mouthed throughout the entire exchange, an incredulous expression upon his features.

"I would not compare yourself to Mr Darcy. You will only find yourself wanting." With great satisfaction at the scowl upon her brother-in-law's face, she turned on her heel and marched away.

"Miss Bennet, wait!" The voice behind Elizabeth caused her to stop. How she had longed to hear those deep, rich tones! Heart hammering wildly against her chest, she turned round slowly. Taking long strides, Mr Darcy was making his way down the nave of the church. Behind his shoulder, she saw Mr Wickham, his face still thunderous, stalk off in the opposite direction. Finally Mr Darcy stood before her, shoulders heaving as he caught his breath. She could scarcely believe her eyes, that he should be here, of all places, the

very man she had longed to see. Yet for all her astonishment, the conversation she had been privy to still echoed in her ears.

She looked him directly in the eye. "I heard you offer Mr Wickham an allowance. Why would you do such a thing? I know how you hate him, and Lydia is so wholly unconnected to you. What possessed you to do it?"

"What *possessed* me?" He gestured wildly with his hands, almost as if he were angry. Taking a deep breath, he took a step closer, before saying, "In truth, Miss Bennet, I am unable to explain why I have paid that scoundrel. The only reason I can offer is that I cannot bear to see you cry." His eyes bored into hers. "As to what has *possessed* me, the answer to that is...you."

Face serious, he moved towards her, closing the space between them. "If your wishes are the same as they were in Kent, then you must tell me at once. My thoughts and wishes are unchanged."

Elizabeth looked up at him in shock, not trusting that she had heard him correctly. *He loves me still?* "But what of my family? My new *brother*?"

Mr Darcy looked up at her from under his brows, his expression one of earnest tenderness. "I would gladly make your family my own if it meant my life is shared with you. I am sorry if I have ever given you cause to doubt my love. Dearest Elizabeth, you must know how precious you are to me."

He stood directly in front of her, so close that Elizabeth could feel the heat from his body. Trembling, she reached out and laid a hand against his cheek. The rough stubble of his jaw felt coarse under her fingers. She watched as he closed his eyes, revelling in the intimacy of her touch.

"Talk no more of the past," she whispered. "And let us be happy. Indeed, I cannot imagine a happy life without you in it."

And at those words, he kissed her.

EPILOGUE



Laughing, Elizabeth flung herself down into the seat, her husband not far behind her. A crack of a whip signalled their departure, and their carriage creaked into life. Leaning across Darcy, Elizabeth poked her head out of the window to wave one final goodbye to her family. Jane and her Mr Bingley were there, not long returned from their own wedding trip and still glowing with love for one another. Kitty and Mary stood to one side, a friendship at last blossoming between the sisters since Lydia's elopement. Elizabeth's parents were also near the paddock to wave them off, Mrs Bennet full of exclamations at the fine party Sir William had put on at Lucas Lodge, and Mr Bennet full of wry observation at its cost. Glad as she was to visit her family, Elizabeth was gladder still to return to her London home.

She turned to Darcy. "What a pleasure to see dear Maria married at last!"

"She looked very lovely." Darcy grinned at Elizabeth's joyful expression. "Though not as well as my bride on her wedding day."

"Arthur Sheppard looked almost as handsome as you...and just as nervous."

"I was not nervous on our wedding day." Darcy raised his eyebrows in pretend astonishment. "Why should I be worried on the happiest day of my life?"

"Bravo! A prudent answer given by Mrs Bennet's wealthiest son-in-law."

"You would have me admit I was worried about what your mother might say?" Darcy's brilliant smile lit up his face. "That would not be considered chivalrous—and I was of the impression that you desired to marry a gentleman."

Elizabeth laughed, linking her arm through his and resting her head on his shoulder. “I married the very best of men. Though do not tell him, as it will only make him vain.”

Darcy laughed aloud at her teasing, intertwining his fingers with hers. Reaching down, he kissed her as lovingly as he had on their own wedding day, and soon there were no more words.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ali Scott fell in love with reading at an early age and spent her childhood reimagining her favourite stories. A lover of languages, she studied French and film at Southampton University and is counting down the days until she can share her love of France with her two young daughters. *Pride and Prejudice* was the one of the first books that truly captured Ali's imagination and she regularly returns to it whenever she needs an escape from the modern world. During her first maternity leave, Ali fell down a rabbit hole of Austenesque variations and has been happily lost there ever since. She lives in Surrey with two beautiful girls, a wonderful husband, and an unruly allotment.

A Wound Deeper than Pride is Ali's second book.



ALSO BY ALI SCOTT

[A Man of Good Fortune](#)

A RIDE ON A STORMY DAY has disastrous consequences for Fitzwilliam Darcy, who finds himself grievously injured and bedridden—and with no memory of Elizabeth Bennet, the woman to whom he has been married for several years. Recovery is slow as his head injury has made it difficult for him to read and write, and a suspected fracture in his leg has made walking painful.

AS DARCY'S RECOVERY PROGRESSES, snippets of memory begin to plague him and questions arise. He begins to suspect that his wife, and those around him, know more about the time leading up to his accident than they are telling him. Why was he riding on such an inauspicious day? And why does he keep dreaming of his mother's brooch?

AS THE DAYS PASS, he finds he is increasingly beguiled by Elizabeth. She draws him in, despite his concerns for her loyalty to him. He wonders if he can trust her love even as he finds himself learning to be in love with her again. Will the shadows in the past and the obstacles they have overcome defeat them? Or will he find happily ever after, once again, with his Elizabeth?

A MAN OF GOOD FORTUNE is a sequel to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and takes place several years after the marriage of Fitzwilliam Darcy to Elizabeth Bennet.