

A Pride & Prejudice Variation

# *Mr. Darcy's* **BOOKSHOP**



**SUMMER HANFORD**

MR. DARCY'S

Bookshop

A PRIDE & PREJUDICE VARIATION

SUMMER HANFORD



## **DEAR READER**

After enjoying this story, you'll find information about signing up for my mailing list, where you will have the opportunity for free gifts, information about new releases and in-person events, and more. I hope you'll sign up and join us by visiting [www.summerhanford.com](http://www.summerhanford.com).

With special thanks to Doris, Linda, Brenda, Cheryl, and all of my amazing beta readers.

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EPILOGUE

THANK YOU FOR READING!

ABOUT SUMMER

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# CHAPTER ONE



Fitzwilliam Darcy pushed his spectacles up on his nose, for they were forever slipping. A more finely crafted pair might better remain in place, but could he afford those, he would need none, for he would be back at Pemberley with more activities at hand than going over his shop records by tallow light. At Pemberley, he would read during the day, for pleasure, with bright sunlight streaming into finely furnished rooms. And if he wrote, there would be no need for cramped letters he could hardly make out, simply to save on watery ink and coarse paper.

Finished with his records for the day, he snuffed out all the tallow candles but one, then took the last and made a check of the doors, front and back, though why anyone would want to rob a bookseller he didn't know. Returning to the counter at the front of the bookshop, he carefully trimmed down the now cooled wicks. Satisfied the shop was settled for the night, he took the cashbox and went up the back stairs to the room above, where he finished the watery ale and half-eaten pasty he'd procured earlier that day.

Going to the other side of the room, he readied for bed, then extinguished the candle. By memory and feel, he crossed back to his narrow cot and climbed beneath thin sheets. So far, November had been mild, but soon enough London would grow cold and cloaked in a smoky miasma, and Darcy would shiver in his sleep. Perhaps if he went to his cousin Richard... but no. He wouldn't put Richard in the position of being at odds with the patriarchs.

Darcy sought rest, his mind on books and ledgers and the price of tallow. It did not help that he had sold only a single volume today, most of which had been spent dusting to keep the shop in good order and to give him something to do. Nor was tomorrow likely to be much different, although soon patrons would trickle in, seeking gifts to take back to their

country estates for the Yuletide. December would be a better month. It always had been in the past.

He listened to the light patter of rain on the eaves, well aware he would face the same worries on the morrow. And the next day, and the following. Every day would be thus, until he relented to his father's and uncles' command that he marry his cousin Anne de Bourgh. Though he certainly wished no harm to his kin, no matter how they tormented, sometimes Darcy liked to imagine how his circumstances would differ if his father, Matlock, and Sir Lewis had died when he was young, rather than his mother and his aunts. Surely, as a mother, Lady Catherine would have laid to rest this nonsense about Darcy and Anne marrying. Were she alive still, Anne would be happily wedded already, and Darcy would be free from his imagined obligation to espouse her. He was certain of it.

Darcy drifted off during his wistful musings, to wake cold and stiff shortly before dawn. He dressed for the day, then stoked his small stove to heat water for tea, which he brewed in a chipped pot. The precious leaves and the heat to boil water for them were the one luxury he wouldn't do without, his morning cup far more important than a second blanket.

Later, down in the shop, he unlocked the front door, then returned to his dusting. He began with the low, chest-height shelving at the front of the shop, then moved on to the taller shelves in the back of the store. Dust and disorderliness, he'd found, were the greatest enemies of a bookshop, aside from a lack of patrons. Immersed in his work, he didn't consider that it was the third Monday of the month until much later when the front door opened, the bell jangling, to admit George Wickham.

Darcy started to scowl, then mastered the expression as a second man entered on Wickham's heels. An amiable-looking fellow in his early twenties, with neither great height nor over-fine looks to distinguish him, but a cheerful air of affability. By his garb and his presence with Wickham, Darcy assumed him to be wealthy. Wickham had no use for companions he couldn't count on to foot the bills, no matter how much money Darcy's father showered him with.

“Darcy,” Wickham greeted with false warmth, sauntering over to the short ladder on which Darcy stood to reach the highest shelves. “Hard at work, I see. Come down here and I will introduce you.”

Leaving the feather duster on the shelf, Darcy climbed down the ladder. He pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his hands.

“Bingley, may I present an old friend of mine, Fitzwilliam Darcy?” Wickham turned back to Darcy. “And this is Mr. Charles Bingley.”

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Mr. Bingley said affably. “Darcy? Isn’t that the name of your patron, Wickham? Any relation? I hear the Darcys are quite the thing in Derbyshire.”

“Why yes, Fitz here is somewhat related to the Darcys in Derbyshire,” Wickham said. He eyed Darcy sardonically and added, “He’s a poor relation, though, to be certain. I come by once a month to check on him.”

“Too good of you,” Mr. Bingley said, looking about. “Fine shop you have here, Darcy.”

“Thank you.”

“Quite a lot of books, isn’t it?” Mr. Bingley continued. “I wish my collection were larger, but I am an idle fellow, and though I have not many, I have more than I ever look into. Still, can’t hurt to browse.”

“You do that,” Wickham said. “Darcy and I are due a chat.”

“Books on horseflesh and fencing are up front on those bottom two shelves there,” Darcy added, pointing to the front corner of the shop.

“Excellent,” Mr. Bingley said and wandered in that direction.

Darcy turned to Wickham. “My father won’t approve of you bringing me a customer.”

“Bingley?” Wickham raised his eyebrows. “You heard him. He’s not the reading sort. He had a devil of a time at



university.”

“Is that where you found him? Haven’t you finished at university yet?”

Wickham shrugged. “I recently decided to give law a go. I’ll have to start all over. Your father was more than happy to sell off that living he wanted me to fill, and to give me the funds to further my education.”

Darcy eyed the loathsome being before him and wondered how much money Wickham had swindled from George Darcy this time.

“Five thousand,” Wickham said, following Darcy’s thoughts, for they knew each other well, having been raised nearly as brothers. “The living didn’t go for that much but my dear, dear godfather wanted to ensure I am comfortable while at my studies, so he augmented the sum.” Wickham leaned near, lowering his voice to say, “By the time you give up this ridiculous show of independence, you will be begging to marry your hoyden of a cousin just to refill Pemberley’s coffers, the way your father spends money on me.”

“Anne is not a hoyden.” Not that anything about Anne was why Darcy would never relent to his father’s demand that they wed. They simply did not suit, and being cut off from his family’s money wouldn’t persuade Darcy that they did. He would never give in to his father’s tyranny.

“Of course she is,” Wickham countered. “She rides and hunts and shoots. I have only ever seen her in boots and a habit, a crop in hand. Your uncle raised her to be the son his late wife didn’t give him, which is why I sympathize with you not wanting to wed her, but you will get Rosings, man. Stop this ridiculous charade and get the banns read.”

“Must we do this every third Monday?” Darcy asked. “I have dusting to do.”

Wickham shook his head. “Who would have thought, back at Eton, that the great Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley would spend his days dusting piles of worthless books.”

“I take exception to the notion that books are worthless.”

“Do you?” Wickham shrugged again. “Never found a single one I liked. Well, not here. You don’t stock any of those bawdy ones with the pictures that they bring back from India.”

“No,” Darcy said coldly. “I do not. This is a respectable establishment.”

“This? Only by dint of you being here. We are in Cheapside, after all. It is a stone’s throw to the grand import warehouses.”

“Did you say import warehouses?” Mr. Bingley said, striding over with three books in hand. “Fine places, those. Always trying to convince my sisters to buy their fabrics and feathers and whatnots there. All the modistes do. Why pay for the markup, I say.”

Darcy agreed. The great open-air market in the center of the warehouse district was where he made many of his purchases, including his tea.

Wickham chuckled. “My dear fellow, you pay for the markup so everyone will know that you can afford to.” He shook his head, his charming countenance molded into amusement, with just a touch of condescension. “How about you treat me to lunch and I will expound on the subject for you? You have a lot to learn if you wish to properly disentangle from your roots in trade.”

Mr. Bingley pulled a face. “Don’t I know it. My sisters are constantly on about the same thing.”

“Well, if there is anyone who can educate you on how to best employ money to appear every inch the gentleman, it’s me.” Wickham cocked an eyebrow at Darcy. “Would you not agree, Darcy?”

“Yes,” Darcy said dryly. “On that, Mr. Wickham and I can very much agree.”

“Splendid,” Mr. Bingley said cheerfully. “I’ll let you take me under your wing, then.”

Darcy shook his head, pitying the affable young man. Who knew what terrible advice Wickham would give, all the while taking Mr. Bingley for every penny he could get. It would

almost be worth marrying Anne simply to be able to influence George Darcy against Wickham and his copious spending.

Almost.

Mr. Bingley held up the books. "I'll take these, Darcy."

"Don't you want to know how much they will run you?" Wickham asked before Darcy could speak. "You want to make certain he does not take advantage of you." He smirked at Darcy.

Mr. Bingley chuckled. "Can't see as a fine fellow with the Darcy name would swindle anyone. I'll take them regardless of the cost."

"Very well," Darcy said stiffly. No matter how long he'd been at his bookselling business, nor how much he truly needed funds, it always dismayed him to accept payment. He would rather give the books to Mr. Bingley. As things stood, he gave the man a discount to make up, in some small way, for the money Wickham would separate him from.

After Mr. Bingley made his purchase, the two said their goodbyes, Wickham trailing his new friend out. He paused at the door, letting it swing closed behind Mr. Bingley, and looked back to say, "I will report to your father that you remain stubbornly opposed to bettering your circumstances, then, shall I?"

"Do what you like," Darcy replied. "You always do."

Wickham grinned. "Yes. I do, don't I?" With a parting smirk, he left.

Through the shop window, Darcy watched the two stride away. Both were fashionably dressed. Both appeared to be gentlemen. Not that Wickham ever would be, no matter how much he spent on his clothes. Darcy only hoped he didn't fleece his new friend too badly. Charles Bingley seemed like a good, if overly trusting, sort of fellow.

Shaking his head, Darcy climbed back up on the ladder and returned to dusting. At least Wickham's visit had put a bit of money in the till. Not enough to be worth Wickham's badgering, but enough to eat for a week which, added to what

Darcy had, would see him into the new year. Perhaps with the influx that should come with the Christmas season, he would be set until March. Then he and his cousin Richard would take their annual pilgrimage to visit their Uncle Lewis at Rosings, where Darcy would endure his uncle's list of his failings and Anne's obsession with hunting.

The visit was always a strain, but a welcome break from his shop and a nice augmentation to Darcy's diet. He would eat more meat in one week at Rosings than during the remainder of the year, most of it hunted and brought down by Anne. As an added boon, after a week with her and Sir Lewis, Darcy's resolve to defy his father would be bolstered and he would be longing for the quiet occupation of his bookshop.

That thought in mind, he cheerfully dusted. His thoughts turned to the happier topic of the upcoming Yuletide and the influx of purchases he always saw at the end of the year. Who knew what new delights the year's end might bring?

## CHAPTER TWO



Though rainclouds threatened, Elizabeth set out from Longbourn very early, Jane at her side, to walk before breakfast. Their cousin, Mr. Collins, had arrived only four days ago, but Elizabeth had already come to understand him well enough to know he intended to propose to Jane. As, when the sad day came that their father left them, Mr. Collins would inherit their home, his proposal must be taken seriously. If issued to Elizabeth's too kind older sister, he would receive a yes. Jane would never put her happiness above securing the future security of her mother and four younger sisters.

But Elizabeth would. She would put any of their happiness above the deed of wedding their odious, sycophantic cousin. She simply would not let Jane be wasted on such a dreadful man, or go to his home in Kent to endure this Sir Lewis and Miss de Bourgh he nattered on about. They sounded even worse than he was, a supposition reinforced by Sir Lewis's willingness to give Mr. Collins a living.

Once she and Jane were far from the house, walking the narrow line of green between forest and field, Elizabeth announced, "I have written to our aunt and requested she remove you to London immediately. As I sent the letter yesterday, I have every hope Uncle Gardiner's carriage could arrive as soon as tomorrow. My wording was that strong."

Jane cast her a startled glance. "You have written to Aunt Gardiner and asked her to invite me to visit?"

"I have."

"But why? It is improper to be so demanding, and you did not even ask if I wish to go. It's nearly December. Will I return from this visit you have orchestrated in time to celebrate Christmas with our family?"

"It is my intention that you remain in London until the danger posed by Mr. Collins is past."

Jane shook her head, her lovely features pulled downward in confusion. "What danger posed by Mr. Collins?"

Elizabeth halted, bringing Jane up short, and turned to her. "Oh Jane. Can you not see it? He means to propose to you."

Her eyes went wide and a hand flew to her cheek, which paled. "He does? How do you know?"

"Because he's been on and on about how Sir Lewis and Miss de Bourgh do not agree with entailing inheritance away from females and that the obvious solution is for one of us to wed him so that we are not, perforce, cast out when Papa dies."

Jane nodded. "Well, yes, but I assume, with his interests and temperament, he will ask Mary. She is attentive to him and enjoys his readings. She encourages him. I have not."

Elizabeth smiled, for it was part of Jane's charm that she did not comprehend how beautiful she was. "You encourage him simply by being you. Every man who looks upon you is encouraged. You cannot help it."

Jane twined her fingers, thoughtful. Slowly, she said, "If Mr. Collins wishes to take me to wife, I daresay I must accept."

All was as Elizabeth had feared. "You most certainly must not. You will not be married to a gentleman who has not one agreeable quality, who has neither manner nor sense to recommend him."

"But Lizzy, think of Mama, and you, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia. If I marry our cousin, none of us need worry again. We will be looked after, should Papa leave us."

"Our father is in fine health. There is every chance you will meet some wonderful, handsome, wealthy gentleman and he will fall hopelessly in love with you, and you will secure our futures and your happiness, all at once."

Jane's smile was sad. "Is there? I concede as to the quality of Papa's health, but not to your estimation of my chances to find a husband. I am two and twenty and no gentleman has looked on me that way since I was fifteen."

“Yes,” Elizabeth exclaimed. “And that was in London, visiting the Gardiners.” She made a sweeping gesture, encompassing the neat fields, low rock walls, and line of trees. “There are no men here to fall in love with you. In London, there will be, and it is high time you went.”

“But Aunt and Uncle Gardiner have their own children to care for.”

“None of our cousins are old enough to be thinking about marriage, let alone out. They have time to do this for you, Jane. I am certain they will be happy to. I explained everything to Aunt Gardiner in my letter.”

Jane pursed her lips, thinking. “Mr. Collins is a perfectly amiable gentleman.”

“Jane, even you cannot truly think that,” Elizabeth exclaimed. “He is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man. You know he is, as well as I do; and you must feel, as well as I do, that the woman who marries him cannot have a proper way of thinking.”

Jane gave her a quelling look. “You are too harsh, Lizzy, but it is true I do not hold any affection for him beyond a cousinly concern. I would...I would prefer not to marry him.” She nodded along to her words as she spoke. “Yes. It may be that your solution is best. If Aunt Gardiner sends for me, and if Mr. Collins does not propose before I depart, all will be well.”

“I will ensure he does not,” Elizabeth said firmly.

Jane gave her a small, bemused smile at that, and turned to resume their walk.

“But you must try not to converse with him, or smile at him,” Elizabeth continued.

Jane halted and turned back. “I cannot be rude to our cousin. That would be unpardonable.”

“Please, do your best. This is very important. I shudder to think of the life you would have with that man and his vaunted patron, Sir Lewis de Bourgh.”

“You are being dramatic.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I do not believe so.” She looped an arm through Jane’s. “And even if I am, you must humor me in this. For if seeming amiable to our cousin will displease me, and seeming unamiable will displease him, you must choose who you wish to displease least, and it must be me. He is our cousin, but I am your sister and dearest friend, and have been for many years.”

Jane sighed as they started walking. “You are very correct, as you well know. If I cannot make all happy, I strive to create the least unhappiness possible.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Yes. I do know.”

They walked on, Elizabeth undoing the consternation caused by her manipulations by recounting a nonsensical report passed from their Aunt Phillips to Kitty and Lydia, and from them to her, about two members of the local militia stationed in the nearby village of Meryton who were vying for the affections of the innkeeper’s daughter.

After walking for some time, they returned to Longbourn to find the family at breakfast. Elizabeth could think of no reason not to dine with them. More than that, Elizabeth had roused her appetite with their walk and very much wished to eat, so they removed their outerwear and joined the others.

“Cousin Jane,” Mr. Collins said, standing to greet her. “I have saved you this place by me.”

“Oh no.” Elizabeth circled the table to take the seat. “Jane doesn’t care to sit here.” She gestured Jane to the remaining open chair, across the table and down from Mr. Collins.

Mr. Collins stared at Elizabeth in surprise. With a worried glance at Mrs. Bennet, Jane sat. From his end of the table, Mr. Bennet peered over the top of his paper, his amused gaze settling on Elizabeth. Kitty and Lydia exchanged knowing looks.

“I have seen Jane sit there many times,” their mother said. “What are you on about, Elizabeth? Give Jane your place this instant.”



Elizabeth shook her head. “There is a draft here. It gives Jane a chill.”

Mr. Collins retook his seat, frowning. “A chill is a trifling matter. That’s what Sir Lewis de Bourgh says. He would know. He has raised a strapping daughter.”

“I don’t feel a draft,” Mary, their middle sister, said from her place across from Mr. Collins.

“Well, I do,” Elizabeth said firmly.

“Me too,” Lydia pronounced. She gave a dramatic, obviously fake shiver.

“And me,” Kitty said, and promptly sneezed.

“You see?” Elizabeth gestured to Kitty. “The draft is making Kitty sneeze.”

“But she’s sitting by Jane, not you,” Mary protested.

From her end of the table, Mrs. Bennet glared at Elizabeth. “There is no draft in this room, nor any other in this house, and Jane is not susceptible to drafts, nor will you have Mr. Collins believing she is. I demand you vacate that seat this instant, Elizabeth.”

“Can we not have peace at the breakfast table?” Mr. Bennet drawled. He lowered his paper. “I forbid anyone to vacate any seat until they have eaten their fill. Now, if it is not too much trouble, a little calm discourse is in order while I read the paper.” He hoisted the page again, cutting him off from his wife’s angry scrutiny.

“Mr. Collins,” Mrs. Bennet said, turning to the gentleman. “Were you not saying only moments ago that you admire the embroidery on these serviettes? Jane’s work, I assure you. She is very skilled with a needle and would add such delicate and tasteful touches to a husband’s home.”

Jane angled her face to her plate, to which she’d yet to add any food, her cheeks pink.

Mr. Collins turned to her, opening his mouth to speak.

Elizabeth plucked up her serviette. "I daresay we each embroidered several, not only Jane. Please pass the rolls, Mr. Collins."

"Immediately, fair cousin," Mr. Collins replied before turning to address Mrs. Bennet. "Sir Lewis de Bourgh believes the introduction of serviettes to the English table to be pure frivolity. Sir Lewis is very knowledgeable about which trends of the fashionable are mere flights of fancy and which will endure. Serviettes, he advises me, are a trend that will quickly fade, crafted by the importers of New World cotton to rob the wealthy." He smiled at Jane. "But I daresay my fair cousin could easily turn her needle to worthwhile pursuits, rather than frivolity."

"I am not so certain," Elizabeth said, taking the rolls from Mary, who handed them across the table to her. "Jane adores embroidering serviettes. I have often heard her say that she prefers nothing more and would be loath to turn her needle to any other task."

"Jane has never said such a thing." Mrs. Bennet let out a huff. "Really, Elizabeth, you are quite contrary this morning. You must not have taken a long enough walk."

"No, I must not have, Mama. Tomorrow, Jane and I will walk for longer." Elizabeth would stay out of doors with Jane all day, every day, until their cousin departed, if that was what it took to keep her from Mr. Collins' clutches.

Mr. Bennet's paper rustled, and Elizabeth wondered if, hidden behind it, her father laughed.

Breakfast continued in this manner, Elizabeth quite enjoying her role, though Jane's obvious discomfort dampened her glee. Mrs. Bennet and Mary glowered at her as she parried attempts at conversation between Mr. Collins and Jane, but Kitty and Lydia spent much of the meal exchanging looks and giggling. Though Elizabeth could not see her father behind his newspaper, she had no doubt of his amusement. After breakfast, Elizabeth immediately reminded her mother that Mrs. Bennet had recommended she take a longer walk, and

hurried Jane away before anyone could raise a cry to join them.

They did not return until nearly two, Jane pleading exhaustion and hunger. Elizabeth owned up to both as well, and gave a silent prayer that Mrs. Gardiner would heed her cry for assistance. They returned to Longbourn a touch bedraggled and quite tired, the entrance hall feeling surprisingly warm after hours in the crisp November air. Jane released an audible sigh of relief as she unclasped her cloak.

“There you are,” Mrs. Bennet said brightly, appearing from the front parlor. “Jane, Mr. Collins has been waiting for you quite dedicatedly. He wishes a word.”

Jane cast Elizabeth a panicked look, her hands freezing in the act of removing her cloak.

Elizabeth stepped in front of her taller sister. “Mama, Jane is exhausted, and look at her. Her hem is all muddy and her hair is windblown. She must go up immediately and set herself right.”

“Mr. Collins will not mind. He has said many times that he admires a young lady who has a vigorous love of nature and a strong constitution, like Miss de Bourgh.”

“But Jane has neither.” Elizabeth gestured vaguely behind her. “Look at how nature has affected her. She is wilted.”

Mrs. Bennet’s gaze narrowed dangerously. “You seem quite lively still, Elizabeth. Perhaps I will suggest to Mr. Collins that you are precisely the sort of young lady Sir Lewis would laud.”

A shock of worry went through Elizabeth, but maybe she should encourage her mother’s threat? Unlike Jane, she would have no qualms about refusing their cousin, no matter how much security his hand offered her mother and siblings. She squared her shoulders, met her mother’s gaze and said, “Perhaps you should.”

Confusion stole the burgeoning triumph from Mrs. Bennet’s eyes. “I should?”

“If that is what you deem best, Mama, who am I to gainsay you?”

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes narrowed once more, but this time to form a look of confusion.

“I am afraid reports to Mr. Collins on either Jane’s or Elizabeth’s tolerance of the outdoors must be curtailed,” Mr. Bennet said from the hall leading to his library.

Elizabeth whirled. She took in the missive her father held with hope.

“How is that, Mr. Bennet?” Mrs. Bennet asked. “Speak plainly, please, for Mr. Collins waits in the front parlor and either Jane or Elizabeth is going in. I care not which.”

“Your motherly affection is touching, my dear, but the answer is neither. Both must go pack for London.”

“Both?” Elizabeth blurted, gratitude welling in her.

“For London?” Mrs. Bennet exclaimed.

“Yes. I have here a letter from their Uncle Gardiner so urgently requesting their addition to his household that I have decided to send them immediately. Within the hour. I ordered the carriage made ready.”

“But...but...” Mrs. Bennet sputtered. Gathering herself up, she said, “This late in the day? Surely, they’d better leave tomorrow.”

“They will depart before three and arrive in time for dinner.”

“But the carriage,” Mrs. Bennet protested. “By the time the horses rest, there will be no time for a return trip tonight.”

“I will pay for accommodations overnight.”

“I promised to join Lady Lucas for tea tomorrow.”

“I am certain the carriage will be back by then, my dear.” Mr. Bennet turned to where Elizabeth still stood before Jane. “Go make ready. There’s not a moment to spare.”

“Yes, Papa,” Elizabeth said. Whirling, she grabbed Jane’s arm, and her cloak when it slipped free, and bustled her sister up the steps to the sound of their mother launching into a tirade. Before she disappeared upstairs, Elizabeth looked back once to mouth, ‘thank you,’ over Mrs. Bennet’s head to her father. Mr. Bennet winked.

## CHAPTER THREE



The shadows around him cast long by the morning sun, Darcy strode through the market in Cheapside wearing a coat that had been made over and skillfully patched at the elbows, his worn cravat tied in a simple knot. The bag slung over his shoulder held his battered tea tin, already refilled, and now he sought a Scottish couple who sold the best morning rolls in London, both by their boasting and his estimation. With the profits from Mr. Bingley's purchase in his wallet, Darcy felt that a bit of celebration was in order. That meant rolls along with his usual loaf and the decadence of a nice, thick slab of butter.

Down the street, a large carriage rolled to a halt before one of the warehouses. A vaguely familiar man alighted, and Darcy tried to place him. His fine but austere attire and economy of movement marked him as a member of the merchant class. Possibly a patron of Darcy's shop and, if the grandeur of his carriage were any indication, also the proprietor of the building in front of which he stood.

The man turned back to the conveyance and handed down a handsome woman of middling years and equally fine garb, then a lovely young woman possessed of the sort of delicate beauty lauded by the *ton*. Were she the man's daughter, his wealth and her beauty would make her a fine prize to most men once of Darcy's acquaintance, despite what he expected to be ties to trade.

The man turned back yet again and handed down a second young woman. Not as tall as the first nor as fair of hair and eyes, she possessed almost sharp, spritely features and a palpable vivacity that called to Darcy, nearly making him stumble.

Looking past the gentleman and the other two women, the dark-haired young lady met Darcy's gaze as he came up the street, then tipped her head to the side in question of his regard. He knew he should stop staring, but somehow, he

couldn't seem to. Her eyebrows shot up and she nudged the blonde beside her.

Darcy wrenched his gaze away, embarrassed by his blatant attention. Head down, he concentrated on walking as his trajectory took him directly past them.

“Thank you, Uncle,” a soft feminine voice said.

“Yes, thank you, Uncle Gardiner.”

Even without looking, which he dared not do as he passed them, Darcy knew the second voice, a dulcet contralto, belonged to the darker-haired young woman. Though he longed to turn back and scrutinize her, he kept his feet moving down the street, seeking his nearly forgotten rolls. He had to hurry, he reminded himself, if he wanted time for a pleasant cup before opening his shop.

Still, those few overheard words played again and again in his mind as he moved away from the four. They were not daughters, then, the two beauties, but nieces. Refined, he would call their accents. If not the daughters of a gentleman, then of a man possessed of enough wealth to send his offspring to a fine finishing school or to hire the best tutors.

In view of what little he knew, he must extrapolate them to be similar to Wickham's Mr. Bingley. A generation removed from trade. Once, that would have seen him looking down his nose, for the Darcys of Pemberley did not associate with those who had even a hint of commerce about them, but in his years as a bookseller, Darcy had rubbed elbows with all manner of men. He found his erstwhile assumptions about what made a person worthy wryly amusing now.

After making his purchases, Darcy returned to his abode with his weekly bread and indulged in buttered rolls and tea, then went down to open his shop. He made his way among the shelves, dusting and ordering, always amazed at how as few customers as he had could create such chaos of his neat shelves. In particular, the sections on husbandry and fencing techniques had been astonishingly disarrayed by Mr. Bingley. How the man could create quite so much disorder in such a short time was beyond Darcy.

As he worked, despite all efforts to the contrary, the alluring voice and beguiling eyes of the dark-haired young woman filled his senses. In his mind, her cultured tones, possessed of a slight country accent, read each title he reshelfed or dusted, though he'd in life heard only five words from her. He knew he was being foolish. He simply hadn't encountered many refined females of late and this one had somehow shocked his senses, which was nonsense. Yet, even knowing that, he could not banish her.

The door opened, the bell there jangling, and Darcy dipped down behind the half-height shelves at the front of the shop to return a final few books to their places before the incoming customer could interrupt.

"This is the shop," a feminine voice said.

"The one from which Papa orders his books?" came the lovely contralto of earlier, suddenly real and present.

"Yes. Your uncle says it is the best bookshop in London."

"Are we here to pick up something for Papa?" a third female asked.

That voice belonged to the taller young woman, were he not mistaken. All three were here in his bookshop. The aunt, whom he assumed to be named Mrs. Gardiner, based on what he'd overheard on the street, must be the chaperone of the other two.

At least, he hoped they were in need of chaperoning. The thought that the fascinating young woman from the street might already be spoken for sent a strange panic through Darcy. He shoved the books he held into place and stood.

"Oh," the blonde exclaimed, clasping a hand to her bosom in shock.

The other two women turned. The bright, intelligent eyes of the brunette widened in recognition.

"Pardon me." Darcy dipped his head to them. "I did not mean to startle you. I am Mr. Darcy, proprietor."



“I find that much more encouraging than if you were Mr. Darcy, gentleman who enjoys hiding behind shelves and jumping out at ladies,” the brunette said.

“Elizabeth.” The young woman he’d startled issued forth her sister’s name in a tone of exasperated reprimand. She turned to Darcy with a pleasant smile. “I apologize as well, Mr. Darcy, for not seeing you there.”

Elizabeth. The name suited her. Lovely and sophisticated.

“You could not possibly have seen him,” Miss Elizabeth said. “He was lurking behind those shelves.”

“I was reshelving books,” Darcy protested, then collected his manners to address their aunt, for he really ought not to banter with young ladies to whom he hadn’t been introduced. “How may I be of assistance today?”

She shook her head. “I am here only as a chaperone to my nieces, Mr. Darcy.” Turning slightly, she addressed Miss Elizabeth. “You suggested a visit to the bookshop, did you not, Lizzy?”

Miss Elizabeth nodded. To Darcy, she said, “I would like to purchase a book for my father, as a Yuletide gift.”

So she had a father, living, and he enjoyed books. Darcy filed that away in the growing list of things he knew about Miss Elizabeth. “About what does your father prefer to read?”

Her eyes glinted with mischief, or perhaps anticipation. “That is precisely what you will tell me, sir, for while I take an interest in some of his collection, I do not by any means claim familiarity with the whole of it. Your knowledge will be much more extensive, if you keep good records or have a keen memory.” She gestured to herself and her sister. “Our father is Mr. Thomas Bennet of Longbourn, in Hertfordshire, where you send books several times a year. Therefore, we rely on you to select what would most please him.”

The daughter of a gentleman, then. Yes, a countrified one, likely with no connections in town, but a gentleman, nonetheless. More than that, an intelligent man, if his reading habits were any indication. “Indeed, I am quite familiar with

Mr. Bennet's preferences." In fact, Darcy already had several volumes earmarked for Mr. Bennet's contemplation. He often wrote to request a list of possible Yuletide gifts for himself.

"Oh, Lizzy, you are clever," Miss Bennet said.

Mrs. Gardiner smiled warmly at her niece. "You are a good daughter, Elizabeth. I admit, with your love of reading, I thought you had come to find volumes for yourself."

"Oh, I will look about while Mr. Darcy contemplates a gift for Papa, to be certain. I have saved quite a bit of my pin money for Christmas purchases. I daresay one or two may be gifts to myself."

If it wouldn't see him unable to purchase fuel and food, he would give her every book in the shop. "I will put together a selection of books that Mr. Bennet will like while you browse. Is there anything in particular you seek?" He longed for her to love literature.

"I do not have all of the Bard's works, so I may begin with your offerings in that regard." Miss Elizabeth looked to her sister. "What say you, Jane? Poetry with which I might regale you on our return trip?"

Miss Bennet smiled. "You must regale me with something from your selection, Lizzy, for I am not such a great reader as you and do not intend to purchase a volume for my own entertainment."

Darcy took in the perfectly stitched flowers along the hem, sleeves, and neck of Miss Bennet's gown, so skillfully done as to refresh a garment clearly out of date. "I have some fashion plates that might interest you, Miss—" He broke off, realizing that while he now knew their names, he had not been given leave to employ them.

"Miss Bennet," she supplied instantly, then flushed. "Oh, I do beg your pardon. That was inappropriate of me."

Mrs. Gardiner looked from Darcy to each of her nieces and back again. "Let me be so bold as to acquaint you with us, Mr. Darcy, as I suspect at least one of my nieces will appreciate your shop quite enough to return regularly while they visit. I

am Mrs. Gardiner, and these are my nieces on my husband's side, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

Darcy stepped free of the shelving to bow. He regretted the practiced, aristocratic gesture the moment he straightened, for Miss Elizabeth studied him through suddenly narrowed eyes. Attempting to ignore her scrutiny, he said, "Let me show you the fashion plates, Miss Bennet, Mrs. Gardiner. Just over here." He crossed to a low table deliberately placed near the entrance. In his experience, the sort of young ladies who sought fashion plates were loath to traverse too deeply into a bookshop.

With a cheerful smile, Miss Bennet followed him. She pulled a collection free and opened it to the first plate.

Mrs. Gardiner joined them but rather than browse the plates, she addressed Darcy. "My niece's fine idea can be applied to me as well, Mr. Darcy. I believe my husband patronizes your shop. If you have any recommendations for Mr. Edward Gardiner of Gracechurch Street, I would be pleased to hear them."

Darcy dipped his head in acknowledgement of that. "I will delve into my records and form a selection for you as well, madam."

"Thank you."

As she finally joined her niece in browsing recent fashions, Darcy turned to Miss Elizabeth. Endeavoring for a calm façade so as not to reveal his eagerness to speak with her, he asked, "The Bard is your preference? The entirety of his works are yours to choose from."

"The entirety? How very thorough of you."

He led the way into the tall shelves. "I endeavor to keep at least one of each of Shakespeare's works on hand, although I cannot claim they are of the same edition." Newly bound books being expensive, Darcy generally stocked his shelves with volumes obtained from estate sales or pawned by unappreciative inheritors.

“But if I purchase one, will that not leave you with a gap in your inventory?”

“Yes, but also with the quest for a replacement, generally a more engaging pursuit than continual dusting.”

She chuckled, a warm, rich sound that reverberated through him. Darcy glanced back in the hope of glimpsing her smile, only to see her trail the tip of a gloved finger along one of the shelves as they walked.

She caught him looking and lifted her hand for examination. “I could not take you at your word, for something about you speaks of a man who does not dust, but I see I should have.” She turned her hand for him to see. “Not a speck.”

“I would hope not. I did these shelves only yesterday.”

“So if I search, I may find what needs cleaning? Should I torment you by seeking it?”

“Torment as you will, but first...” He turned to one of the shelves. “Here we are. Shakespeare.”

Miss Elizabeth smiled and came to stand beside him, unwittingly availing him of the mingled scents of lemon and rosewater. “You do have quite the collection. And three copies of *Macbeth*, I see, which is precisely the volume I seek. My mother has taken it into her head not to allow the Scottish play into our home, believing the story to be cursed.”

“And you are of a different opinion, Miss Elizabeth?” he asked, unable to resist the use of her name.

She nodded. “Unless you can convince me that all of the Bard’s works hold some magical property, I refuse to believe that one can.” She studied the shelves and then went up on tiptoe, tapping the bottom edge of a spine. “What is this?”

Darcy reached up to extract the volume, resolutely ignoring how near to her that brought him. He could so easily dip his head down to kiss the nape of her neck.

But he wouldn’t.

“Castle Rackrent,” he replied, stepping back before she could turn. He proffered the book, *Castle Rackrent* almost a shield between them.

She turned the plain-looking volume over in her hands. “What is it about?”

“The mismanagement and ruin of an estate.”

“Is it interesting?”

“It is both comical and tragic.”

“Hmm.” She looked up, meeting his gaze. “Have you read every book here?”

Darcy smiled slightly. “Not the fashion plates.”

Elizabeth laughed and returned *Castle Rackrent* to him. “I am intrigued, but I am resolved to procure and devour *Macbeth* while visiting my aunt and uncle, and so I shall.”

“Elizabeth,” Mrs. Gardiner called. “The carriage has arrived, and your uncle is waiting. Have you and Mr. Darcy found what you need?”

“He is early,” Elizabeth murmured. She pulled free one of the copies of *Macbeth*, the oldest of the editions Darcy had, and stepped from behind the shelf. “We haven’t even begun looking at books for Papa yet, or for Uncle Gardiner.”

Suddenly feeling the impropriety of being secluded behind a bookshelf with a young miss, even if Elizabeth obviously did not, Darcy replaced *Castle Rackrent* and stepped around her so he, too, could see Mrs. Gardiner, and be seen by her. “If it is no trouble to you, I can put together selections for both Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner. I will have them ready tomorrow, or at your earliest convenience.”

Elizabeth gave him a grateful look. “That would be very kind of you, Mr. Darcy. I am not certain if we will return tomorrow, but certainly soon.” She held up *Macbeth*, wagging the volume at him. “Let me purchase my cursed play, then, so as not to keep my uncle waiting.”

It was on his tongue to make a gift of the book, but he bit back the words. Not because he required the funds, but

because he was a bookseller, not a swain. *Miss Elizabeth*, and he forced himself to add that appellation even in the privacy of his mind, stood before him an innocent patron of a shop. She sought entertainment and knowledge in the form of literature, not unsubtle attentions from a man she had no thought would dare pursue her. Nor who had any right to do so, insofar as she knew.

Or insofar as he knew, for bereft of his father's good graces, what did Darcy have to offer a young lady of gentle birth? The promise that someday, if Wickham hadn't drained the family coffers, Darcy might have an estate again, upon the sad event of his father's demise? What would he do in the meantime, install her in his room above the bookshop? And what wrath would the additional defiance of marriage bring down on them and on her relations, from both George Darcy and Sir Lewis, if not the Earl of Matlock as well?

"Mr. Darcy?" Miss Elizabeth waggled the book again. "May I purchase this copy of *Macbeth*?"

He gave a slight bow. "You certainly may, Miss Elizabeth. Right this way." He gestured to the front of the shop and let her lead on, returning to the safety of her aunt and sister, though she didn't realize she'd left it.

Darcy tried not to take in the sway of Elizabeth's hips as she went, and wondered what was wrong with him. Ignoring her person should not be so difficult, and what had his thoughts of a moment ago been, except madness? Had he truly entertained even the fleeting idea of wedding a woman he'd just met?

Had he lost his mind? Been too long alone?

Or was Miss Elizabeth Bennet the most beguiling creature he had ever set eyes on?

## CHAPTER FOUR



Seated in her uncle's carriage, Elizabeth smoothed her fingers over the cover of her new copy of *Macbeth*, her thoughts on the man who'd sold her the book. He'd been so gentlemanly, this bookshop proprietor. If they'd met under other circumstances, she would deem him among the *ton's* elite. Could he be? It seemed rather unlikely, given his reworked clothing and his well-ordered shop. And yet, there was something about him...

Not that his standing mattered insofar as Elizabeth was concerned because he was obviously infatuated with Jane, as gentlemen usually were. Elizabeth hadn't missed how he'd been staring in Jane's direction when she'd first spotted him on the street, or how he hadn't revealed himself in the shop until after Jane spoke. Then, as if to drive home the point, he'd seen to Jane's needs before hers, astutely assessing her sister and finding something of interest for her in his shop.

Elizabeth didn't begrudge Jane a happy union, or her sweet temperament and lovely looks. It would simply be nice if, for once, someone saw her as more than second choice. Well, unless that someone was Mr. Collins. She wrinkled her nose.

"Elizabeth, dear, are you well?" Aunt Gardiner asked, causing Uncle Gardiner and Jane to turn to her, too. "I daresay London isn't as fresh as Hertfordshire, but you pulled the most awful face."

Elizabeth chuckled. "My apologies. That face was not for London, in which I am very happy to be. I merely contemplated our cousin, Mr. Collins, and the offer he meant to tender."

"Is the man truly that insufferable?" Uncle Gardiner asked.

"Your letter seemed quite dire," Aunt Gardiner added.

"He is a sycophant with no opinions of his own, and yet devotedly opinionated," Elizabeth said. "Moreover, he insults at every opportunity, without the intelligence to see that he

does, and I am rendered quite certain that he doesn't believe female heads contain thoughts or reason. He would make the absolute worst sort of husband. I am quite devastated to know that Longbourn will be his someday."

Mrs. Gardiner's eyebrows went up. "That does sound quite terrible. What do you think, Jane?"

"I think..." Jane looked about at the three of them, her eyes wide. She drew her shoulders back and sat up straighter. "I think he would make me unhappy, and Lizzy miserable."

Everyone stared at her in shock. That was the least amiable opinion Elizabeth had ever heard from her sister.

"But I trust none of you will ever repeat such sentiments," Jane added, flushing. "I am certain there are young ladies who would find him a perfectly acceptable husband."

"Well, then," Aunt Gardiner said. "I am pleased we have the two of you here, safe from danger. We will have to see what might be done to alleviate the potential disaster of Mr. Collins for good."

"You mean, find us husbands?" Jane asked, sounding hopeful.

So, her sister tired of life at Longbourn? Elizabeth suppressed a sigh. She'd always known they could not remain there forever, best friends, leading their quiet existence. Jane would want a husband, a home, and a family. Elizabeth did as well, she supposed. She simply wasn't ready for her world to change quite yet. But then, Jane was two years older.

"I do mean find you husbands, yes," Mrs. Gardiner said firmly. "It seems to me the only way to end the risk of seeing either of you married badly is to ensure you are married well."

Elizabeth smiled slightly. "Maybe Jane. She is destined to marry a wealthy, amiable fellow." Not a bookseller in Cheapside. "I, however, reserve the right to marry as poorly as I choose, all in the name of ridiculous notions of affection and independence. And then I shall be Jane's poor relation, and she will send her extra pin money to me."



“You will marry quite well indeed, Elizabeth, if you will but curb your wit long enough for a gentleman to come to appreciate you,” Aunt Gardiner said.

Uncle Gardiner snorted, holding in a chuckle.

“I would rather find a gentleman who appreciates my wit, than surprise him with such an unwanted trait after the wedding,” Elizabeth countered.

“She has you there, my dear,” Mr. Gardiner said, giving in to his amusement.

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. “Indeed, and I cannot help but agree. Perhaps a compromise in that you at least give gentlemen a sporting chance? You have a quick, sharp mind, Elizabeth, and an even quicker tongue.”

“I will do my best, but it is not my fault if the gentlemen I meet have slow, dull minds.” Before her aunt could issue another rebuke, Elizabeth continued, “And it is Jane who we must truly think of. She is the one keen to marry.”

“And what is it you seek in a husband, Jane, other than wealth and amiability?” Aunt Gardiner asked.

That devolved into a debate about the desirability and tolerability of traits, such as horsemanship or a proclivity for wagering, and of assets, such as London homes and country seats. Elizabeth returned to studying her new book and pondering Mr. Darcy. Given Jane’s list, coaxed from her by Aunt Gardiner and more extensive than Elizabeth would have suspected, a bookseller was not what Jane sought. Nor would Mr. Bennet be pleased to give his eldest, most beautiful and beloved daughter over to a man of such poor prospects. Everyone knew Jane was meant for more.

Thoughts of Mr. Darcy remained with Elizabeth through the afternoon and evening. Finally, when she and Jane climbed into the too-small bed they shared in the Gardiners’ lone guest chamber, Elizabeth couldn’t help but speak of him. “What did you think of Mr. Darcy?”

“Who?” Jane asked, fluffing her pillow.

“Mr. Darcy. The bookshop proprietor.”

“The bookshop proprietor? Why would I think anything of him at all?”

Elizabeth turned to the candle beside the bed, hers to snuff as Jane slept against the wall. She plunged them into darkness and said, “Because he was uncommonly handsome, and quite refined of manner. Particularly for a shopkeeper.”

“Oh, but Lizzy, you cannot look at a bookseller that way.”

“How can I not? That would be to deny the evidence of my senses.”

Jane shifted. “I never permit myself to think of a gentleman in any way. Nor will I, until I know there is a future between us. I do not believe I would survive the heartbreak of coming to care for someone I could not marry.”

“Marry? Future?” Elizabeth laughed. “I merely meant to point out that he was quite worth looking at.”

“Well, that I will allow.” Jane’s voice spoke of a smile Elizabeth couldn’t see in the dark.

“Then you did notice,” Elizabeth exclaimed, triumphant.

“Certainly. What female wouldn’t?”

“And he’s so upright and tall,” Elizabeth continued. “And very knowledgeable about books. At least, he seemed to be about the ones in his shop, of which there are rather a lot.”

“Elizabeth Bennet, are you infatuated with a bookseller?” Jane asked in a teasing voice. “What would Mama say?”

“She would say I must give up reading and never purchase another book again,” Elizabeth replied with a laugh.

“Well, that would be a bit much, but she would be right that you shouldn’t encourage such thoughts.” Jane settled back against her pillow. “You would never be happy with a bookseller.”

“And why not?” Elizabeth asked, half amused and half annoyed. “I adore books.”

“Yes, but you cannot eat them, or turn them into a country cottage, or use them to feed and clothe your children.”

“You can read them to your children.”

“Yes. In the daytime, as you would not be able to afford candles.”

“Really, Jane, owning a bookshop cannot provide a life quite so mean as that.”

“Did you see how thin the fabric of his coat was? The patches on the elbows?”

Elizabeth had, but did not care. The more Jane spoke, the more determined Elizabeth became to learn more about Mr. Darcy when next she visited his shop. She’d jested earlier, in the carriage, about the right to marry poorly, but she would defend that right. Did not an intelligent, diligent, well-mannered man like Mr. Darcy deserve consideration? “Uncle Gardiner is in trade, and Mama comes from it.”

Jane yawned. “But being in trade like Uncle Gardiner is and selling books are a far cry from one another.” Silence stretched between them and then Jane added, “Maybe we shouldn’t go back to the bookshop.”

Not go back? “Mr. Darcy said he would set aside books for us to look at, for Papa for Christmas, and for Uncle Gardiner. We must go back. Not to do so would be quite rude.”

“Yes, but is it, well, dangerous for you?”

“Dangerous? Picking out books?” Elizabeth chuckled. “I am only in danger of disappointing our father with my selection.”

“I mean, if you are serious in your esteem of this bookseller.”

“You act as if I have declared my undying affection for Mr. Darcy.”

“You sound almost as if you have.”

Elizabeth turned onto her side, facing Jane in the dark. “I did not know you could be quite such a snob.”

“I know you prefer to behave otherwise, but I am your older sister,” Jane said. “It’s for me to look after you,

particularly when we are away from Mama. It is not snobbery to want my sister to know happiness in her union.”

“But can we, in all honesty, say that wealth and standing equate with happiness?”

Jane fluffed her pillow again. “Really, Lizzy, I know you enjoy being contrary, but can you resume your pursuit of argument tomorrow? I want to sleep.”

Elizabeth frowned. Jane was correct. Elizabeth did like to take the opposing side. She enjoyed a lively discussion. Yet, something about Jane’s dismissal of Mr. Darcy truly aggravated her.

But why? Jane had been raised her whole life to expect to marry a man of a certain wealth and standing. More than that, she knew it to be her duty to their family. If Jane could make peace with such hopes, why should Elizabeth resent her for doing so? Would her sister’s life be made better if she ignored expectations and fell in love with the owner of a shop?

Would Elizabeth’s?

## CHAPTER FIVE



Darcy stood behind the counter in his shop composing a letter to Georgiana on paper he once wouldn't have considered fit for his valet to use. Now, after so long at odds with his father, it was the best he could afford, and a bit of a splurge. He hoped fervently that this time she would deign to reply. More than fine clothes, carriages, and rich food, he missed his sister. He'd rarely spoken to her since he finished at university and George Darcy issued his ultimatum, Uncle Lewis and Lord Matlock flanking him and nodding along in agreement. Since that day, only his cousin Richard came to visit with any consistency, but only infrequently as he served as a colonel in the regulars.

But Georgiana used to write, at least. At first, quite a great deal, principally before the incident with her imagined illness and the treachery there. Before then, she'd written twice weekly, begging him to marry Anne and come home. She'd promised to help Anne become a proper young lady. No more hunting, shooting, and going about in hessians like Sir Lewis. Only slippers and Italian lessons, as if Anne would ever put up with any of that.

What none of them seemed to grasp was that Darcy didn't begrudge Anne her ways. He quite liked his cousin. In their youth, she'd been at least as much fun to gallivant about the countryside with as Richard. No one could climb a tree like Anne, or catch a trout as large, or take down a goose with as precise a shot. But none of that meant Darcy was in love with her.

His gaze swept over his rows of shelves. His neatly ordered books. He had read nearly every one, as he often had little else to do, and many of them spoke of love. The sorts of books most gentlemen once of his acquaintance would mock. Miss Elizabeth too, were he any judge. In the past, Darcy would have agreed that novels of the Gothic bent were frivolous, silly, and quite possibly a waste of ink and paper.

But the more he read, the more he understood the promise of hope they offered. The escape into a world where love could be found. Where such joy must be fought for and held onto with all your strength, for happiness was fleeting in this life. What had begun as a show of defiance against his father, the selling of his personal possessions to purchase this shop, had become the firmest resolution Darcy had ever made. He would marry for love, not for his father's and uncle's money.

Not that he had any opportunity to do so. Not once his three powerful relations, one a peer, made it clear to the world that Darcy was not to be invited anywhere, nor his shop patronized. Fortunately, there were many landed men outside the sphere of the fashionable set, like Mr. Bennet, and many of the wealthy merchant class, like the Gardiners, who either did not know of the edict delivered by Darcy's relations, or simply didn't care. That meant his shop did well enough, but that didn't help with the lack of eligible ladies.

Until Miss Elizabeth Bennet walked in.

When would she be back? What if she forgot her quest to select a gift for her father? He had Mr. Bennet's information. He could go to Hertfordshire and find her, which would be madness after one interaction, and because she seemed to be visiting her relations in London. He'd searched through his records for Mr. Edward Gardiner and found the man's previous purchases and his address. Gardiner seemed to prefer books on history or adventure on the high seas.

Darcy could take the books he'd selected for Elizabeth's father and uncle over to the Gardiners...which would be deemed quite forward as they had agreed to return to his shop to make their selections.

He looked down at the page before him. He could mention Elizabeth to Georgiana. Ask for her advice.

No. That would border on madness as well, because his sister might tell their father, Wickham, or even their uncles. Instead, Darcy would simply prattle on about his shop and his efforts to procure more books, and hope his sister had it in her heart to pen him a reply.

The door swung open, setting the bell ringing. Darcy looked up from his letter again.

Mr. Bingley entered, followed by two women and another gentleman. All were very fashionable, particularly the women. Snooty, he would call them, with their carefully practiced movements and the angle of their chins as they took in his shop as if vaguely offended by all they surveyed. He supposed they were the sort of ladies he would once have been a companion to. Likely even looked down on himself, as they bore resemblance to Mr. Bingley, and he was connected to trade.

“You see?” Mr. Bingley executed a slow turn, arms out like a conjurer. “A perfectly lovely shop despite your opinions about the location, sisters.” He came full circle, spotted Darcy, and strode to the counter. “Mr. Darcy, how fares the day? I have come for more books.”

“Mr. Darcy?” the taller and younger of the two women repeated, following Mr. Bingley to the counter. Her narrow, pinched features perked up and she sniffed, like a hound hunting for wealth and connections. “Are you at all related to Mr. Wickham’s Mr. Darcy in Derbyshire?”

As curdling as he found that description, Darcy kept his expression neutral. “Some would say so.”

She leaned forward, a predatory glint in her eyes. “Would you happen to know where one can find Mr. Darcy’s missing heir? I would adore being the instrument of his reunification with his family.”

Darcy didn’t think she would, as she would be disappointed either by wedding him and ending up with only a bookshop, or delivering him into matrimony with Anne. She was also forcing him to prevaricate, something he abhorred, but he wouldn’t shatter his happy, if stunted, existence by admitting the truth to this obviously mercenary female. “I am not privy to the details of Mr. George Darcy’s affairs.”

“But Mr. Darcy the younger?” she pressed. “Have you at least seen him in London?”

“Come on, Caroline, leave off,” Mr. Bingley said.

The woman, and Darcy could only assume her to be Miss Caroline Bingley, pressed, “Have you?”

“Yes. On occasion.” In fact, he’d been staring out of the mirror that very morning as Darcy shaved.

“You see, Charles? Louisa?” Miss Bingley crowed triumphantly as she whirled from Darcy, his usefulness ended. “He is in London. I told you that rumor he is on the Continent couldn’t be true. No Darcy of Pemberley would hare off to France.” She spun back. “Mr. Darcy, if you see your relation, you must send word to me at once. I am residing with the Hursts.” She gestured to the other woman, who appeared to be her older sister and named Louisa Hurst. Mrs. Hurst, who browsed the fashion plates, did not look up. The stouter gentleman, presumably Mr. Hurst, had ambled off deeper into the shop. Miss Bingley rattled off an address in a fashionable, if old, part of London.

“Caroline,” Mr. Bingley said with mild exasperation. “This is a bookshop, not the Bow Street headquarters. I have come to speak with Mr. Darcy about books. While I realize you have no use for them, I would like to purchase some.”

She narrowed her gaze at her brother. “I have every use for them. I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading.”

“Then go read something.”

“Caroline, come look at these plates with me,” Mrs. Hurst called. “They are quite up to date.”

With a parting glare at her brother, Miss Bingley swept away to join her sister.

“Sorry about that. Unmarried miss and all,” Bingley said. “Now, on to important matters. Those books you recommended are top notch. Even Hurst was impressed, and he’s a great one for reading. Mostly the paper, but he declared them quite the thing, so I’ve come for more.”

“More books on the same topics?”



Mr. Bingley frowned, pondering. "One or two, perhaps. But one needs a selection, doesn't one? For it to be all proper."

"For what to be all proper?" Darcy asked, wondering if Mr. Bingley always spoke in incomplete thoughts.

"My collection. I'm purchasing a home, you see. In London, most likely. Can't presume on Hurst forever. I thought somewhere in the country would suit me, so I could get my hand in land management like a proper gentleman, but Wickham pointed out how absolutely lacking in society and activity the country is most of the year, so now I'm at sixes and sevens. Still need a respectable library, either way."

"Indeed," Darcy inserted when Mr. Bingley finally paused for breath. Should he point out that Wickham had less care for Bingley's happiness in his choice of residences than for if the man were conveniently located? Undoubtedly, Wickham preferred to keep Mr. Bingley in London to employ him as his own private bank account.

"I still say you should strive for a country manor, Charles," Miss Bingley said from where she stood at the front of the shop by one of the large windows, looking through fashion plates. "A proper gentleman has a country manor. In Derbyshire."

"In Derbyshire?" Darcy repeated before he could halt the words.

Miss Bingley looked up. "Yes. Near Mr. Wickham's Mr. Darcy. Mr. Wickham is to inherit it all, if the prodigal son does not return, so to speak, and he and I are on very good terms."

Ice filled Darcy's veins. His father had named Wickham his heir? That could not be true.

"But he's nothing, Caroline," Mrs. Hurst said in a low voice. "I know he's amiable and well dressed, but he is the son of a steward."

"He could be the son of a streetsweeper. Once he has Pemberley, no one will care. We came up. I am the perfect person to ensure he does as well. And besides, you know the

rumors.” She lowered her voice to an easily audible whisper. “About his true parentage.”

Rumors about Wickham’s parentage? With his penchant for lies, Darcy could easily guess the nature and source of such rumors. Nor were either of Wickham’s parents alive to refute them. Darcy ground his teeth.

Mr. Bingley turned to his sister. “I say, if you want to gossip, do it over tea,” he said, a touch of annoyance in his voice, before returning his attention to Darcy. “Now, where were we?”

“Books,” Darcy offered, struggling for equilibrium. What evil was Wickham up to? Should he close his shop and return to Pemberley?

His memory snapped back to Georgiana’s imagined illness. Six months after he’d purchased the bookshop, Wickham had brought word from Darcy’s father that Georgiana was quite ill. Darcy had rushed home, only to find the illness was an invention of his father and Sir Lewis, who had an irate Anne, a special license, and a priest waiting. From the guilty look on Georgiana’s face, she’d known of the scheme, although Anne had seemed oblivious. She’d later confided that Sir Lewis had brought her to Pemberley with the promise of a hunting party.

Anne would be a staunch ally and a good source of information, if he were to write to her. Any communicate would be seen as an admission of an engagement, however, so he dared not. He would write to Richard, though, and hope a letter sent to Matlock House would eventually reach him wherever he might be stationed. If only Anne would marry, everything would be solved, but she showed no inclination to do so. And who would she wed? Few men would tolerate a wife who was a better shot, a better rider, and an all-around more vital person than they were.

Regardless of Anne’s marriage prospects, Darcy wouldn’t be tricked into racing home again. Last time, Sir Lewis had advocated physical detention, but Darcy’s father had disagreed. Now, after years of resistance on his part, Darcy wouldn’t be surprised if desperation drove his father to employ

lock and key. Well, Darcy wouldn't be tricked into a gilded cage.

"...and possibly something lofty as well. Poetry or some such," Mr. Bingley was saying. "What do you think, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy stared at the amiable young man before him and rapidly collected his thoughts. "Well, a good library should include a myriad of topics, both to broaden one's mind and to entertain guests, but the majority should be made up of volumes which engage you, as they will be yours, to be read for your enjoyment."

Miss Bingley nudged her sister and said in false *sotto voce*, "How many books can one read on fencing?"

"I daresay one would be one too many," Mrs. Hurst replied with a smirk.

Not bothering to look up from the fashion plates she perused, Miss Bingley raised her voice to add, "Charles only likes books with pictures, Mr. Darcy."

Women such as Mr. Bingley's sisters were something Darcy definitely didn't miss about his old life, although he imagined they would behave quite differently if they didn't view him as having little more significance than furniture.

He turned back to Mr. Bingley. "What are your interests, Mr. Bingley? Are they limited to fencing, pugilism, and horseflesh?"

"Well," he drawled, looking about. He seemed almost confused, as if no one had ever posed the question before. "I enjoy dancing. Give me a lively country dance any day."

He paused, shifting a glance to his sisters, who were indeed rolling their eyes at each other.

"Let me show you this section." Darcy came around the counter and led the way deeper into the shop, where the shelves were double high. Once there, he turned to Mr. Bingley. "What about, in addition to more volumes on your three favorite topics, you add books on husbandry and land management? To prepare for your eventual estate. I also have

a fine collection of travel journals, to engender a broader perspective on our world, even if you do not plan to travel yourself. And, certainly, a smattering of history, the Greeks, the Bard, and something modern. Perhaps Byron?”

Mr. Bingley nodded along, his expression grateful and his shoulders dropping to a less aggrieved angle. “Yes. That all sounds just the thing, doesn’t it? Have to have the Greeks. Ah, in Greek, are they?”

“Let us begin with translated texts.”

Mr. Bingley nodded again. “How many books, then, should a gentleman have to appear respectable in his interest?”

“You should begin with no more than twenty volumes. A library is to be the work of a man’s lifetime, not simply a picturesque display. You should at least attempt to read each volume, and then you may add more in the areas where your attention is engaged.”

“Right,” Mr. Bingley agreed. He looked about. “So, how do I select them?”

“I will put together a selection for you to consider, but in the future, once you have a better understanding of what you prefer, you may want to choose books yourself, or for me to offer a condensed number of options in keeping with your interests.” Because he felt it bore repeating, Darcy reiterated, “Your library is for your enjoyment.”

“Solid advice, that,” the gentleman who’d accompanied Mr. Bingley and his sisters into the shop said, coming around the shelf, two volumes on history in hand. “Hurst’s the name,” he added, although Darcy had already guessed as much.

Darcy dipped his head. “Mr. Darcy, at your service, Mr. Hurst.”

“I’d like to purchase these. For my collection.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Bingley turned to his brother-by-marriage. “I can’t carry twenty books. We could load them into the carriage?”

“If I may, Mr. Bingley,” Darcy inserted. “I will put together the twenty or so that I believe best suit. You can return to look them over, to make your final choices and ensure they meet with your approval. Then, once you purchase your new home, I can have them delivered.”

Mr. Bingley grinned. “A splendid idea.”

Darcy led Mr. Hurst and the amiable Mr. Bingley back to the front of the shop. Hurst purchased his two volumes and Miss Bingley bought half a dozen fashion plates. Mr. Bingley, though Darcy protested, insisted on putting a deposit on his new collection. All in all, a very profitable day. Darcy only hoped that Wickham didn't discover what good clients he'd brought in. If he did, he'd undoubtedly add a fresh lie to his ongoing theater of deceit to prevent the Bingleys and Hursts from returning.

After making a note about which books to put aside for Mr. Bingley, a pile that would be quite a bit larger than the ones he'd already set aside for Miss Elizabeth's and Mrs. Gardiner's perusal, Darcy returned to his letter writing. He finished Georgiana's, then pulled out a second precious sheet of paper. Hopefully, his questions and worries would reach Richard before the fruition of whatever new evil Wickham plotted.

## CHAPTER SIX



Elizabeth couldn't deny a thrill of excitement as she, Jane, and their attending maid entered the bookshop. The thrill, she felt quite certain, was because she loved books and she looked forward to seeing which ones Mr. Darcy had selected for her father. Any elation she felt about being in the bookshop was most definitely not for the slightly mysterious, exceedingly handsome man who stood behind the counter.

He looked up as they entered, the pages before him speaking of a letter or some sort of record keeping, and nodded in greeting. Setting aside his quill, he removed a pair of wire-framed spectacles and placed them on the counter by the inkwell. "Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth. How pleasant to see you once more in my shop."

Elizabeth tried not to resent him welcoming Jane first even though she'd entered second, because propriety could be construed as demanding he address her elder sister more promptly, and greeted, "Mr. Darcy. I trust you have had time to assemble a selection of books from which we might choose gifts for our father?"

"Gifts?" Jane murmured.

"Gifts?" Mr. Darcy unwittingly echoed. "You would like to gift your father a book as well, Miss Bennet?"

Why must he sound so happy that Jane might buy a book?

Jane looked from him to Elizabeth and back. "I had not yet decided," she temporized.

Mr. Darcy came around the counter, appearing quite pleased. "Because I have the most perfect set for Mr. Bennet, based on his previous purchases, but I did not put it aside as it contains two volumes and I did not wish to press you, Miss Elizabeth, into so costly a purchase. Let me fetch them to add to your selection." He dipped his head to them again and hurried deeper into the shop.

Jane drew Elizabeth away from the maid, who waited by the door, and said, "I wasn't going to buy Papa a book."

Her voice low, Elizabeth replied, "But Mr. Darcy must need the funds, if his coat is any indication. And look how pleased he is. Besides, Papa loves books. What else would you give him?"

Jane's brow crinkled in thought. "Perhaps you are correct."

"To be certain I am."

Mr. Darcy returned carrying two thick volumes. He held them up as he drew near. "The complete compendium of English, Welsh and Scottish sheep, goats, cows and horses, barring the new racing breeds. Am I correct in my estimation that Mr. Bennet does not have a strong interest in horse racing?"

"You are, indeed," Elizabeth said, amused at the very idea. "He is of much too pragmatic a bent to breed horses for sport rather than work."

Mr. Darcy nodded. "I thought as much." He went around the counter and set down the books, then turned to the shelves behind him to take up a short stack of more, which he placed before them. "Here are all the works I currently possess that would interest Mr. Bennet."

Noting several volumes still piled on the shelf, Elizabeth said, "Our aunt could not join us today, but I am certain she will return to select a book for Uncle Gardiner soon." Aunt Gardiner had embarked on a search for a governess for Elizabeth's eldest two cousins, eight and six. They more and more ran ragged their nurse, who had the two young boys, four and three, to look after as well.

With a wave of his hand, Mr. Darcy replied, "It is not yet December. Mrs. Gardiner's selection is not urgent."

Elizabeth inclined her head in acknowledgment of that and took up the first of the volumes Mr. Darcy had selected for her father. She read the title and flipped through a few pages, then handed the book to Jane before taking up the next. In addition to the two-volume set, there were three books about matters of

husbandry and land management, one on Greek philosophy, and a fifth pertaining to the history of the British Isles.

After handing the final one to Jane to examine, Elizabeth raised her gaze to meet Mr. Darcy's. "You have made this more difficult than I anticipated, sir."

"Then I have done my job well."

She chuckled. "Too well. How am I to choose?" She turned to her sister. "Jane, what do you think?"

Jane set down the history book. "I think that you and Mr. Darcy are correct about the two-volume set. Papa would enjoy it very much and is less likely to order it as it is more extravagant. We should each buy him one volume."

"And give them to him out of order for our amusement," Elizabeth said by way of agreement.

"That would be for your amusement," Jane replied.

Mr. Darcy stacked up the other books. "I do believe you have made the best choice."

Elizabeth looked at the stack he held, annoyed he'd addressed those words to Jane. "I wish we could purchase more of them."

He set the stack aside and said, "I have made note of them. If you ever care to purchase another for your father, simply write to me."

Had he just invited her to correspond with him?

"Ah, that is, write to the bookshop," he added hastily, his thoughts obviously mirroring hers. He cleared his throat. "Would you like me to wrap these together or separately?"

"Separately, please," Jane said, opening her reticule to find her money.

Mr. Darcy accepted their payment and wrapped their books, all while Elizabeth sought about for more to say. Usually, she had no trouble conversing, but everything she thought of mentioning to Mr. Darcy seemed trite. In a drawing room, she would begin with the weather, but that now struck



her as a completely silly topic. They could all see out the large front windows of the shop. She thought hard, but the art of conversing had quite deserted her.

“There you are,” he said as he set the second paper-wrapped volume on the counter. “And if by some coincidence Mr. Bennet writes to me requesting this set, I will be certain to delay him until after Christmas.”

“Why not simply tell him you do not have it?” Jane asked.

“Because he might contact a different bookseller,” Elizabeth supplied before Mr. Darcy could.

“Precisely,” he said, meeting her gaze.

A jolt went through Elizabeth and her power of speech immediately deserted her again.

Jane let out a sigh.

Alarmed at what her sister might see on her face, Elizabeth turned to her.

But Jane’s attention was fixed on the clock set on one of the shelves behind Mr. Darcy. “That took much less time than we anticipated, but if we walk back, we cannot say we will arrive in time to keep them from setting out to collect us.” Jane looked about with a slight frown. “I suppose we might look at more books.”

“Then you are not opposed to walking?” Mr. Darcy asked. “I intended to close shortly and visit the open-air market. I am afraid I am not much of a cook, and I buy meals almost daily.”

“Do you mean we must leave or you will go hungry?” Elizabeth asked with faint amusement. After they’d purchased two books, he meant to cast them out?

“That would be an exaggeration. Rather, I thought you might enjoy accompanying me to the market and back.”

“That sounds delightful.” The words were out of Elizabeth’s mouth with no thought, only certainty.

“I do not know if that would be appropriate,” Jane said, worry in her voice.

“How so?” Elizabeth gestured to the maid. “We are together and escorted, and we will be in public for all to see.”

“It is not Mr. Darcy’s presence but the market that concerns me,” Jane said quickly, her cheeks tinged with pink. “We truly should not be wandering about Cheapside.”

“And what is so wrong with Cheapside?” Elizabeth countered. “You moments ago considered walking back. Not to mention that Uncle Gardiner works here, and his home is but one street removed, and we are residing there.”

“The market is a perfectly respectable place,” Mr. Darcy said. “Many women with households to run visit almost daily.” His expression very serious, he added, “Even the wives of gentlemen.”

Though nothing about his mien or tone suggested it, Elizabeth felt that Jane’s reluctance amused him.

Jane must have felt it as well, for her frown deepened, the expression strange on her usually placid face. “I am not certain.”

“But we must, Jane,” Elizabeth urged, both eager to spend more time in Mr. Darcy’s company and to see the famed London open-air market. “It will be an adventure, and I truly cannot see any harm with both Aunt Gardiner’s maid and Mr. Darcy to watch over us.”

Emotions warred on Jane’s face. “Oh, very well, but please do not tell Mama. Before we left, she told me that I am to keep you from trouble.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I am never in trouble.”

“No, you are never in trouble with Papa. With Mama it is a different story.”

Elizabeth shrugged, for her mother would insist on condemning her no matter how she behaved. Her true crimes were being not as pretty or biddable as Jane, nor as vivacious and entertaining as Lydia, and being her father’s favorite.

“Well, I promise to see you clear of any trouble today,” Mr. Darcy said. “Let me fetch my hat and we will be on our way.”

You may leave your books on the counter for now if you like. They will be perfectly safe.”

He disappeared through a door at the back of the shop and in a short time footfalls sounded above where Elizabeth went to wait near the door with Jane and the maid. After a moment, Mr. Darcy returned. They stepped into the street and he followed, locking the door behind him.

He offered Jane his arm, much to Elizabeth’s annoyance, but turned to look over his shoulder to ask, “How goes your reading of Macbeth, Miss Elizabeth?”

Thus encouraged, she came up to walk on his other side, leaving the maid trailing them alone. “On first reading, it was quite enjoyable. We will see how it proves on my second, which will be taken with more appreciation and care now that I know the story.”

“And did you find it as controversial as many deem?”

She shook her head. “It is no more full of bloodshed and deceit than Hamlet, nor more magic-laden than A Midsummer Night’s Dream. In truth, I cannot comprehend the fuss.”

They strode down the side of a wide street, traversed by carts, wagons, riders and others who strolled as they did. The sun shone down brightly on all, and voices called out and chattered. Elizabeth found the scene quite lively and wondered what it would be like to live in a place like this, with life all around, day and night.

Probably noisy.

Quite possibly marvelous.

“Well, some believe the incantations used by the witches to be such in truth,” Mr. Darcy said. “And therefore, an affront to decency.”

“Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble?” Elizabeth laughed. “I cannot imagine that is a real incantation.”

Jane looked past Mr. Darcy at her. “Oh, Elizabeth, you shouldn’t say it. What if it truly is real?”

“Jane, there aren’t any witches.”

“They say there are in the new world,” Jane replied.

“Here we are,” Mr. Darcy said as they came around a corner.

A square opened before them, filled with open-air stalls displaying a myriad of wares. The square was lined with shops as well, filling the building fronts and spilling out into the streets. The space before them teemed with people and Elizabeth was awed at the vibrancy of it. The sheer abundance of life thrilled her.

Mr. Darcy took them through the stalls, exchanging greetings with all manner of people. It was easy to see that he was well-known here, and liked. Elizabeth wondered if, as well, he was usually alone. She and Jane garnered a great deal of interest and second looks from those with whom he interacted.

Or was it simply Jane who garnered looks, being as she was uncommonly pretty?

They stopped at a stall that sold meat pies and Mr. Darcy purchased two, and went on to another that displayed freshly baked bread, with Mr. Darcy declaring, “The best bread in all of London.”

“Ah, but you’re too kind, Master Darcy,” the rosy-cheeked woman behind the counter said with a thick Scottish accent. “And what have we here? You’ve brought some company with you?”

“Yes, Mrs. Watson, but they come merely to observe, not to buy. They have never been to the market before.”

“An’ well I can see that, for I’d remember such pretty lasses, Master Darcy. You’ll be the talk of the town for days to come, parading about with two lovely misses.”

Mr. Darcy chuckled, an easy sound, and picked out his bread. As she wrapped it, Mrs. Watson added two small sweet rolls. “For the lasses,” she said with a wink.

“Oh, but we couldn’t let you do that,” Elizabeth protested, starting to dig in her reticule for coins.

“Aye, you can, lass, and don’t you be worrying about it. Any friend of Master Darcy’s is a friend of my husband’s and mine, and he’s always sneaking in a few extra pennies here and there when he’s paying us, thinking we don’t notice, so I daresay we owe him a sweet bun or two.”

Red burnished the back of Mr. Darcy’s neck and he looked down, abashed.

Mrs. Watson cackled. “Ye see, lass? He truly thought we didn’t know.” Still chuckling, she handed over the bread and rolls.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said with a smile, giving up on finding her coin.

They bid Mrs. Watson farewell and continued on their way, Elizabeth splitting her roll with the maid, feeling bad for dragging the poor girl all about.

Completing their circuit of the market, they returned to the bookshop shortly before Uncle Gardiner’s carriage was to arrive, to the sight of a fussy older gentleman waiting. Mr. Darcy greeted the man and unlocked the door, letting them all in. Going to the counter he stashed his bread and meat pies, then handed over their wrapped books before hurrying off to assist what was obviously a loyal customer.

Both volumes pressed to her chest, Elizabeth watched Mr. Darcy disappear into the shelves with the older gentleman and suppressed a sigh. She hadn’t anticipated such an abrupt end to their outing.

“The carriage is here,” Jane said from where she waited by the door, looking out the window.

Giving up on any more interaction with Mr. Darcy for today, Elizabeth joined her sister.

They chatted of inconsequential things on the way back to the Gardiners, the maid seated beside Elizabeth, and once they arrived, Elizabeth went up to their shared room to put away the books. Jane followed, carefully stowing her cloak and

bonnet. Elizabeth turned from doing the same to see her sister quietly close the door.

Jane turned to study her, worrying at her lower lip.

“Is something amiss?” Elizabeth asked.

“I am not certain. That is, are you, well, interested in the bookshop proprietor?”

“Mr. Darcy?” Elizabeth asked, although Jane could mean no other. “I enjoyed our walk today, I cannot deny, and look forward to further discussions of Macbeth with him once I am done with my second reading of it. I suppose that is interest, insofar as it goes.”

“So it is as I fear.” Jane crossed to her and took her hands. “Elizabeth, you cannot permit yourself to become fond of a man who works in a shop. He is so far beneath you.”

“Works in? He said he is the proprietor, and he obviously dwells above the shop. That is where he went to get his hat. He quite possibly owns the entire building, which would be no small thing.”

“Or he rents it.” Jane shrugged. “Neither makes a difference. He is not the sort of man you will marry, and so it is cruel of you to encourage him by paying him special attention.”

“Me? It is you to whom he offered his arm.” Elizabeth struggled to keep a tinge of envy from her voice.

“But it was to you he spoke,” Jane countered. “Please tell me you will not encourage him. In fact, tell me we won’t return to the bookshop again.”

“I cannot tell you that,” Elizabeth said, a thrill of anger going through her at the very idea. “Why should I not return to the bookshop? Both Papa and Uncle Gardiner deem it the best in London, and I love books. Not to mention, our aunt has not yet returned to make her selection.”

“But you must see that—”

“No,” Elizabeth broke in more firmly than she intended. She took a steadying breath, uncertain why Jane’s suggestion

caused such alarm in her. “Mr. Darcy is merely an interesting conversationalist, and I was very entertained by the market. I am encouraging no one, and he is not at all encouraged. I am certain it would not even occur to him to think of me in that way.” Not that Elizabeth would mind it, but she didn’t permit that thought to pass her lips. She wouldn’t be denied the pleasure of Mr. Darcy or his shop because Jane feared something that simply would not happen.

Jane studied her face for a long moment. Finally, she lightly squeezed Elizabeth’s hands and then released them. Smiling, she said, “Yes, well, I suppose I am being silly. He is the proprietor of a bookshop, after all. You are correct that he would not even form the idea of courting you, the daughter of a gentleman.”

“Exactly.” Elizabeth mustered a smile to cover the sorrow that observation evoked.

No, Mr. Darcy would never assume he could harbor such expectations, which was why Elizabeth could enjoy his opinions and his company. They had no future. Nor would she even be in London for very long. She was perfectly safe indulging in her interest in Mr. Darcy.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Darcy had more trouble than usual putting together a selection of books to show Mr. Bingley. Not because the task was at all difficult, nor because with the onset of December he had more customers than usual, but because his attention kept wandering to a pair of fine, intelligent eyes. How could he read a spine or make note of a title when all he could see was Elizabeth Bennet's face before him?

Still, when the bell rang the morning after he'd sent word round to Mr. Bingley that his selection was ready, Darcy assumed the jangle heralded that gentleman's entrance. Turning from his endless dusting to sight Miss Elizabeth, her sister, and a maid was a delightful surprise. In vain, he struggled to keep a grin from his face, succeeding only in reducing his exuberance to a slight smile.

Climbing down from his ladder, he greeted, "Miss Bennet. Miss Elizabeth. How may I assist you today?"

Miss Bennet offered a vague smile and moved to the front corner of the shop to browse fashion plates, but Miss Elizabeth strode purposefully his way. "I, sir, have finished my second reading of the Bard's cursed play and I wanted to discover your opinion on some of the nuances of the work."

"You read it again already?"

"Certainly. I am a rather avid reader. I take after my father."

Darcy discerned a slight blush as she spoke and couldn't help but wonder if the real reason she'd read the work again so quickly was for an excuse to renew their conversation. Dare he be so flattered?

No, he dared not. Elizabeth Bennet was a gentleman's daughter and he, to her knowledge, was a shop owner with made over suits who could hardly afford tea. For the first time in years, he longed to embrace his family name. To claim the fortune that was his, don the finest creations London's tailors,



haberdashers, and bootmakers had to offer, and dazzle Miss Elizabeth with his polish and wealth.

Unfortunately, to lay a finger on any of the Darcy fortune necessitated wedding another woman, so he adopted an amicable expression and asked, "Have you, then, fresh topics after a second reading?"

"Well, to begin, I cannot decide if it is cleverly done, with Macbeth as the instrument of his own downfall, or if Shakespeare means for us to blame both the witches and Lady Macbeth, the first for tricking him and the second for manipulating him. If Macbeth is at fault, I applaud the play. If he is the victim of all, I am afraid it is quite harsh on my sex, and I am not certain I can condone that."

Darcy nodded. "I see your point, but perhaps the play is about weakness. Macbeth gives in to weakness when he chooses to seek power and acclaim through unsavory means rather than by merit."

"Are you suggesting that listening to the witches and his wife is a weakness?" Miss Elizabeth cocked an eyebrow at him. "Ergo, listening to women is a weakness?"

Darcy chuckled. "I would not dare suggest any such thing. Instead, I propose that Macbeth chose to listen because their words told him what he most wished to hear and gave him an excuse to do as he secretly desired. Does that not make the weakness his?"

"Mayhap, but he did seem genuinely torn as to if he should murder his king, and I will admit that his lady wife urged him on most vehemently, even going so far as to shame him."

"In view of your earlier observation, I do not know if I dare reply to that."

Miss Elizabeth laughed. "On my honor, I do not attempt to trap you into insult, sir."

The bell rang and out of habit, rather than lack of interest in Miss Elizabeth and her words, Darcy raised his gaze to look past her to the front of the shop. Thus, he took in Mr. Bingley's entrance, and the moment that gentleman's gaze

settled on Miss Bennet. Bingley's face flushed, his eyes widening, and he halted in the open doorway.

Following that look, Darcy watched, fascinated, as the lady raised her gaze from the plates she browsed to the sight of Mr. Bingley. She, too, appeared quite affected. Many times, Darcy had read of love at first sight. Never before had he born witness to the event.

"Charles, what are you doing?" a feminine voice demanded from behind Mr. Bingley. "Are we entering or not?"

"Oh. Yes. Certainly." Mr. Bingley tore his gaze from Miss Bennet for long enough to take several steps forward.

Miss Bingley moved around him, then halted in turn to study the shop. Her gaze found Miss Bennet, who still stared at Mr. Bingley, and she frowned. Miss Bingley then sighted Miss Elizabeth, who had by now turned to face the doorway, and glossed over her with a casual lack of care that nettled Darcy. Striding forward once more, she brushed past Elizabeth and came to a halt before him.

"Mr. Darcy. We are here to view my brother's books."

"Certainly, Miss Bingley. I have a selection prepared, but I was in the process of assisting this young lady." He gestured to Elizabeth.

Miss Bingley sniffed, not troubling to look at Elizabeth again. "For what we plan to pay, we do not expect to wait long." She whirled and marched over to the counter.

After watching Miss Bingley prance across the shop, Elizabeth turned back to face him. Amusement of a rather sardonic bent brightened her gaze. "Do not let me keep you from what sounds to be a very lucrative transaction."

Even knowing she jested, Darcy winced to hear her place his income above polite behavior.

A look of concern overtook Elizabeth's features. "Truly, I understand. This is your business, not a salon. See to this Miss and Mr. Bingley. I will be well entertained among the shelves."

“Thank you, but if you require me in any way, do not hesitate to interrupt.” Darcy nodded to her, then started across the shop to where Miss Bingley waited. Elizabeth, rather than disappear into the taller shelves as he’d assumed she would, joined her sister in browsing fashion plates. He suspected neither truly attended to the pages through which they flipped, but for very different reasons.

“Charles, why are you dawdling in the doorway still?” Miss Bingley snapped. “Come here.”

“What?” Mr. Bingley looked about, then spotted his sister, appearing for all the world as if surprised to see her standing before the bookshop counter.

“I said, come here,” Miss Bingley reiterated, casting a quick, narrow-eyed look at Miss Bennet. “Mr. Darcy has your books ready.”

Behind the counter now, Darcy slid several books to one side and produced his carefully compiled list. “What I in fact have is a list of books from which I recommend you select,” he said, directing the words at the approaching Mr. Bingley. “I have ordered them by category, keeping to those we discussed. For each volume, I provide the author, title, and a brief description of content. I recommend at least one selection from each category, augmented by several more from those categories which you find most interesting.”

“What is this number?” Miss Bingley asked, pointing to the small notation to the left of the first title.

“The price,” Darcy said blandly.

Miss Bingley pulled a face. “Charles doesn’t care about that.” She peered at the second page as Mr. Bingley lifted the first. “You have only noted what each book is about and who wrote it?”

“Yes,” Darcy replied, uncertain why she would say, ‘only.’

She turned the page over, finding more titles written out on the other side. “But there is nothing here about what they look like.”

“Look like?” he repeated.

“I say, I’d like all of these, from the sound of things,” Mr. Bingley said cheerfully, looking up from the page on which Darcy had collected his recommendations of books on fencing.

“You cannot possibly know that until you see them, Charles,” Miss Bingley protested.

“I can’t read every one before I decide,” Mr. Bingley protested. “That’s why I asked for Mr. Darcy’s recommendations.”

“Read them?” Miss Bingley stared at her brother blankly for a moment. “Whoever said anything about reading them? When you have your house, I am doing the library in greens and blues, and these will have to do until you can have enough bound to fill the shelves.” She turned back to Darcy. “We need books that have green, blue, or cream covers. I suppose various shades of brown will serve as well, but nothing inclined to oranges, reds, yellows, or purples, you understand.”

Darcy blinked once, then asked, speaking slowly to be certain he understood correctly. “Do you mean, Miss Bingley, that you wish to select the volumes for Mr. Bingley’s library based solely on their covers?”

“Certainly.”

Elizabeth coughed. A glance revealed nothing of her thoughts, for she held a book open before her face.

“But—” Darcy broke off and drew in a breath. “Can you not see the flaw in that?”

“I certainly can,” Mr. Bingley said.

Miss Bingley looked from Mr. Darcy to her brother and back again. Suddenly, she laughed. “Oh, I do see. I feel foolish.” She lifted one of the books Darcy had moved aside and tapped the cover. “You are correct, of course. The cover does not signify.” Turning it, she brandished the spine. “It is the spines about which we must worry. They are what will appear on the shelves.”

Elizabeth devolved into a fit of coughing. Miss Bennet and the maid both turned to her, appearing concerned.

“Caroline,” Mr. Bingley protested. “I want to read the books. A man has a library so he can better himself, and to pass along to his offspring.” His gaze darted to Miss Bennet and away again. “Not as a matter of décor.”

“But it is a matter of décor,” Miss Bingley protested. “Surely Mr. Darcy can locate books for you that are both about fencing and horses, and are green? Or blue, russet, cream, or gray. I have given him a considerable number of colors from which to choose. And if he cannot accomplish such a simple thing, we will find a bookseller who can.”

Elizabeth continued to sputter. She had her back to them now. The book she’d held had been set aside in favor of a handkerchief Miss Bennet pressed on her.

“Is that woman well?” Miss Bingley asked, frowning at the back of Elizabeth’s head.

Miss Bennet turned to them. “Mr. Darcy, I believe my sister requires air. Please excuse us. I am certain we will visit your shop again soon.” Her gaze darted to Mr. Bingley with those final words, then she and the maid led Elizabeth away.

The door closed behind them with a jangle of the bell and Mr. Bingley whirled to Darcy. “Who was that glorious creature, Darcy? Tell me you know her name?”

“I do,” he admitted reluctantly.

“You must tell me everything you know about her. I must see her again.”

Darcy shook his head. “I do not know that it would be appropriate to provide details about other patrons of my shop.”

“Quite right,” Miss Bingley said. “Really, Charles, you cannot just go chasing after some woman you noticed in a bookshop.”

“She is not some woman. She is the future Mrs. Bingley.”

Miss Bingley let out a beleaguered sigh. “That is the same thing you said about that miss in Bath, and about the one in London the year before. You are forever in love, until you aren’t again.”

Mr. Bingley's face, youthful by Darcy's thinking, took on a firm cast. "This time is different. She's different."

Darcy rather thought she was. Although Miss Bennet didn't stir his interest, he'd seen enough of her to believe her to be the epitome of English breeding. Well mannered. Lovely. The daughter of a gentleman. That standing, particularly in view of Miss Bingley's words, and Mr. Bingley hadn't denied them, meant that Darcy had no business passing along any of Miss Bennet's information.

His countenance very serious, Mr. Bingley turned back to Darcy. "Can you tell me anything about her? Any small thing?" His look of hope reminded Darcy of his first hunting dog as a pup.

Darcy let out a sigh. "Very well. Her father is a gentleman by the name of Bennet. She is visiting relations near Cheapside."

"Cheapside?" Miss Bingley cried as if she'd been stung. "Oh Charles, no."

"I don't care if she sells turnips in the market," Mr. Bingley said staunchly. "Where near Cheapside?"

"I have said all I am at liberty to say," Darcy replied firmly, though he easily called the location to mind. It struck him as appropriate that Elizabeth could be found on a street the name of which included the word 'grace.'

"But she's been in here before?" Mr. Bingley pressed. "And she'll return?"

Reluctantly, and feeling as if Miss Bennet had already made that clear enough, Darcy nodded. "She has been in before and seems likely to return while still in London."

"How long will she be in Town?"

Darcy shook his head. "I truly have no idea. Some references have been made to returning to her family's estate for the Yuletide, but that is all I know."

Worry overtook Mr. Bingley's face. "Why, that could mean any day now."

“I suppose it is simply not to be,” Miss Bingley said with unveiled relief.

Mr. Bingley nodded and returned to studying Darcy’s list of books, but the firm set of his jaw spoke of a man with resolve. Darcy wondered how many hours Mr. Bingley would spend walking the streets in and around Cheapside.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



Elizabeth contained her mirth until her uncle's footman handed her into the carriage, at which point laughter spilled from her mouth, tears of amusement forming in her eyes. "Blue and green," she managed, still laughing.

Jane was handed in and sat beside her, staring. "Whatever is the matter with you?"

"That supercilious Miss Bingley. She wanted to choose her brother's books based on the color of the spines. The spines, Jane, and nothing more. Were you not listening?"

Jane sat up straighter. "Eavesdropping is rude."

"But we couldn't help but hear." Elizabeth peered at her sister. "So I return your question. Whatever is the matter with you?"

Jane blushed, looking down. The maid their aunt had sent with them was handed in, but Jane didn't seem to notice.

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. "Jane?"

"I-I did not really hear anything after *he* walked in."

"Truly?"

Jane's blush deepened. "Well, he was so handsome, and amiable seeming, and simply..." She trailed off with a sigh. "I do not suppose I will ever see him again."

"Nonsense. I have never seen you so affected. We must see him again."

The eyes Jane raised from contemplation of her twined fingers were stark with hope. "How?"

"Well, for a start, we know his name, and we know he's been to the bookshop."

"Misses, are you ready to depart?" the footman asked, sticking his head in.



Elizabeth turned to him. “No. We are not. Are there many carriages in the street?” She hadn’t paid attention, in too much of a hurry to ensure her mirth went unseen through the bookshop windows.

“A few, miss,” the lad asked, looking confused.

“Did you see a well-dressed gentleman and lady, her with her nose in the air and him amiable, disembark from one and enter the bookshop?”

The boy nodded. “Yes, miss.”

Elizabeth dug a few coins from her purse. “I don’t care if these are for you or whomever you speak to, but I need to know the address of the gentleman who came in that carriage. Can you get me that?”

The footman accepted her coins, nodding. “I sure can, miss.”

“Thank you. Once you have it, we can go.”

“Lizzy, what are you doing?” Jane asked as the boy hurried away.

“Finding out where Mr. Bingley lives.”

Jane darted a look at the maid, who made no pretense of ignoring them, and said, “But...to what end? I cannot go there, or even write. Mr. Bingley does not even know me.”

“Yes, but we can go to places near there. Or set a footman to spy on him, or any number of things.”

“None of that sounds appropriate,” Jane protested.

“Jane,” Elizabeth said firmly, unwilling not to fight for the longing she’d seen in her sister’s eyes. “If we, as women, take no action when it comes to making the acquaintance of gentlemen we fancy, we will end up with...with men like Mr. Collins.”

Jane let out a little gasp of horror.

“Miss,” the maid said tentatively. “In London, it’s not unheard of for a lady, or a gentleman, to make gentle inquiries of the staff of a household to learn the habits of their mistress

or master. Little things, such as when they might prefer to frequent a park. A very public place. Nothing at all scandalous.”

Jane turned to the maid, hope filling her eyes once more. “Truly?”

The girl gave a staunch nod.

“And we can ask Uncle Gardiner,” Elizabeth added. “Maybe he will know something of these Bingleys. It is not impossible.”

The rigidity left Jane’s spine and she relaxed against the cushioned seat. “Yes. We must ask Uncle Gardiner, and tell our aunt all that occurred today. I do not want there to be any, well, sneaking.”

As sincerely as she could, for nothing remotely stealthy had taken place, Elizabeth nodded. “There will assuredly be no sneaking.”

Their footman returned to the window. “The gentleman, Mr. Bingley, and his sister, Miss Bingley, reside with their married sister and her husband, Mr. Hurst.”

As the boy rattled off an address in a fashionable enough neighborhood, Elizabeth smiled for his emphasis on Miss Bingley being Mr. Bingley’s sister. The lad couldn’t know that they already knew that detail and it was kind of him to want to reassure Jane of Mr. Bingley’s availability. But then, people enjoyed being kind to Jane.

The footman certainly did, flushing at the radiant smile she awarded him as she said, “Thank you. You have done me a great service. We may be on our way now.”

The boy dipped his head and disappeared from the carriage window. Elizabeth supposed she could have saved her coin. Obviously, the footman would do anything for her sister. As would most males.

But not Mr. Darcy. After those first few interactions, he seemed far more interested in speaking with her than with Jane. In fact, if Elizabeth wished, and she’d given their every encounter considerable thought, she could reinterpret his

earlier actions and believe he'd shown her more interest all along. With the exception of those long moments when he'd first sighted Jane and gaped at her on the street, that was.

None of which mattered, as gentlemen's daughters did not fraternize with booksellers. Particularly ones with coats made over enough times to suggest the need for funds.

A terrible thought occurred to her. Mr. Darcy didn't think she came with a dowry, did he? For she did not. She imagined her father might provide fifty pounds, and she would someday receive a share of her mother's five thousand, but only upon Mrs. Bennet's death and only if her mama, never one to save, didn't find a way to squander it all.

Elizabeth twined her fingers together, staring out at the passing buildings as they rolled ever nearer to Gracechurch Street. Growing up at Longbourn where everyone knew her circumstances, she'd never had to worry that a man might be thinking about her dowry before. She found the sensation unpleasant. In part because she didn't want to be married for money, particularly money she didn't actually have. But also because a small part of her suddenly wished she did have more. Enough to entice a handsome, intelligent, well-read bookseller to want her, which was pure foolishness in view of not wanting to be married for her money.

She contemplated that, and struggled not to contemplate it, while they imparted all that had occurred to their aunt. The story told, Jane retrieved her sewing and then sat with it in her lap, a distracted, dreamy look on her face. Elizabeth didn't doubt she conjured Mr. Bingley's visage. Aunt Gardiner returned to her hunt for a governess, in the form of reading letters, and Elizabeth had little to do except pretend to read and try not to dwell on Mr. Darcy. Fortunately, Uncle Gardiner returned from work early that day, providing Elizabeth, at least, with a much-needed distraction.

As soon as Uncle Gardiner was ensconced in his favorite chair, and before he could pick up the paper, Elizabeth said, "Uncle, we nearly met a gentleman today."

"Did you now?" Uncle Gardiner asked.

Their aunt cast Elizabeth and Jane an indulgent look. "They have been woolgathering all afternoon."

"I have not been woolgathering," Elizabeth said, hoping she was correct. "Jane has. She is the one who has fallen in love with Mr. Bingley at first sight, without even an introduction."

Jane pinked, looking down. "I am not in love. I am simply interested in learning more about the gentleman."

"And where did you meet this Mr. Bingley?"

"At the bookshop," Elizabeth replied to their uncle when Jane continued to stare at her hands.

"A fine establishment," Uncle Gardiner said. "First-rate, that Mr. Darcy."

Aunt Gardiner lifted her gaze heavenward. "Yes, dear, but can you tell us anything about Mr. Bingley?"

Uncle Gardiner's brow furrowed. "Knew a Bingley once. From my father's time. Made a fortune in trade, then the son did his best to turn his back on the whole thing. Married a gentleman's daughter, he did, and never worked a day again. I suppose this Bingley could be their son."

Jane looked up, her expression avid as she took in their uncle's words. "Do you believe so?"

Uncle Gardiner shrugged. "Difficult to say, isn't it?"

"He and his sister were dressed very finely," Elizabeth supplied. "And she seemed to think a great deal of herself. They are staying with a married sister and her husband. The Hursts." Elizabeth repeated the address provided by the footman.

Uncle Gardiner frowned. "Did Mr. Darcy provide you with their address?"

"No." Elizabeth shook her head vehemently, aware of the condemnation in her uncle's tone.

"Lizzy got it," Jane said. "She sent your footman to ask their man."

“Good,” Uncle Gardiner said. “Can’t have shopkeepers handing out their patrons’ addresses. I would take my business elsewhere.”

“Will you find out more about Mr. Bingley, Uncle?” Jane asked, her eyes wide and earnest.

“You can be sure I will. Starting with if he’s good enough for you, my dear.”

“Oh, I am certain he is,” Jane replied with the surety of someone for whom life tended to work out.

And Elizabeth couldn’t help but imagine it would. Mr. Bingley had been well dressed and in the process of purchasing books and starting a library, both auspicious. He’d spoken of a new home, and yet brought his sister. That told Elizabeth that he wanted to settle in, yet didn’t have a wife to select books with him. Most importantly, he’d stared at Jane as if she were the last breath of air in his body.

Just as Mr. Darcy had that morning on the street when he first sighted them. Men reacted that way to Jane, and no matter how Elizabeth wanted to turn things about in her mind, how much Mr. Darcy seemed to want to speak with her now, she’d seen his face the first time he saw her sister. Would anyone ever look at her that way?

She sighed.

“See, you are woolgathering,” Aunt Gardiner stated.

Elizabeth turned to her aunt, aware she’d lost track of the conversation. “I am thinking about how Jane will certainly find her Mr. Bingley, and then she will be married, and I will have to return to Longbourn without her.” Which was a lie, but now that she’d said it, Elizabeth knew she would be thinking about that for some time to come.

“Oh dear,” Aunt Gardiner said. “Well, perhaps we will find someone for you as well, Lizzy.”

“And you will have Mary, Kitty, and Lydia,” Jane added earnestly.

Elizabeth mustered a smile. Longbourn without Jane would be dreadful. Kitty and Lydia would be even more uncontrolled without Jane's calming influence and good example. Papa would hide away in his library even more often. Mrs. Bennet would focus her marital ambitions on Elizabeth, and Mary her moralizing.

How far would fifty pounds go to maintaining a bookshop, Elizabeth wondered?

Footfalls drew all their gazes to the doorway as one of the maids came in with a tray full of letters. While most were for their aunt and uncle, two were addressed to both Elizabeth and Jane. One from their mother and one from Mary. Taking the one from Mary, Elizabeth left their mother's to Jane, who had a greater tolerance for endless reiterations exhorting them to marry soon and well. Almost in unison, Mr. Gardiner, Mrs. Gardiner, and Jane opened their letters and began reading.

"My sister is well," Aunt Gardiner said after a moment, not looking up from her letter. "As is Mama."

"That's good, dear," Uncle Gardiner murmured.

Elizabeth cracked the wax sealing Mary's letter.

"Oh my," Jane exclaimed with enough force to garner everyone's attention. She looked up from Mrs. Bennet's scrawl. "Mr. Collins proposed to Mary, and she refused him. Mama is livid."

"She refused him?" Elizabeth blurted, surprised.

"Does Mary say why?" Jane asked, looking at the letter Elizabeth held. "Mama's letter goes on about what an ungrateful, contrary child she is, but I do not see anything about Mary's reasoning."

Elizabeth opened the letter she held with sudden avid interest, skimming the words. Amusement bubbled in her, although she attempted to stifle it for Mary's sake. "Apparently, he prefaced his proposal with the explanation that he'd wanted you most, and me second most, but as we were absent, he would take her."

Aunt Gardiner and Jane gasped in unison, quite offended on Mary's behalf.

Elizabeth read on. "He then proceeded to inform her of all the good wedding her would do him, particularly in the eyes of his patron, Sir Lewis de Bourgh." Elizabeth looked up. "She's written out his words. It's all very insulting."

"Oh, poor Mary," Jane said. "To win a proposal and have it be so...so..."

"Awful?" Elizabeth supplied, aware that censorious words were scarce in Jane's vocabulary. "Horrendous? Demeaning?" Ludicrous, she added to herself.

"Well, yes," Jane said. "Poor Mary."

"Poor Mary indeed," Mrs. Gardiner agreed. "And good on her for standing firm. No woman should be made to accept such an offer."

"I hope she doesn't give in." Jane met Elizabeth's gaze and added, "Should one of us go home so that Mary can come here?"

Elizabeth's spine snapped straight. She knew who Jane meant by 'one of them,' for she certainly had no intention of leaving London until she'd properly met Mr. Bingley. Elizabeth shook her head. She was having far too much fun to go home. Mary had already refused, after all. The matter was sorted. Why should Elizabeth leave...well, London. Just London as a whole. Not anyone in particular, as Jane would be leaving Mr. Bingley if she went.

She dropped her gaze to the letter she held and flipped it over. Taking in what were obviously tear drops on the back, she winced, reading how Mrs. Bennet had forbidden Mary the use of the pianoforte as punishment. Maybe Jane was right. A good sister would return to endure their mama and let Mary come to London to—

"No need," Uncle Gardiner said, looking up from his letter. "Your father writes that he's taking charge of the situation. Mary will reside with the Phillips for a time, to be spared the bulk of your mother's displeasure."

Relief washed through Elizabeth. She simply wasn't ready to leave London yet. She had more books to discuss with Mr. Darcy. Not that there was a future with him, but she could enjoy his company for a while longer before putting him and his shop behind her and returning to the country.

"That is good to hear," Aunt Gardiner said.

"Yes," Jane agreed.

Elizabeth looked up to find her sister and uncle reading letters once more, but Aunt Gardiner watched her, her expression inscrutable and contemplative.



## CHAPTER NINE



Darcy stood behind the counter in his shop and tried in vain not to stare at the door. Two days had passed since his and Elizabeth's discussion of *Macbeth* had been ruined by the appearance of the Bingleys. While Darcy was very pleased with the funds Mr. Bingley's business had brought him, and while he deemed Mr. Bingley a cheerful and upright fellow, he could not help but resent the interruption. When Elizabeth spoke as she had, her entire mien alive with interest and intelligence, she enthralled Darcy. He hadn't appreciated having the spell broken.

If it had been, not a safe assumption as he'd thought of little save her for days.

With the emphasis Miss Bennet had placed on their plan to return to his shop, Darcy had expected to see them the following day. Mr. Bingley had obviously hoped to as well, for he'd spent the afternoon mooning about Darcy's shop to no avail. By the time Darcy had closed up for the day, he and Mr. Bingley had both begun to worry over when the Bennet sisters would depart London. Surely, they would return to the bookshop at least once more before they did.

Today, not even Mr. Bingley entered Darcy's shop. He suspected the active young gentleman had taken a different tack. Namely, scouring the streets around Cheapside for any sight of his temptress. Darcy envied him the freedom to do so.

Bereft of the outlet of walking, Darcy was forced to endure the endless tick of the clock in his shop. He glanced at it now, the hours until closing filling him with both hope and despair. So long as the shop remained open, Elizabeth might appear, but Darcy must also remain, hoping for customers. His shop, usually something of a sanctuary, felt more like a cage today.

Not that he was as in need of funds as usual. He had Mr. Bingley's not inconsiderable payment already deposited at the bank. Surely, with that, Darcy could afford to miss an hour or so of business? He still had the excuse of Mr. Gardiner's book.

He could deliver the small pile of volumes he'd assembled for Mrs. Gardiner to select from.

And why not? He would enjoy the walk and Mrs. Gardiner seemed quite pleasant. She would likely be pleased by his consideration, rather than appalled to have him arrive unsolicited at her door. At least, he could choose to believe that would be the case until proven wrong.

Outside, a large, thickly lacquered carriage rolled to a halt. His carriage. Darcy's jaws clenched. As George Darcy employed his own conveyance and Georgiana a smaller vehicle, the sight of Darcy's could only mean one person. Wickham.

It was only the fourth of December. Nowhere near the third Monday of the month. What was Wickham doing here?

Darcy issued a prayer that Elizabeth would not visit his shop now. Not while Wickham was present.

His erstwhile companion alighted, looking the façade of the shop up and down. With a smug grin, Wickham strode in. To Darcy's hearing, the bells on the door sounded far less cheerful than usual.

With no customers to consider, Darcy needn't trouble to conceal his displeasure. Frowning, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Wickham. What do you want?"

Wickham cast a quick glance around, his smirk growing. "No customers this afternoon, Darcy? Terrible shame, that."

"I will manage."

"So I have heard. Bingley showed me that list of books you foisted off on him. That was very badly done, you know."

Darcy grimaced. He should have known Mr. Bingley wouldn't keep his purchases secret from Wickham. Why would he? "He wanted books, so I sold him books. I would hardly call that 'badly done.'"

"You wouldn't, but I would. Although, I may permit you to keep what he paid you."

Darcy's frown deepened. "And what do you imagine you mean by that?" Was Wickham going to sink to theft now? To the physical removal of Darcy's profits?

Well, he would be disappointed. Not simply because Darcy had already placed Mr. Bingley's payment in the bank, but because Darcy wouldn't permit a search of his shop. If Wickham wanted to commandeer anything, he would have to go through Darcy to do it.

"I mean that I have rarely met anyone as easily led as Mr. Bingley," Wickham replied. "I have every expectation that, with but a few words, I can convince him to return and demand his money back."

"Do as you see fit," Darcy said with a shrug that he hoped conveyed a lack of care he did not feel. It was nice to have enough money in the bank not to have to worry for a time.

Wickham waved his words off. "As I said, I might let you keep it. You have enough troubles without my interference."

Darcy tried to bite back the words but, "What do you mean?" issued forth regardless.

"Only that you are looking a bit thin these days, old chum, and you can't count on your yearly trip to Rosings, can you? Not with how things stand."

Taking in how smug Wickham looked, Darcy forced his mouth to remain closed. He would not provide the satisfaction of asking how things stood at Rosings. Wickham could go be entertained somewhere else.

Unless...What if something had happened to Sir Lewis? To Anne? Would Darcy know? His family never wrote to him anymore. What could have taken place to prevent him from joining Richard on their yearly trip to Kent for Easter?

While Darcy wrestled against seeking further details, Wickham wandered about the shop. He eyed the half full shelves, pulling out books here and there. These he would carry for a bit, flipping through the pages before dropping them onto the shelf of whatever next caught his eye. Not a large mess, but one he knew Darcy would need to tidy. Darcy

supposed he was fortunate that Wickham didn't decide to simply pull down the shelves.

"There has been a lot of travel between Matlock and Pemberley of late," Wickham said finally. He cast a sly look over at Darcy. "Between Rosings and Pemberley as well."

"Oh?" Darcy allowed.

"Yes. A great deal. Even Colonel Fitzwilliam has been to see your father, my dear godfather."

Richard was back? Darcy hadn't realized he'd returned from whatever far off reaches his duty had last taken him. Or that he'd been to Pemberley. Why had Richard not been by? Had he received Darcy's letter?

Wickham came full circle in the open front area of the shop and sauntered up to the counter. "Now, I don't know what the patriarchs are colluding about these days, but I do know that Sir Lewis's precious daughter is running out of time."

Darcy would not discuss Anne with the fashionably garbed cretin before him.

"Unlike us gentlemen, a lady's usefulness to society wanes." Wickham smirked, meeting Darcy's gaze squarely.

"Us gentlemen?" Darcy countered sardonically.

Wickham sneered at him. "That is all you have to say? No reprimand? No words to defend the lady's honor? No challenge?"

"If Anne wants her honor defended, she will do so," Darcy countered. "I am certain she would prefer to be the instrument of spilling your blood and that if I did it, she would only accuse me of depriving her of the pleasure."

"Hm," Wickham drawled. "That may be, but you should know that rumor has it that Sir Lewis has called a locksmith in. Best in the land and all that." Wickham leaned across the counter. "If you travel to Rosings this spring, you had best be prepared to remain there."

Darcy pondered Wickham's smug expression. Would Sir Lewis truly lock him away until he agreed to marry Anne?

Would Anne permit that?

And what of this talk of travel? Had the patriarchs renewed their colluding, and brought Richard into their scheme? Wickham couldn't be trusted to tell the truth, but his lies often held a kernel of it. A dollop of honesty to draw Darcy in. What smidgen of his words today could be believed? And why was he tormenting Darcy more than usual?

Wickham straightened. "Very well. Be your usual boring, stoic self. I am off to change for dinner and then on to my club. I have several lambs lined up for a high stakes game of cards later, including Bingley. If he loses too much, I may console him by illuminating how you cheated him on those books."

"Do as you see fit," Darcy reiterated with a sinking feeling. So much for his extra funds.

"You know I will." Wickham tipped his hat and strode from the shop.

Darcy watched him board the carriage, once his, and ground his teeth. Turning from the view of Wickham enjoying the prerogatives of George Darcy's favor, Darcy surveyed the disarray in his shop. He should put everything back right. Fix the mess Wickham had left in his wake.

But he would not.

Instead, Darcy went to the front door and locked it. He then went up to fetch his coat, hat, and very worn gloves. Those he would remove before knocking on the Gardiners' door, for fear of Elizabeth taking note of the holes in them.

Back down in his shop, he gathered up the three volumes he felt Mr. Gardiner would appreciate most and left through the back door, locking up behind him. Soon enough, he would know if Elizabeth was still in London and, hopefully, he would have the joy of seeing her. The second he knew may not take place, for he had no reason to ask for her nor the standing to call on her.

Still, he could enjoy his walk, and be reassured of her presence, and maybe even hear her voice. At present, that

seemed all he could ask for. For her sake, he would deem it enough.

## CHAPTER TEN



Elizabeth wielded needle and thread dutifully, having committed to helping her aunt with the children's mending. Aunt Gardiner still sought a governess, though she seemed to have whittled away at the pile of letters of recommendation she'd been perusing for days. Soon, she would begin interviewing those she deemed to hold the most potential. She wanted someone who could help educate her daughters, and who was firm and commanding enough to control their rather wild streaks. To Elizabeth's mind, her young cousins seemed distressingly similar to Kitty and Lydia at their age.

Jane stitched as well, though her role was to add decoration to their cousins' gowns. Jane had a fine eye and the patience Elizabeth lacked, enabling her to add lovely ornamentation. Elizabeth's strength lay more in mending tears and darning, skills learned over years of repairing her own gowns and hose.

At her desk in the corner, Aunt Gardiner sighed and straightened. "I cannot tell from these letters if the women in question have the fortitude to manage your cousins," she said. "They all seek to impress with their refinement, of which I approve, but I am afraid my girls need a firm hand, not simply an elegant one."

Jane looked up from a neat row of bluebells. "I believe you are overly worried. Frances and Madeline seem like lovely young ladies to me."

"Because they behave as lovely young ladies around you," Elizabeth noted. "Even they are not immune to your calming influence and your ability to inspire awe and a desperate need to please."

"Really, Lizzy, you say the most outlandish things," Jane admonished.

Aunt Gardiner smiled slightly. "Elizabeth may exaggerate, but the heart of her compliment is valid. If only I could find a governess who is precisely like you, Jane."

Elizabeth snorted. “No one precisely like Jane would remain a governess for long. Some gentleman would marry her.”

Jane let out a long sigh, her eyes losing focus.

Elizabeth raised her gaze ceilingward. The one trouble with Jane’s needlework at present was that one thought of Mr. Bingley could derail her.

Which was how Elizabeth knew she had not permitted too much admiration for Mr. Darcy to grow in her. Thinking of him in no way interfered with her stitches. Not visions of his strong jaw. Nor of his dark, compelling eyes, regarding her with such esteem and interest. Nor the set of his broad shoulders or how he stood tall enough to reach all but the highest shelves in his shop.

She stifled the urge to sigh, looked down, took in her still fingers, and resumed working.

“Well,” Aunt Gardiner continued, neatening the stack of pages on her desk. “I suppose I must choose from—”

A screech and a clatter sounded deeper in the house. Startled, the three of them exchanged glances.

“What under heaven could that be about?” Aunt Gardiner asked.

Another shout sounded, followed by the distinct smash of shattering plates.

Aunt Gardiner stood, casting an alarmed look in the direction of the kitchen.

A maid burst in, flour thick in her hair, on her eyebrows and lashes, and dotting her clothing. “Mum, come quick. The young misses sneaked some kittens in from the mews and they’re wild little things and loose in the kitchen.”

Her expression horrified, Aunt Gardiner started across the room.

“Can we help?” Elizabeth asked, bundling her sewing.



“No.” Aunt Gardiner shook her head. “Stay here while I see to this, and then to your cousins.” She swept from the room, calling all the maids and footmen to her as she rushed to the back of the house.

Elizabeth exchanged a look with Jane. “Should we go help regardless?”

Jane thought for a moment. “No. I do not believe so. Our aunt will want us out of the way.” Jane dropped her gaze to the mending Elizabeth held. “You are simply tired of sewing.”

“I am, and I believe the sight of kittens running amuck in a flour-filled kitchen will be entertaining.”

“You are terrible,” Jane replied, though without rancor. “Our aunt seemed completely unamused.”

“It is no fault of mine if people about me cannot see the amusement before them.”

Jane merely shook her head and returned to stitching. Deeper in the house, voices rose, shouting, and a loud ringing clatter sounded. Copper pots colliding, by Elizabeth’s estimate. Her cousin Frances’s voice rose in a wailing shout and Elizabeth gathered the young culprits were still in the kitchen with the kittens they’d brought in.

With a sigh, for she truly would like to witness the chaos there, Elizabeth attempted to mimic Jane’s calm industry.

A knock sounded.

Elizabeth jumped up, aware the disturbance in the kitchen had the entire household occupied. “I will answer the door.” She rushed from the room, hoping not to be detained for long. Once she dealt with whoever knocked, she could go to the kitchen before Jane thought to stop her. Eagerly, Elizabeth yanked open the front door.

To the sight of Mr. Darcy.

He wore his somewhat threadbare coat, but had doffed his hat and already shoved his gloves inside, by the look of it. Under his arm were tucked three books, and he smiled to see her.

Elizabeth's breath caught. She stared at him, certain that proper words of greeting existed but unable to call them to mind.

Mr. Darcy bowed. "Miss Elizabeth. It is pleasant to see you."

"And you," she managed and stepped back deeper into the entrance hall. "Please, come inside. What brings you?" As much as she suddenly wished he might be there to call on her, she doubted he was.

He entered and looked about, seeming entirely at home in the Gardiners' fine yet reserved entrance hall, and taller than ever, for he'd been a step down while still outside. "I hope it is not too forward of me, but I brought three books for your aunt to select from. I suspect her to be quite busy and thought she might consider them at her leisure and return those she does not wish to give your uncle at a later date."

"That is very kind of you." Elizabeth accepted the books he proffered. Turning to set them on a small table, she sought about for more to say. She couldn't invite him in for tea, could she? Not only because he was a shopkeeper but also because the kitchen was in disarray. "I am certain my aunt will be grateful. She has, indeed, been quite busy of late."

Deeper in the house, there was another crash. Elizabeth's other cousin, Madeline, yelled this time.

Mr. Darcy raised his eyebrows. "Is all well?"

Elizabeth pictured Mr. Darcy's reaction to the scene she imagined in the kitchen and pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to hold in laughter.

He studied her, bemused. "It is nothing dire, then, but something entertaining?"

She shook her head and dropped her hand. "I am certain it seems quite dire, and I truly am sorry for my aunt. Two kittens have got loose in the kitchen and are wreaking havoc."

"Two kittens?"

“That is what I hear. My aunt bid my sister and I remain at our sewing while she took charge of the—”

More plates smashed.

Elizabeth turned to look down the hall in the direction of the kitchen, some of her amusement leaving her. “It does seem to be getting a bit out of hand.” How many dishes would her aunt be required to replace?

The door at the end of the hall burst open and two white-coated balls of fur raced out. Flour-covered Frances and Madeline came charging after them, one brandishing a pot and a lid and the other table linens. They barreled headlong down the hall, right for Elizabeth.

She jumped backward and collided with Mr. Darcy’s tall, solid form. His hands settled on her shoulders, steadying her as the kittens, flour puffing from them, turned sharply, and darted up the staircase. Frances went after, pot and lid in hand, followed by Madeline.

Mr. Darcy’s hands were strong and warm where they clasped Elizabeth, and heat radiated along her back and legs where they braced against him. Mortification raced through her as well and she stepped away. Madeline screamed.

Elizabeth whirled to see her little cousin windmilling her arms, table linens wrapped about her and under her feet. She careened over backward. Elizabeth leaped up the steps to catch her.

She caught Madeline and went toppling back herself, trying to grab the banister with one hand and keep her cousin pressed safely to her with the other. Elizabeth stifled a cry as her fingers slipped along smooth wood, finding no purchase. Fear rushed through her to lodge in her throat and cut off her breath. She squeezed her eyes shut as she fell, determined that she should collide with the floor and her cousin end up atop her, unscathed.

Strong arms caught her and Madeline up. Elizabeth opened her eyes to the sight of Mr. Darcy’s face startlingly near. She was enveloped by the clean scent of shaving soap.

“Is all well?” Jane asked, sticking her head out of the parlor doorway.

“Mr. Darcy,” Aunt Gardiner exclaimed, a sea of maids behind her. “Thank you. My heart nearly stopped when I saw them falling.”

Mr. Darcy set Elizabeth on her feet and Madeline wiggled away, rushing to her mother in a cloud of flour. Once again, Mr. Darcy’s hands lingered on Elizabeth’s shoulders. She tried to ignore the warmth that radiated from him, and how protected his light touch made her feel.

“They’re coming back,” Frances screeched from above.

Elizabeth whirled to the staircase. Frances careened down, fortunately no longer holding the heavy copper pot or its lid. Two balls of fluff raced before her, now revealed to be calico and orange.

The kittens reached the bottom and Elizabeth scooped them up by their scruffs, rendering them instantly compliant in the manner employed by mama cats for generations. Mr. Darcy reached out a steadying arm and prevented Frances from sprawling face first onto the entryway floor.

Aunt Gardiner, an arm still about Madeline, rushed forward and hugged Frances to her. She stepped back to glare down at both flour-coated daughters. “The two of you are in a great deal of trouble. March up to your room this instant and do not leave it. Maids will be up to assist you once the kitchen is back in order. Do you have any notion of the mess you have created?”

“Yes, Mama,” they chorused, hanging their heads.

Elizabeth brought the now calm kittens to her chest. They both started purring, which was very pleasant, but which didn’t cause Elizabeth to miss how Madeline jabbed a bony little elbow out to catch Frances’s attention. She cast a sly grin at her older sister.

Aunt Gardiner must not have missed that either, for she sighed. “Off with you.” Elizabeth’s cousins scampered up the

steps and her aunt turned to her. “Elizabeth, give Florence the kittens.” She gestured to one of the floured maids.

“What will happen to them?” Elizabeth asked, not handing over the little balls of fluff.

“I will have them returned to their mother along with a saucer of milk,” Aunt Gardiner said firmly. “She has raised generations of good ratters for us, and I am certain she can keep these two in line.”

Reassured, Elizabeth gave Florence the kittens. The little monsters purred quite as loudly for the maid as they had for Elizabeth. In the parlor doorway, Jane, the only one of them not now coated in flour, watched in consternation.

Aunt Gardiner turned to Mr. Darcy. “I do not know what brought you, but I thank you, sir, for your timely intervention. I would not care to see my niece or my daughter crash to the hall floor.”

Mr. Darcy bowed. “I am pleased to have been of service.”

Elizabeth took in the flour all up and down his front and hoped he meant his words. She didn’t believe every gentleman would. But then, many would not have had the quick thinking to catch her and Madeline. “I, too, thank you. I do not think I would have enjoyed colliding with the floor any more than my aunt would have enjoyed seeing me do so.”

“Why are you here, Mr. Darcy?” Jane asked from the doorway.

Elizabeth gestured to the books on the little hall table, fortunately unscathed. “He brought books for Aunt Gardiner to look at, so she could select the one she wants.”

“That is very thoughtful of you,” Aunt Gardiner said, looking about at the mess in the hall. “But I do not at present have time.”

“There is no hurry,” Mr. Darcy assured her. “Once your selection is made, simply send the others back.”

“Oh, that is kind of you.” Aunt Gardiner awarded him a distracted smile. “Elizabeth, if you would take charge of them.

Jane, might I prevail upon you to go to your cousins and ensure they aren't getting flour all over their room? Although it may well be too late." Not waiting for an answer, Aunt Gardiner turned and started down the hall, her arms wide as she shepherded the gathered gaggle of staff before her. "Florence, you may return those two to their mama, with some cream to mollify her. Now, we will need to..."

Elizabeth hadn't realized how much of the household had poured into the hallway but now they all disappeared back into the kitchen with her aunt. Jane hurried up the staircase but paused halfway. She looked down at Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy with a frown. Elizabeth deliberately moved away from him, going to the table with the books. Mollified, Jane finished her ascent.

The moment her sister turned away, Elizabeth returned to stand before Mr. Darcy. She understood Jane's worry, but she owed him her thanks. "I cannot thank you enough. I truly thought I would crash to the floor as my aunt feared."

"I would never permit harm to come to you," he said softly.

Elizabeth studied his intent expression, her heart pounding so hard she feared to attempt speech. The memory of his arms, of his solid form bracing her, brought fresh heat to her cheeks. "That is very chivalrous of you."

"I, too, would once have thought so, but now I wonder if chivalry exists."

"How can you say that when you have only now evidenced it?"

He shook his head. "The pain it would cause me to see you injured was my single consideration. So you see, assisting you and your cousin was an act of pure selfishness."

"I refuse to accept that." She also refused to ask him why seeing her harmed would cause him such pain. Knowing his answer would bring her to very uncertain ground. She swallowed, pulling her wit to her to strive for control over a riot of emotions she could not seem to subdue. "Do you mean to claim that all acts of chivalry are mere selfishness?"

He drew in a deep breath and it fascinated Elizabeth to think that perhaps he struggled as well. That her nearness affected him, too. That he recalled each touch with the searing detail she did.

“Perhaps some,” he declared. “I daresay we must first define what it means to be chivalrous before we can discredit the notion.”

Elizabeth nodded, forcing her mind to the task. Anything to pull her thoughts away from being in his arms, and yet still keep him here. She couldn’t bear for him to depart quite yet. “Let us consider chivalry to be acts of honor, courage, and honesty.”

“You must not forget a ready desire to aid the defenseless.”

“How can I, when you have so aided me?” And how could she stop thinking about him doing so if he insisted on returning her thoughts to his act?

He studied her face, giving no indication he meant to reply.

“Elizabeth,” Jane’s voice called from above. Footfalls sounded in the upper hall.

Elizabeth stepped back from Mr. Darcy. Her gaze alighted on his hat, which he had at some point dropped to the floor. “Your hat.”

He turned and scooped it up just as Jane started down the steps. Elizabeth adroitly moved back another step and picked up the books, holding them to her chest. Jane descended low enough to see them, looking from Mr. Darcy, who stood and dusted at his hat, to Elizabeth.

“Please give my regards to your aunt,” he said, addressing Jane. He added a bow. Pulling free his gloves, he pressed his hat down on his head and turned to the door.

“Mr. Darcy,” Jane called.

He halted, looking back. “Yes?”

“Be certain to dust yourself off once you are outside. You are all covered with flour.”

He looked down at himself. “Thank you.”

Jane nodded. Mr. Darcy stepped out and Jane turned to Elizabeth. “You should hide those books so Uncle Gardiner doesn’t see them, and dust the flour from yourself as well,” she said sternly.

“I will,” Elizabeth replied. And she would, though she doubted Jane’s tone had anything to do with flour or books.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN



The bell on his shop door rang and Darcy lifted his gaze from the book he read, unable to quell the hope that Elizabeth would enter. He hadn't seen her since the day he'd taken books to the Gardiners, but he thought of her with a near constancy that alarmed him. Her quickness and bravery in trying to save her cousin impressed him. The shock of stark fear that raced through him at the thought of her being injured tormented him. The memory of her in his arms, he dared not think on.

But the figure who entered, while familiar, was not Elizabeth, and brought forth an entirely different swirl of emotions. "Georgiana," he exclaimed, coming around the counter. "Welcome." She'd grown so tall since last he saw her, an observation which wrenched at his heart.

His sister marched up to him, a determined look on her face. "Do not 'welcome' me, Fitz. I am very cross with you." Her arm snapped out, presenting a folded and sealed missive.

Darcy glanced past her to the woman who followed, her companion, Mrs. Younge, who wore a slight frown. Turning back to his sister, he repeated, "You are cross with me?" How could she be, when they spoke so rarely? And his were the letters gone unanswered, so hadn't he rather be cross with her?

"Yes. Very. But I am not to be speaking to you, as part of your punishment, so I have written it all down. Unlike you, I know how to put pen to paper." She shoved the bundle of pages closer.

Darcy plucked it from her hand.

Georgiana pivoted and started back for the door.

"Georgie," he called. She stopped but didn't turn. "Won't you stay? I can make tea. Or close the shop and walk with you."

"Miss Darcy," Mrs. Younge said in a warning voice.

Georgiana squared her shoulders, shook her head, and resumed walking. Mrs. Younge held the door open to let her out. She cast Darcy an assessing look and then followed her charge.

Through the front windows, Darcy watched his sister enter the familiar carriage. The one of their father's she usually employed. Was their father in Town? Should Darcy go see him? Beg for an end to this ridiculous feud over him marrying Anne? Last spring when he and Richard visited Rosings, Sir Lewis had seemed as firm as ever on the matter. In fact, Darcy had been given the distinct impression that all was as it had been since his act of defiance, but Darcy hadn't spoken to his father about his supposed engagement for years. Maybe George Darcy had softened?

Wickham's smug, but likely touched with truth, warning rang out in Darcy's mind. The patriarchs were colluding, and Anne was running out of time.

Darcy looked down at the letter he held. Returning to his place behind the counter, he pushed his book aside and cracked the seal, a bit envious of the heavy paper and bold, dark ink. Georgiana didn't have to water ink to make the most of each drop. Based on the lack of revision, she'd likely composed the letter on sheets now tossed on the fire after recopying them, as well.

He longed to enjoy such frivolous employment of resources once more, although he doubted he would ever look at something so simple as paper and ink the same way again. Could he ever return to ways he hadn't even known were wasteful when he'd lived them?

Shaking his head, he focused on his sister's carefully penned words.

*Dear Fitz,*

*How can you be so horrible and so vindictive? Is it not enough that Father, George, and I have been deprived of your company for so long? That you have let this foolish stubbornness over wedding Anne mar so much familial happiness? And why? For what? She has always been one of*

*your dearest companions. Why not wed her? If it is her cursing, I can speak to her about that. I am certain she can be made to keep a civil tongue.*

*But that is neither here nor there. What breaks my heart is that you will not come home now. How, how, how can you be so stubborn and selfish and cruel? How can you do this to Father?*

Darcy scowled at the page. Him? Do this to their father? It was George Darcy, along with his brothers by marriage, who kept up the insistence on a match Darcy did not desire. Nor did Anne, although she wasn't as vehemently opposed as he was. She'd often said they may as well get leg-shackled, as she so colorfully put it, and then go on living their separate lives, he at Pemberley and she at Rosings.

A sour taste in his mouth, Darcy kept reading.

*Why must you keep up this aloofness? Why will you not come home? You do not even write. You have left me with only George as a brother. He does as well as he can, but it is not the same as having you home. He will never look at me with the same sort of affection you do.*

Wickham had best not look at her with any other sort of affection than brotherly. Darcy would challenge the man, with Anne and Richard in line behind him.

He drew in a breath to master his anger, for Georgiana had hit on a sore spot in his heart. He did miss her. She looked so grown up today when she entered his shop. Tall and ladylike. He'd lost his little sister. Lost years of her life he would never get back.

And what was that she'd said about him not putting pen to paper? That was balderdash. True, he hadn't written much of late, but why should he when coin was dear and his letters went unanswered?

He sighed and continued reading. Her letter went on and on, reiterating that she could not fathom why he wouldn't come home. Finally, she concluded with a salutation of

affection, but threatened, *'If you do not come home now, I will lose all love for you.'*

Pain lodged in his chest. He should have seen this coming. For how long could his sister go without forming resentment over his absence, after all? But she stood on the precipice of womanhood. Soon she would enter into the quest for a husband. Perhaps then she would reconsider his insistence on wedding for affection and forgive him?

Or perhaps she would not.

Darcy carefully folded her letter and tucked it into his coat pocket. He supposed the paper was quite fine enough to sand and reuse. He could do that this evening.

Or he could throw his sister's angry and pleading words into the fire.

He pulled his book back over, struggling to put Georgiana's haranguing from his mind. But he could not. He missed his family. His home. The hills, dales, brooks, and meadows of Derbyshire. Would marrying Anne truly be that awful? Was he, indeed, overly stubborn? Pride was a treacherous source of motivation, as many of the books he'd read over the years revealed.

But love was not. Well, it could be, but needn't be. More than his pride, more than his desire not to be weak and give in, his quest for affection motivated him. Surely, that was a worthy pursuit?

A vision of Miss Elizabeth Bennet formed in his mind. The bell on his door jangled. Darcy looked up in hope.

Mr. Bingley strode in, sans his haughty younger sister. "Mr. Darcy," he greeted as he approached the counter, his voice and manner more restrained than usual.

Darcy dipped his head. "Mr. Bingley. How can I help you today?"

"I am not certain yet."

Darcy considered that. "Have you come for more of your books? Or with the address to which you would like them

delivered?" He couldn't be here because of Wickham's threats to label Darcy a cheat, or he would surely appear angry, rather than subdued. Likely, Mr. Bingley had hoped to see Miss Bennet, hence his somewhat glum expression.

Mr. Bingley shook his head. He pulled out the list of the books he'd purchased, most of which Darcy held in the back of the shop, though Mr. Bingley had taken a few home the day he'd placed the order. "I showed Mr. Wickham this," Mr. Bingley said, placing the page on the counter.

Unease settled in Darcy's gut. Mr. Bingley was here to accuse Darcy of cheating him after all. Darcy glanced at the page, though he didn't need to study the paper before him. He'd written out the list of books selected, the price for each, marked which ones Bingley had taken with him, and signed that Bingley had already paid for all in full. "What did Mr. Wickham have to say?"

"He said you swindled me horribly and that if he'd had any notion you would abuse me thusly, he would never have introduced us."

Darcy sighed. "I already put your payment in the bank, but I will give you what I have here and secure the remainder, to be ready for you tomorrow. Or you can walk with me to the bank now, if you prefer. Do you mean to keep the volumes you took with you, or to return them?"

Bingley stared at him. "Now hold up. I didn't say I want the money back."

"Then what do you want, Mr. Bingley?"

"I would rather like some answers." Mr. Bingley doffed his hat and set it on the counter. "I went around to several shops and asked for the same books. If anything, you undercharged me."

Darcy nodded. "I did. You seem like an amiable fellow out to seek betterment through reading, something I like to encourage."

"Then why did you say you would give the money back?"

Slowly, and with due consideration, Darcy replied, “In my experience, Wickham’s charm often exceeds people’s reason.”

“And you were going to let him get away with that?” Mr. Bingley sounded a touch angry now.

“As I said, he generally does.”

Mr. Bingley formed his mouth into a hard line. “I know I’m young, and that my background isn’t as good as a gentleman’s. My parents did their best with us. I had well-respected tutors, and my sisters went to a top finishing school, and that’s all very well, but I don’t comprehend the nuances of being a gentleman. I am a ship without a mainsail. Could you please, plainly, illuminate me on what is going on?”

Darcy studied the earnest young man before him. Could this be some trick of Wickham’s? He’d appeared to have Mr. Bingley thoroughly enthralled. Even the snooty Miss Bingley seemed to think a great deal of Wickham.

But what sort of trick? To what end?

With no answer to that, Darcy decided to take Mr. Bingley at face value. “Mr. Wickham makes it his prerogative to ensure that I am kept as far from wealth as possible. When he brought you in, he did not believe you to be the sort to purchase books, or he would never have introduced us.”

“Why would he want to keep you poor? I thought he was checking in on you.”

“His reason is complex and relates to familial matters.”

Mr. Bingley studied him expectantly.

“I would not want this repeated to anyone, even your sisters,” Darcy said, relenting.

“I should think not.”

Taking that as agreement, Darcy shrugged and said, “I truly cannot go into details as a lady is involved, which means so is her reputation. I will say that I am at odds with the bulk of my relations over my refusal to marry where they would have me wed, and it is Wickham’s role to ensure that I suffer for my stubbornness.” As Georgiana had called it in her letter.

“Well. I’ll be.” Mr. Bingley studied him for a long moment. “Resolve, rather.”

“I beg your pardon?” Darcy asked, confused.

“If you are holding out for love, I would call it resolve, not stubbornness. Many a man would be swayed by access to the Darcy fortune and influence.” Mr. Bingley nodded sharply, as if agreeing with his own words. “Yes, better to call it resolve on your part.”

Darcy dipped his head again, acknowledging that. “Thank you.”

“In that case, I want to pay you market value for these.” Mr. Bingley tapped the page before him.

“I would not hear of it.”

“But I insist.”

With a sardonic smile, Darcy countered, “Think of the difference as paying you back some of the funds I am certain Wickham is fleecing from you.”

A comical look of dismay overcame Mr. Bingley’s face, then he chuckled somewhat flatly. “He never can seem to find his purse, can he?”

“Not in the years I have known him, which have been many.” All Darcy’s life, in truth.

Mr. Bingley’s expression hardened into seriousness again. “My sister Caroline fancies him. She seems to believe he will be Mr. Darcy’s heir.”

“I certainly hope not,” Darcy said flatly, wishing he had the surety to fully refute that. “It seems unlikely to me.”

“Is he flush?” Mr. Bingley asked. “I’m not above her marrying back into trade, so long as the man is respectable and not simply after her dowry.”

“To the best of my knowledge, Wickham has less than five thousand pounds to his name.” Because he spent money as quickly as he came by it. “Nor is he in trade. I do not believe he has a vocation, though he claims to study law. He is, I

admit, gentlemanly, though not a gentleman.” Recalling words spoken by Mr. Bingley’s sisters, Darcy added, “He has told you that he is the son of Mr. George Darcy’s late steward?”

Mr. Bingley nodded, thoughtful once more. “He has, but he is always quite vague about such matters and often implies a much closer relation to his patron than that. I have wondered, but one doesn’t like to be vulgar and press. I learned that much, at least, from my expensive tutors.”

“That sort of good breeding is something Wickham uses to his advantage.”

“So I should warn Caroline off?”

“I would,” Darcy said, and then wished he hadn’t. He shouldn’t get involved. Wickham would find out, or guess who had set the Bingleys against him. He would make Darcy pay, one way or another. Still, even arrogant as she seemed, Miss Bingley didn’t deserve to be tricked into marrying a penniless man who would render her equally so with all the speed he could.

“I thank you for the warning.” Mr. Bingley took back up the list of books and tucked it away, then donned his hat. “I appreciate your frankness, Mr. Darcy.”

“And I appreciate you looking into Wickham’s claims rather than storming in here and demanding your money back, particularly as I believe we have set you up with a very respectable start to a library and with many volumes which will bring you enjoyment.”

Mr. Bingley smiled, looking more the affable young man Darcy had seen on previous visits. He turned away, then swung back, his gaze narrowing. “Just how are you related to the Darcys in Derbyshire?”

Darcy scoured all expression from his face. “By blood.”

“Hah,” Mr. Bingley barked, then chuckled. “Very well. Have it your way, Mr. Darcy,” he said, but made no move to leave. After a moment, he asked, “Has that Miss Bennet been back around?”

“Not since your last visit.”



“So, she’s due,” Mr. Bingley stated with undisguised enthusiasm.

“I cannot say. One does not make an appointment to visit a bookshop.” Although he, too, dearly wished for the Bennet sisters’ return. Perhaps he should send a note to the Gardiners saying that a book had come in that would interest Mr. Gardiner? Or better yet, Mr. Bennet.

But no, he’d already dismissed that idea. He didn’t want Miss Elizabeth to think he saw her as an income opportunity.

He could send a book for Mr. Bennet as a gift. She would surely come to thank him.

“You still won’t tell me the address of her relations?”

Darcy realized Mr. Bingley scrutinized him. “I would not feel right doing that. Were things reversed, and a lady asking for your location, I would likewise show restraint.”

“And I commend you for that, as inconvenient as it may be for me now.”

“Thank you,” Darcy said wryly.

“Well, then, I am off for a walk, as are several of my footmen, all with her description. I’ll find her, even if my staff curses you.” Mr. Bingley said this jovially, then tipped his hat and left.

Darcy stared after, bemused. It was rare to meet someone who didn’t fall for Wickham’s lies. Perhaps he would send not a book, but a note saying that he had a book for Mr. Bennet, and suggesting the ideal time to claim the volume. He would call the book a thank you gift for years of patronage. And maybe, just maybe, Darcy would send a note to Mr. Bingley as well, informing him that he must collect one or two of his books at the very same time.

It seemed the least Darcy could do, and no harm to Miss Bennet, putting her in the way of a gentleman she by all appearance esteemed, and who Darcy knew to be an upright and honest sort of fellow, even if she was a gentleman’s daughter and Bingley only a generation removed from trade. What Miss Bennet chose to do upon meeting Mr. Bingley

again was up to her. For Mr. Bingley's sake, Darcy hoped she would give him the opportunity to woo her.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



Elizabeth and Jane joined their aunt for luncheon only to find their Uncle Gardiner in attendance. Knowing he deemed breaking for lunch a frivolity that only kept him away from home later in the evenings, Elizabeth's curiosity was instantly piqued.

Uncle Gardiner stood to greet them, his expression so jointly eager and pleased as to redouble Elizabeth's initial interest. As she sat, Jane took the chair across the table, her placid expression nearly as agitating to Elizabeth as Uncle Gardiner's eager one. Surely, Jane could not be so unobservant, in which case she ought not be so calm. She knew as well as Elizabeth did that their uncle had been making inquiries about Mr. Bingley.

Once they were all seated and a plate of cold meats, cheeses, and sliced bread set on the table by a maid, Uncle Gardiner cleared his throat. "I have news about this Bingley fellow."

Jane's hand halted for a fraction of a second, then continued moving as she selected several slices of bread. "Oh?"

"His family did come up in trade, his grandfather and then his father both doing quite well for themselves. Quite well indeed." Uncle Gardiner nodded along with his words, reaching for his own bread.

Elizabeth took up a slice of rich brown loaf to nibble at the corner, too interested to be distracted by anything so mundane as food. Jane, in contrast, calmly selected several slices of meat and reached for the mildest of the mustard spreads.

"Then he is not landed gentry?" Aunt Gardiner asked.

Uncle Gardiner shook his head. "He is not, but he himself has left trade behind. His father wanted to see the Bingleys enter those vaunted ranks. He sent Mr. Bingley through Eton and to Cambridge, and his two sisters to finishing school.

Provided them with rather large dowries as well, if rumor is to be believed.”

Elizabeth lowered the bread she nibbled. “We aren’t really interested in Mr. Bingley’s sisters’ dowries, Uncle.”

He cast her an indulgent smile. “No, I suppose not.”

Jane took a bite of her food.

“Well?” Aunt Gardiner pressed. “What more did you learn?”

“A great deal, all of which comes to the fact that Jane has chosen well,” Uncle Gardiner replied. “Mr. Bingley is well-liked and well-respected.”

“And well-thy,” Elizabeth couldn’t resist adding.

Uncle Gardiner nodded. “By all accounts, he has four thousand a year.”

“Oh dear,” Jane murmured and set her food down, crestfallen.

“Whatever is the matter, dear?” Aunt Gardiner asked. “I should think four thousand a year would be enough for anyone.”

Jane raised wide, stricken eyes. “It is too much.”

“Because Mama will fall into a fit of joy that will burst her heart?” Elizabeth suggested.

Jane shook her head. “Because, with his wealth, he can afford a much better gentleman’s daughter than I.”

Elizabeth’s mouth hinged open in surprise for a moment before she rallied to protest such a ludicrous idea. “No gentleman of any rank could do better than you. You are the loveliest, sweetest miss in England. Anyone can see as much. Simply leave this house and approach the very first person you see, and they will be forced to agree with me.”

Aunt Gardiner patted Jane’s hand. “Elizabeth is correct, dear.”

Jane shook her head. “I have no dowry of which to speak, our mother and younger sisters are unsuited to be in company with the truly genteel, and Papa is indifferent.”

That last statement raised Elizabeth’s hackles in an entirely new way. “Papa is not indifferent.”

“He is.” Jane turned sad eyes on her. “You are his favorite, Lizzy. He listens to you and cares about you. He is not the same father to our sisters, or the same gentleman to Mama.”

Further stung on her father’s behalf, Elizabeth protested, “He saved you from Mr. Collins.”

“No. You and Aunt and Uncle Gardiner saved me.”

Was this truly how Jane viewed their father? “Papa intervened to prevent Mr. Collins from proposing to either of us.”

Her expression touched with firmness, Jane replied, “He intervened to minimize the haranguing he must endure.”

Aunt and Uncle Gardiner exchanged a knowing look.

Their tacit agreement with Jane only fueled Elizabeth’s annoyance. “You do not think Mama had words with him over sending us both away when an offer of marriage awaited one of us?”

“I believe that Papa would have endured worse had he permitted Mr. Collins to offer for you, as Mama had begun to press for, because you would have refused our cousin and Papa would have sided with you. He selected the path that infringed on his reading the least, as he always does.”

Elizabeth could only stare at her sister. A glance showed her uncle chewing, his unfocused gaze indicating that he’d stopped listening. Her face angled to her plate, Aunt Gardiner carefully layered meat and cheese onto a slice of bread. “Do you all see Papa this way?” Elizabeth asked.

Aunt Gardiner looked up. “Well, it can be said, at least, that after Jane and you, your father decided to adopt a more distant role when it comes to parenting.”

Elizabeth sat back, thinking. “But only because Mary, Kitty, and Lydia are less interesting to him and a great deal sillier than Jane and I.”

“I daresay the cause and effect of that may be the other way around, dear,” Aunt Gardiner said with an apologetic shrug.

“He sent Mary to the Phillips,” Elizabeth pointed out, not ready to condemn her father as a disinterested parent.

Uncle Gardiner snorted. “To maintain his peace and quiet,” he said, refuting Elizabeth’s belief that he’d long since lost interest in the conversation, as Mr. Bennet would have. “He wrote as much in his letter to me.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “You are mistaking his façade for truth. He says he sent Mary away to protect his quiet, but I am certain he did so for her happiness. He is simply amused by pretending indifference to his wife and daughters. That indifference is not real.”

“Perhaps you are correct, dear,” Aunt Gardiner said soothingly, then turned to Jane. “The real issue at hand is that your fears are nonsense, Jane. You are, as Elizabeth said, all things proper and lovely, and your sisters are young. If this Mr. Bingley cannot see past a few silly relations who simply have not had time to grow up yet, then you cannot truly have found the man who will bring you joy. Furthermore,” she said a touch loudly as Jane made to speak, “I stipulate that if you are as excessively smitten with this Mr. Bingley as you seem, and in view of your feelings being of a unique nature rather than an everyday occurrence, you cannot cheat yourself by ignoring them. You must make an effort to encounter Mr. Bingley and assess the true extent of your attraction.”

“And you may as well let the young man decide for himself if your dowry and relations are not to his liking to such an excessive amount as to turn him from you,” Uncle Gardiner added. “You may think he is wealthy enough to want more by way of a dowry and connections, but he may instead deem himself well enough set up that he can marry purely for affection.”

“In which case, he will certainly choose you,” Aunt Gardiner finished with a firm nod.

Elizabeth watched her aunt and uncle exchange another look of silent communication and wondered if she would ever find such a good match as they had in each other.

Mr. Darcy seemed such a match.

Elizabeth shook her head to clear such thoughts and returned to mulling over the opinions three people she respected held on Mr. Bennet.

“Elizabeth, dear, you have hardly eaten a thing,” Aunt Gardiner said.

Elizabeth picked up her half-eaten piece of bread and returned to nibbling.

A footman strode in. “A letter for you, sir.” He proffered the salver.

Mr. Gardiner took up the rather thin page and cracked the seal. He skimmed for a moment. “Is Mr. Darcy’s bookshop not where you encountered Mr. Bingley?”

Elizabeth’s eyes flew wide at mention of Mr. Darcy. She reached for another piece of bread to distract from any emotion that might show on her face, wishing her heartbeat hadn’t quickened so at the man’s name.

“It is,” Jane replied eagerly.

“Interesting,” Uncle Gardiner drawled.

Aunt Gardiner looked from Jane to Elizabeth, then said, “Do not keep us in suspense.”

“This is a note from Mr. Darcy, proprietor of that bookshop.” Uncle Gardiner waggled the page. “He claims he wishes to present a small volume as a gift for Mr. Bennet, to thank him for being such a fine customer, and writes that he feels Monday at two would be the ideal time to present Miss Bennet with the volume to take with her at such time as she leaves London.”

“Miss Bennet?” Elizabeth echoed. No mention of her, then. Not even, *the Miss Bennets*. Elizabeth attempted to ignore how much that oversight hurt.

“Oh, do you think he invited Mr. Bingley there at the same hour?” Jane asked, her eyes wide and bright.

Uncle Gardiner turned the page over, but it contained nothing more save the address.

“I cannot imagine why else he would send such a note,” Aunt Gardiner said with equal excitement. “Monday at two is too specific for a plan not to be afoot.”

Jane stood abruptly. “What should I wear?”

Elizabeth looked up at her sister in surprise, taking in the note of panic in her voice. “I daresay that’s something to decide on Monday.”

Jane shook her head. “I must decide now.” She twined her fingers. “His sister was dressed so finely. I do not own anything as fine.”

“I don’t believe your gown was what he noted when you met,” Elizabeth said, bemused. She’d never seen Jane so distraught.

“There’s no time to get anything new.” Aunt Gardiner looked as flummoxed as Elizabeth by Jane’s odd behavior.

Jane shook her head. “I have been browsing fashion plates. I will alter my cream and sage gown. I will need some of your ribbons, Lizzy. I had best begin now.” With that, she rushed from the room.

Elizabeth stared after her. Jane seemed very rattled.

“Oh dear,” Aunt Gardiner murmured. “I do hope this Mr. Bingley is as smitten with Jane as she is with him.”

“He did appear to be,” Elizabeth said, hoping she was correct. “His sister seemed as if she will be a trial, though. Very full of her own importance, that one.” She turned to her uncle. “Did you happen to learn anything about the Hursts, Uncle? The married sister and her husband, that is.”



Uncle Gardiner nodded. "A bit. He's old money. They live well, if modestly. He is liked at his club. Nothing out of the ordinary there."

Elizabeth turned to look after Jane again, though her sister had long since disappeared. "Monday ought to be interesting."

"I will accompany you," Aunt Gardiner said firmly, and slanted a quick look at her husband.

"Thank you," Elizabeth replied with a smile, recalling that her aunt must return two books and pay for one. "I am not certain a maid and I alone would be enough oversight. I have never seen Jane like this."

"Reminds me of Fanny when she met your father," Uncle Gardiner said to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth frowned, not caring for the comparison of Jane to their mother. Mama was not the sane, rational creature Jane was. Usually. Elizabeth shook her head, hoping her uncle's comparison would not prove too apt.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Darcy stood behind the counter watching Mr. Bingley pace. He held his hat, tapping it against his leg as he walked, his agitation clear. Darcy could only hope no other patrons entered, for Mr. Bingley's behavior would drive them away. Unable to resist glancing over his shoulder at the clock, he took in the time. It was still twenty to two.

Mr. Bingley made four more circuits by the time Mr. Gardiner's carriage, etched into Darcy's memory after the morning he first saw Elizabeth disembark from the conveyance, came to a halt outside the bookshop. Another glance showed it to be ten to. Miss Bennet was early, and hopefully accompanied by her sister.

"Her uncle's carriage has arrived," Darcy announced.

Midstride, Mr. Bingley pivoted to face the door. He shoved his hat on his head.

Darcy watched Mrs. Gardiner disembark, then Miss Bennet. Tension filling him, he waited.

The footman turned back and handed Miss Elizabeth down. Darcy relaxed, a smile easing onto his face. He'd hoped, almost dared to assume, that she would accompany her sister. He hadn't included her in his note, much as he'd wanted to. In fact, his deep desire to do so was what had convinced him it would be improper. After the scene in the Gardiners' entrance hall, he thought of Elizabeth far, far too often.

The three entered, walking resolutely past Mr. Bingley without acknowledging him, though pink rose in Miss Bennet's cheeks. Mr. Bingley pivoted to watch her pass, his expression besotted.

When they reached the counter, Mrs. Gardiner nodded in greeting and said, "Mr. Darcy, here are two of the books you so kindly brought over, and I would like to purchase the third."

“I am happy to hear one was to your liking, Mrs. Gardiner.” Darcy emphasized her name for Mr. Bingley’s sake and accepted the payment she slid across the counter. He then turned to Miss Bennet, assuming she would claim the book he had ready for Mr. Bennet, though he longed most to speak with Elizabeth.

Miss Bennet had her face turned downward, her head angled to peek behind her, although Darcy imagined she could see little more than Mr. Bingley’s hessians at that angle.

Mrs. Gardiner, too, studied her niece. She raised her eyebrows and turned back to Darcy with a shrug. “It seems you have a gift for my nieces to bring to their father, Mr. Bennet of Longbourn?” She said the gentleman’s name and estate quite loudly, obviously for Mr. Bingley’s ears.

“I do, Mrs. Gardiner.” Darcy hoped that somehow true introductions might be made, for this had all begun to seem quite silly. He took a small, wrapped book from under the counter. “It occurred to me somewhat belatedly that I missed an excellent opportunity to send a token of my thanks for Mr. Bennet’s years of patronage.” He slid the book across the counter.

“What is it about?” Elizabeth asked.

He turned to her, pleased for the excuse to finally do so. “It is a catalog of river and lake dwelling fish. I assume Mr. Bennet keeps a well-stocked pond.”

Elizabeth nodded. “He does, although he rarely fishes. Some of the locals have permission to, and my Uncle Gardiner enjoys the activity when he visits.”

“Does he?” It was on Darcy’s tongue to offer fishing at Pemberley someday, but he bit the words back.

Elizabeth nodded.

“Yes, he does,” Mrs. Gardiner confirmed.

Silence resounded. Darcy sought about for something more to add. Amusement sparked in Elizabeth’s eyes. Miss Bennet craned her neck to look over her shoulder.

Mr. Bingley cleared his throat, striding across the shop to join them. "I say, Mr. Darcy, I don't mean to interrupt but I couldn't help but hear talk of fishing."

Mrs. Gardiner turned to him. "Do you fish, Mr....?" She trailed off questioningly.

"Mr. Bingley," he said with a bow. "Charles Bingley."

"I am Mrs. Gardiner. These are my nieces, Miss Jane Bennet and Miss Elizabeth Bennet, of Longbourn in Hertfordshire." Mrs. Gardiner offered a warm smile as she performed the introductions she'd obviously come to make.

Mr. Bingley bowed again. "It is my great pleasure to make your acquaintances, Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Bennet, ah, Miss Elizabeth."

The last, Bingley said tentatively, and Darcy realized he hadn't paid any heed to Elizabeth's name, too enamored with Miss Bennet to hear. Taking in the now sardonic twist to Elizabeth's mouth, Darcy didn't think she'd missed the slip, or doubted the impetus.

"Do you fish, then, Mr. Bingley?" Miss Bennet reiterated softly.

"Well, no," Mr. Bingley admitted. "I've never had the pleasure. I do not have access to a pond."

"Perhaps if you ever visit Hertfordshire, you might employ our father's," Miss Bennet said. "He has the pond stocked with trout."

"I would like that very much, Miss Bennet."

They locked gazes, falling silent as they studied each other with dreamy expressions.

Elizabeth watched them for a moment, then gestured to her aunt and said, "Mr. Darcy, could you show us your wonderful Shakespeare collection? I have quite forgotten the location."

He doubted that, but he nodded, coming around the counter. "This way."

About halfway across the shop Mrs. Gardiner halted, looking back at Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet, who now conversed in low tones. "Perhaps I will browse these." Without looking, she pulled free what Darcy knew to be a travel journal.

He looked a question at Elizabeth, wondering if she still wished for him to accompany her into the tall shelves.

"Lead on, please, Mr. Darcy."

He did, hoping she wasn't driven entirely by the desire to give Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet greater privacy. Dare he think that Elizabeth wished for his company?

The moment they stepped between the shelves she turned to him. Her voice low, she asked, "May I inquire as to how long you have known Mr. Bingley?"

Darcy's hope vanished like early morning fog. He should have expected that her goal was to quiz him on behalf of her sister. "You may, but you will be disappointed, as the answer is that I have known him hardly longer than I have known you, Miss Elizabeth."

She frowned, proving him correct.

"But what I have seen of him suggests an intelligent, upright gentleman," Darcy added.

Elizabeth nodded. "Is there aught more you know of him?"

Darcy considered what more he might say. By rights, he should not attempt to influence the future of either Mr. Bingley or Miss Bennet, and yet he already had by bringing them together. "Has not your uncle made inquiries about the gentleman?"

Her lips quirked. "He has. I wanted to know what you would say."

Testing him, was she? How alive her eyes became when mischief touched them. "What is it you hope to hear?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "I wondered if you would mention his wealth, or his roots in trade."

“Mr. Bingley is wealthy, and has connections to trade,” Darcy offered dryly.

“And which of those do you believe my sister must consider as she contemplates his suitability?”

Darcy shook his head. “I cannot say. That in large part must depend on Miss Bennet’s ambitions.”

“Jane’s ambition is happiness.”

“Laudable, but what does she require for that happiness? Connections? Wealth? A country home?”

Elizabeth considered that. “I will admit that wealth would be a boon.” She cast him a quick look, then dropped her gaze. “We have little in the way of dowries and our father’s estate is entailed away.”

Was he imagining that she’d made a point of mentioning that to him? “I believe that Mr. Bingley has enough wealth that he does not need his marriage to bring in more.” Darcy did not know the details of Mr. Bingley’s finances, but the way he and his sister dressed, his copious spending on books, and Wickham’s attachment to him all pointed to money.

Elizabeth turned away to contemplate the shelves. “So you feel that a man with connections to trade who does not have so much wealth as Mr. Bingley would care about Jane’s lack of a dowry? Even though, as the daughter of a gentleman, she could be seen as elevating him?”

“Again, I would direct you to consider ambitions. I cannot say what those of this hypothetical man are, and so do not know how he would value a large dowry, or what emphasis he would place on wedding a gentleman’s daughter. In particular, I cannot say how these qualities would affect his interest in Miss Bennet.”

“You are very careful in your replies,” Elizabeth observed.

“I am endeavoring to be.” Darcy was uncertain what precise goal lay behind her inquiries, but he knew he did not want to answer incorrectly.

Elizabeth trailed a finger lightly down the spine of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. "What if I were to state that in a union, both parties should seek to improve their circumstances?"

"Then I would agree but would also stipulate that improvement takes many forms."

She appeared to turn that over in her mind. "Such as?"

"Obviously wealth, standing, and land come to mind, but I would argue that security and affection have great value. Perhaps incalculable value."

"You would value affection as much as wealth?" she asked, turning from the shelves to look up at him.

"No. Not as much as. I would place affection above wealth."

She studied his face, a smile tugging at her lips. "Why, Mr. Darcy, you are a romantic."

"I am afraid it may be a symptom of being a bookshop proprietor."

"When you implied you have read most of the books here, I never imagined you included those that my fifteen-year-old sister would enjoy."

"You have another sister?" he asked, more for something to say than because he cared. He loved the way Elizabeth's eyes sparkled when a topic engaged her.

"I do. In fact, we have three younger sisters who are not here in London with us, and no brothers, so you can imagine the importance of any union Jane might make to my family."

"Ah yes," he said, recalling her pointed statement about dowries. "The entail."

Elizabeth scrunched her nose into an adorable grimace. "Yes. Someday, hopefully far, far from now, when my father leaves us, our home will go to our cousin, which is all the more aggravating as he has what seems to be a good living already, being a rector in a parish called Hunsford, in Kent."

“Mr. Collins?” Darcy blurted, familiar with the dithering lackey his Uncle Lewis had instilled in Hunsford.

Elizabeth stared at him in surprise. “You know our cousin?”

Why had he spoken? “I do.”

“Do you have family in Kent, then?”

“Yes.”

Elizabeth tipped her head to the side, regarding him. “You have become quite monosyllabic, Mr. Darcy. Am I to take it that you do not get on with your family there?”

He shook his head. “My pardon for my brevity. Yes, I do have family there and we do get on. I visit each spring for Easter.”

Understanding eased the question from her features. “Hence your knowledge of Mr. Collins, for I am to understand from him that he puts special effort into his holiday sermons. He boasted of the length of them.”

Darcy could only chuckle at that. “It is all I can do not to doze off.”

“And have you ever met the vaunted Sir Lewis de Bourgh and his daughter? Mr. Collins speaks endlessly of them, and with such high praise as I cannot quite give credit to.”

“Can you not?”

She shook her head, mischievous once more. “How can I accept as all things laudable a man who would select Mr. Collins as his rector?”

Darcy had never understood his uncle’s choice, except perhaps for the ease of constant agreement and the way the man praised Anne, rather than condemning her ways as many did. “I know much good of Sir Lewis, but I can offer no explanation as to his selection of Mr. Collins.”

“And Sir Lewis’s daughter?”

“His daughter?” They’d returned to treacherous ground.



“Mr. Collins calls her a paragon of womanhood, and yet any direct tale of her he offers has her hunting fox or galloping about on her stallion, and I have deduced her to be unwed despite what must be a considerable fortune, for he has assured us that she is heir to her home.” Elizabeth frowned. “What is it called? Rollings?”

“Rosings,” Darcy offered. “And yes, Miss de Bourgh is a vigorous, out of doors sort.”

“Have you had occasion to meet them often?”

“They are, certainly, always in church on Easter and I have on occasion delivered volumes to Rosings directly.” Though only as gifts, for Sir Lewis would not condone patronizing Darcy’s shop.

“I can see why, if they urgently sought a volume from London, they would send for you, Mr. Darcy.”

“You can?” he asked, frowning.

Elizabeth nodded. “You must fit there quite well. Your manners are very gentlemanly.”

“I do try to carry books on comportment,” he said wryly.

She laughed, much to his delight.

“Elizabeth?” Mrs. Gardiner’s voice called.

“Yes, Aunt?” Elizabeth answered, stepping from the seclusion of the shelves, Darcy following.

“It is time to go. Have you selected a book?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “We did not get to books.”

Mrs. Gardiner’s gaze narrowed. “Then whatever have you been doing back there for so long?”

“We were discussing Mr. Collins,” Elizabeth replied.

Her words drove all suspicion from Mrs. Gardiner’s face. “Your cousin?”

“Yes, madam,” Darcy said, feeling as if he should bolster Elizabeth’s defense, though nothing untoward had occurred... because a part of him very much wished that weren’t so. “I

have attended Mr. Collins' sermons in Kent. I have relations there."

Mrs. Gardiner smiled. "What a happy coincidence."

"Not for Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth said with another laugh. "Not when he has been made to listen to our cousin's sermons."

Mrs. Gardiner shook her head and turned to the front of the shop, where Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet still stood together, speaking softly. "Jane, dear, it is time for us to depart."

Miss Bennet looked over with clear reluctance, then back at Mr. Bingley. She spoke to him, too quiet to hear. He bowed over her hand, then crossed to her aunt to bow again.

"Mrs. Gardiner, may I have permission to call on you?" he asked eagerly.

Mrs. Gardiner nodded and fished a card from her reticule. "You may, Mr. Bingley."

He grinned. "Splendid. Thank you."

Mrs. Gardiner gathered her nieces, nodded pleasantly to Mr. Bingley again, and departed Darcy's shop. Elizabeth, the last to leave, looked back at him with a smile before slipping out the door.

Striding to the front window, Darcy joined Mr. Bingley to watch the three be handed up into Mr. Gardiner's carriage.

"Fine equipage, that," Mr. Bingley observed, then let out a long sigh. "She's the most splendid miss I have ever met, Darcy. She's perfection."

"May I assume you speak of Miss Bennet?"

"Who else?" Mr. Bingley asked with another sigh. "She's an angel descended to earth. A Venus who walks among us mere mortals. A siren, calling me into the depths of matrimony."

"What did you learn about her?" Darcy broke in before Mr. Bingley could mash together any more mythos. He felt a sudden, poignant responsibility for this too-affable young man.

Did Mr. Bingley have anyone to go to for advice on such weighty decisions as marriage? Anyone aside from his sisters, that was.

“Learn about her? I told you. That she’s an angel.” Mr. Bingley looked after the departing carriage longingly and let out yet another sigh.

“Did you, for example, seek hints about her family or dowry? Her connections? Her circumstances?”

Mr. Bingley shook his head. “I care nothing for any of it.”

“But your relations might.” And Wickham might as well, if he thought Miss Bennet would interfere with him taking Mr. Bingley’s money.

“Louisa and Caroline?” Mr. Bingley said, confirming Darcy’s suspicion that he would receive no parental guidance. “They will be overjoyed to have such a lovely sister. How could they not be? She’s a step up for me, you know, if we must be practical about it. She’s a gentleman’s daughter.”

“Yes, but a country gentleman who clearly has connections in trade and who, I feel obliged to warn you, has provided his daughters with no dowries.”

Mr. Bingley shrugged. “I don’t want to boast, Darcy, but I have no need to wed for money.”

Darcy had suspected as much. “And there are sisters and a mother who will require looking after once Mr. Bennet is gone. His estate is entailed,” he added, realizing Elizabeth must have ensured he received that information for the very purpose of imparting it to Mr. Bingley. Darcy’s brief hope that she had wanted him to know her circumstances was laughable. Why would she care if a shopkeeper knew she had no money or land to bring to a union?

Mr. Bingley frowned slightly. “There are? Well, that sister of hers, Beth was it? She seems pleasant enough. How much of a burden could that be? And if the other sister is anything like Miss Bennet, she’ll be married upon her come out.”

Darcy frowned, both at Mr. Bingley’s lack of memory for Elizabeth’s name and his reasoning. “There are, in fact, three

other sisters. Four, if you include Miss *Elizabeth*, and she and Miss Bennet both strike me as at least twenty.”

Mr. Bingley shook his head. “Don’t leave me feeling obtuse, man. What has her age to do with things?”

“Neither are yet married, for which there must be some explanation, and I cannot help but note that their gowns are not of the finest fabric and are made over, though with skill.”

“I already told you that I don’t need funds.” The look Mr. Bingley turned on Darcy was a touch hostile. “Are you attempting to dissuade me from courting Miss Bennet? On so little acquaintance with either of us?”

Darcy shook his head. “I would not presume. I am merely suggesting that a trip to Hertfordshire may be in order to discover why they are not yet wed and why such little effort seems to be going into seeing them so. And you would do well to acquaint yourself with the whole of the family before you take on the commitment of wedding the eldest daughter. As you are likely to be the best any of the five can do in marriage, you will be assuming a certain level of responsibility to the mother and other four sisters.” Unless, somehow, Darcy could...but no. He should not even contemplate such things. He had no right to think of Miss Elizabeth in such terms. Not as things stood.

“The aunt seemed respectable enough,” Mr. Bingley said stiffly. He stared out the window for a long moment, then his shoulders slumped. “You are likely correct. I had best meet the lot of them. I cannot imagine they are anything too awful, but it’s best to know, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It is best to know.”

Mr. Bingley turned to him, his ready smile back. “Well, I’ll make a day of it, then, later in the week. After I call tomorrow.”

“Or you could investigate them before you call and raise the lady’s hopes,” Darcy suggested. And before Mr. Bingley’s affection for Miss Bennet grew beyond all prudence.

Mr. Bingley frowned again, but he nodded. “Tomorrow, then, I am off to Hertfordshire.” He tapped his hat down more securely on his head. “Thank you for orchestrating this, Darcy. I’ll return the favor. Maybe come up with a reason for you to drop by at some point. I’m sure you could use a bit more entertainment than books and Miss Bennet’s sister seems to fancy your conversation.”

Darcy dipped his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Mr. Bingley departed then, leaving Darcy alone and envious. How he would like to dash off to Hertfordshire and make enquiries into the Bennets. He missed the freedom that ready coin allowed. He missed the assurance that anyone, gentleman or lady, duke or earl, would be happy to make his acquaintance. Since meeting Elizabeth, for the first time in a long time, he truly missed being Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



As Elizabeth mended, she cast frequent looks at Jane. Mr. Bingley had not called the day after they met him in Mr. Darcy's shop, nor yet today. Jane was, to Elizabeth's eye, quite despondent. Her needlework was slow. Her gaze often went to the clock on the mantel. Her whole countenance seemed to droop. Elizabeth wished Aunt Gardiner were not so busy with her household. Perhaps she would know how to cheer Jane.

"It hasn't been even two days," Elizabeth murmured. "He could still call this afternoon."

"I thought he would call yesterday." Jane's quiet voice was full of worry.

"He may have had previous obligations. He seems a social sort of gentleman."

"Does he?" Jane looked over eagerly, as if Elizabeth could give true insight.

Elizabeth shrugged. "You are the one who spoke with him. My assessment is more an impression." Based on Mr. Bingley's flashy conveyance and showy coat and waistcoat, in such stark contrast to Mr. Darcy's sober garb.

Not that a true comparison could be made. Had he money, who knew how Mr. Darcy would dress?

Except that Elizabeth did know. He would don dark colors. Blues, she thought, and black or gray. With no flashy gold and silver embroidery. Simply a slightly contrasting waistcoat and a crisp white lawn shirt and cravat. Perhaps an elegant cravat pin. A single diamond, or a sapphire. He was so upright, so tall and handsome, he needed no adornment. He would still capture every eye in the room.

Particularly if he danced. He must dance well, mustn't he? Did the proprietors of shops even learn to dance? Certainly, at the public assemblies in Meryton some did. Mr. Darcy would be such a joy to dance with. So strong and sure.

“There are letters for you, misses,” a maid said.

Elizabeth started. She hadn't even noticed the girl enter the room. Jane cast her a questioning look and Elizabeth shrugged, pleased the maid was there so her sister couldn't ask her what so fully occupied her thoughts. The maid presented the salver to Jane, who sat nearest the door.

“Thank you,” Jane said. Holding up the letters, she turned to Elizabeth as the maid departed. “There is one from Mary and one from Mama.”

“I will read Mary's.”

Jane shook her head. “Really, Mama is not that terrible,” she said but she gave Mary's letter to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth opened the letter to what appeared to be a detailed account of how Kitty and Lydia were making cakes of themselves with the officers stationed in Meryton, who Mary saw a great deal more of as she still resided with the Phillips. Curious if her sister's missive contained any actual news, Elizabeth skimmed words she would read in more detail later. Mary's mention of spending time with a Mr. Denny caught her eye, but as the next paragraph contained the name of Elizabeth's dear friend, Charlotte Lucas, she skipped over Mr. Denny for now.

“Oh no,” Elizabeth breathed. “Mary says that Mr. Collins proposed to Charlotte and that she has accepted.” Elizabeth shook her head. “It cannot be true. I will not credit such a thing until I hear it from Charlotte herself.” How could her intelligent, sensible friend possibly commit to a life with Mr. Collins? It was unthinkable. “Does Mama mention anything about it?”

Jane made no reply.

Elizabeth looked up from her letter.

Jane gaped at the pages she held, her eyes swimming with tears.

Alarmed, Elizabeth set her mending aside and went to her sister. “Jane, whatever is the matter?”

“Oh Lizzy, it is awful. It is too awful.” Jane burst into tears.

Elizabeth plucked the letter from her sister’s hands. “Has something happened to Papa?” She skimmed past her mother’s salutation to read:

*You will never guess what happened today. Your Uncle Phillips brought by a young gentleman by the name of Mr. Charles Bingley. I must tell you, he arrived in a very fine carriage so I asked him almost immediately what a gentleman’s income must be to have such a fine conveyance. To which he merely chuckled but I was quite meaningful in my question, thinking of my Lydia and how sadly the officers are disappointing her.*

*Mr. Phillips owned that Mr. Bingley is interested in the neighborhood and wanted to meet one of the families with whom he might associate should he join our society. I informed him that he had selected the correct family because the Lucases are foul, treacherous creatures, as like to snatch a man’s last piece of bread from his mouth as show kindness to him. I daresay Mr. Bingley must have listened carefully to all I had to say of the Lucases and thought diligently upon my words, for he seemed to have no ready reply at the end of my discourse. I feel I have done my duty well in taking the time to warn him of their deceitful natures.*

*To wit, you should know that hussy, Charlotte Lucas, is to wed Mr. Collins, stolen right from under our Mary’s nose. Shame on her for all the years she pretended friendship with you, Lizzy. Of course, I should have seen that she merely lay in wait for such an opportunity. After all, what else could cause anyone to be such a true friend to you as she erstwhile seemed?*

*My warning issued, we invited Mr. Bingley in, for we had until then been speaking in the drive, and we sat for tea. He brought up trout ponds, of all things, but you well know your mama’s skill and I turned the conversation back to his income, which he eventually owned to be four thousand a year, so we can imagine it to be at least five thousand, for he seemed a bashful sort of fellow who has little to say.*



Elizabeth grimaced, quite certain that Mrs. Bennet had given Mr. Bingley little opportunity to speak.

*I questioned him more, quite adroitly to be certain, and learned that he is unmarried and to select a residence soon. I extolled the virtues of Netherfield Park quite fully and expect him to lease it in a matter of days. He was all amiability at the idea.*

*We, Lydia, Kitty and myself, also learned that the gentleman has one unmarried sister and one married one and, sadly, no brothers equally as well funded as he or otherwise. A brother, even one with a lesser income, might have done for Kitty. Mr. Bingley is obviously for Lydia. He was quite smitten with her, I assure you, and when he made to leave, after spending a full two hours in our company, Lydia caught him under the kissing bough in the parlor doorway and claimed their first kiss.*

Elizabeth cast a quick look at Jane, finding her sister blotting her eyes with her handkerchief.

*The poor fellow, reserved as he is, turned a rather startling red so I am certain he enjoyed the experience. He must have, for he stood there gaping like a fish, still right under the bough, so Lydia could kiss him again. Then, laughing, Kitty said she must have a turn, but the ridiculous girl sneezed in his face before their lips could meet.*

*No matter, to be certain, as he is destined for Lydia. I always knew she would marry well, and Mr. Bingley is quite wealthy.*

*He then requested to speak with your father but I put an end to that notion immediately. You know how off-putting Mr. Bennet can be. I could not have him ruining Lydia's chances. So I bundled Mr. Bingley out the door, your uncle as well, and we three stood waving until I was certain he was gone, to ensure he did not somehow encounter my most contrary husband.*

*Which is all to say that you both must remain in London for as long as possible. I will not have you return to snatch Mr. Bingley's attentions from Lydia, Jane, for she has her*

*heart set on the union and has already kissed the gentleman twice. I know that Lydia is the prettiest of the five of you and that her vivacity will make her the most suitable wife for Mr. Bingley, but he will not have seen that yet and we cannot permit you to distract him, Jane. And if Jane will remain, so must you, Elizabeth, for it is certainly not worth sending the carriage simply to bring you home.*

*Yours in haste, for I must take my Lydia to have new gowns made up, for Mr. Bingley is certain to return soon to court her if his stunned demeanor after her kisses is any true indication, which it must be,*

*Your Mother*

Elizabeth lowered the page. She swallowed, tried to adopt a neutral expression, and turned to Jane. “Perhaps it is not as terrible as it sounds. We should show this to Aunt Gardiner and ask her opinion.”

Jane dropped her face to her palms. From between her fingers issued forth, “That is why he has not called. How can he, after such behavior? Like as not, he does not wish to ever set eyes on me again.”

“He did not call yesterday because he was in Meryton, which you must own shows considerable interest in you. He went all the way to Longbourn to see Papa, and that after only speaking with you once.”

“He has not called today either, nor will he.” Jane raised stricken eyes. “Could they not have behaved with decorum for once? Only this once?”

Elizabeth forewent pointing out that without her and Jane there to mitigate them, or even Mary, there had been little chance of their mother and youngest two sisters behaving well. She glanced at the clock. “It is early for callers. He may still come.”

Jane cast her an incredulous look.

An idea struck Elizabeth. “We should go to the bookshop.”

“Whatever for?”

“Mr. Darcy is our only shared acquaintance. If anyone knows aught of Mr. Bingley, he will.”

Jane shook her head. “He is only a shopkeeper. Mr. Bingley would not confide in him.”

Pushing back her resentment at Jane’s use of ‘only,’ Elizabeth said, “And yet, he and Mr. Darcy obviously colluded to bring us to the bookshop at the same time as Mr. Bingley was there.”

“Like as not, Mr. Bingley arranged that.” Jane dabbed at her eyes again, her face already returned to normal after her bout of weeping. Another enviable trait. When Elizabeth cried, she remained red and puffy for hours. “We certainly have Mr. Bingley to thank for the book we are to give Papa.”

Elizabeth frowned. “Mr. Darcy wrote to Uncle Gardiner that he had a gift for Papa. Do you mean to say you believe him to have lied?”

“Not lied, precisely.” Jane shrugged. “More, gone along with Mr. Bingley’s story.”

Elizabeth drew in a breath and let it out. Truly, there was no point in arguing. Particularly with Jane already distraught. “Regardless, my point stands. If we know anyone who might be able to tell us news of Mr. Bingley, it will be Mr. Darcy.”

“I suppose you are correct.” Jane looked down at her hands, twisting her handkerchief. “It is a scant hope but our only one. Oh, why did he feel the need to travel to Longbourn?”

“He would have met our relations eventually. If he will not tolerate them, is it not best to know now?”

Jane merely sighed.

“Come. I will ask Aunt Gardiner if we may borrow the carriage and a maid, and you make ready.” Elizabeth stood, shoving Mrs. Bennet’s letter into the pocket of her gown, to give to their aunt.

Hopefully, their aunt would have some notion of how to repair the damage their mother and sisters had surely done. In

the meantime, a trip to the bookshop would distract Jane. And who knew? Mr. Darcy might even have news for them, and Elizabeth imagined there was some small hope of that news being good.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Ledger in hand, Darcy walked the shelves. He rarely found a discrepancy between the books his records said he had and what could be found in the shop, but he still preferred to check. Particularly in December when he sold more books than usual. He'd already had four customers today, though only three made purchases.

The bell on the door jangled and, as now happened every time he heard that sound, hope he might see Elizabeth surged through him. He repressed it, adopted an amiable expression to hide his nearly inevitable disappointment, and turned.

Only to find a pair of fine eyes regarding him from across the shop.

Exerting his will, he managed not to rush forward to greet her. Fortuitous, as her sister entered behind her, followed by a maid. Darcy marked his place in the ledger and closed it, then tucked the stub of the pencil he'd wielded into his pocket, shortly followed by his spectacles.

Miss Bennet pushed past her sister, hurrying to him. "Mr. Darcy."

He dipped his head. "Miss Bennet."

"I realize this is an odd, perhaps even untoward, question, but have you seen Mr. Bingley of late?" she asked in a rush. "The gentleman we met in your shop on Monday."

"You have not seen him?"

Her eyes wide and filled with worry, she shook her head.

"Nor have I." Had Mr. Bingley taken his advice and visited Hertfordshire, then? To what conclusion? "It has been only two days, however. Did he say something to make you believe he would call with immediacy?"

Miss Bennet frowned slightly. "No. Nothing in particular. It is simply that I felt he would, and now he has not, and..." She

trailed off and cast a stricken look over her shoulder at her sister.

Elizabeth came forward to join them. “To be frank, Mr. Darcy, we received a letter from our mother detailing Mr. Bingley visiting Longbourn, our home.”

“Certainly you must consider that encouraging?” Darcy suggested, though he discerned from the worry on their faces that they did not. Was there, then, some terrible secret the sisters kept? Some reason two lovely and intelligent young women such as they were not yet married?

Elizabeth grimaced. “It would seem encouraging but that our younger sisters are perhaps a touch spoiled, which has made them somewhat willful, and our mother can be...” She scrunched her face, thinking.

“A bit enthusiastic,” Miss Bennet supplied.

“We worry that without us there to gently guide the conversation they may have given Mr. Bingley a less than desirable impression of themselves,” Elizabeth continued.

“Then you do not believe that a gentleman has the right to familiarize himself with a lady’s relations before he begins to court her?” Darcy countered. “It seems to me that such a precaution could avoid unnecessary sorrow later, if the lady’s affection is engaged and then her relations are deemed unsuitable.”

“He means to court me?” Miss Bennet breathed.

“You seem to have given the idea considerable thought, Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth stated flatly, scrutinizing him.

Darcy took a deep breath, feeling as if he stood on a sheet of ice over a pond, and he’d just heard a loud crack. “If you must know, I advised Mr. Bingley to travel to attempt to make the acquaintance of your family.”

Miss Bennet gasped.

Her eyes flashing with fury, Elizabeth opened her mouth.

The bell rang, halting her words. They all turned to see Mr. Bingley enter.

“Miss Bennet,” he cried. “I hoped to find you here. I called at your aunt and uncle’s and your aunt directed me here.” He bowed, his attention fixed on Miss Bennet.

“You called?” Miss Bennet repeated hopefully.

Mr. Bingley nodded, coming across the shop to join them. “Yes, to make a confession to you and to beg for your understanding.”

“You have it,” Miss Bennet said instantly.

“Then I must confess that I took it upon myself to seek introduction to your relations yesterday, at Longbourn, and toured the village of Meryton and a nearby property by the name of Netherfield Park.”

Darcy’s eyebrows shot up. It sounded as if Mr. Bingley had made the most of his day north of London.

Mr. Bingley gazed down at Miss Bennet in adoration and continued, “I hope I have not overstepped.”

“That depends,” Elizabeth said, casting Darcy a sharp, anger-edged look. “How did you find our little corner of Hertfordshire, Mr. Bingley?”

“Lovely,” Mr. Bingley replied, his gaze locked on Miss Bennet. “A semblance of heaven. Couldn’t have enjoyed it more. Everyone was quite welcoming. Fine community.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Darcy took in Elizabeth’s incredulousness.

Miss Bennet awarded Mr. Bingley a radiant smile, her shoulders relaxing to a more natural angle. “I am pleased to hear that.”

“There was one, ah, incident.” Red rose up the back of Mr. Bingley’s neck. “Something I would like to discuss with you, if I may, in some privacy.”

Instantly, Miss Bennet’s happiness dimmed. “Certainly.” She looked about, then pointed to the front of the shop, at the corner opposite where the maid who accompanied the sisters stood. “Perhaps we could speak over there?”

“That will do.” Mr. Bingley offered his arm, which Miss Bennet accepted.

The moment they moved away Elizabeth turned to Darcy. “What right have you to interfere between Jane and Mr. Bingley?” she demanded, her words quiet but not lacking in vehemence.

“Then you do not agree that there would have been no point in further raising your sister’s hopes if, upon acquaintance with your relations, Mr. Bingley’s affection dimmed?”

Rather than answer, Elizabeth studied his face. “You feel, then, that affection is that fleeting? That if you cared for a lady but found her relations distasteful, your affection would simply vanish?”

He stared at her, considering that, then glanced over to where Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet spoke. She, too, had red staining her cheeks and he wondered what they discussed to cause them both such discomfort. Turning back to Elizabeth, Darcy said quietly, “No. I must confess that I believe, were my affections engaged, no number of aggravating relations could alter my opinion.”

“Then you deem Mr. Bingley less stalwart than you?”

Darcy grimaced. “I have already admitted to but a brief acquaintance with him.”

“Yet, you seemed to feel it your place to suggest he take a journey north.”

The metaphorical ice beneath him was definitely cracking. Darcy dropped his gaze to the worn shop floor. Looking back up, he shrugged. “I cannot apologize for thus advising him. He seems somewhat impulsive. I thought to save both of them heartache.” He held up a hand when Elizabeth made to speak. “I admit, it is not my place to advise him. I know little of him. I can only plead a certain feeling of responsibility for my role in bringing the two together, a feeling bolstered by the knowledge that he seems to have no relations to turn to other than his sisters.”



Elizabeth grew thoughtful, much of the rigid anger leaving her frame. “You invented the notion of gifting our father that book?”

“Yes. I will own to that.”

She shook her head. “Why? Do you care so deeply for the future of a man you only recently met?”

Dare he own up to the truth? Yes, he’d seen the way the two looked at one another and wished to assist them, but he’d longed to see Elizabeth again as well. Would he have assisted Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet if not for her?

“Or was it my sister who inspired you to offer assistance?” Elizabeth pressed.

“What if I said that I sent that note in the hope you would accompany Miss Bennet back to my shop?”

Elizabeth’s eyes went wide.

Darcy held his breath, awaiting her response.

“Elizabeth,” Miss Bennet called, hurrying across the shop. She looked back and forth between them, worry in her eyes, but adopted a sunny expression as she said, “Mr. Bingley has invited us on a picnic tomorrow. Is that not a fine idea?”

Elizabeth looked past her sister to smile at Mr. Bingley, who followed more slowly. “It is, if the weather holds and we dress warmly.”

“Then it is settled.” Miss Bennet took Elizabeth’s arm and turned her away from Darcy. “Unless our aunt has some urgent need for us, we will see you tomorrow, Mr. Bingley.”

Mr. Bingley tipped his hat. “I look forward to it, Miss Bennet, and will send round the details of our outing.”

“Thank you,” Miss Bennet replied. “I look forward to becoming better acquainted with your sisters.” With a final look of adoration for Mr. Bingley, Miss Bennet ushered Elizabeth away.

At the door, Elizabeth turned to meet Darcy’s gaze, hers searching. As much as he wished to, he found he could not

interpret her expression. Then she was gone, the maid trailing after.

Mr. Bingley turned from watching their carriage depart. “I tell you, she is an angel, Darcy.”

An angel who did not approve of her sister speaking with him, he wagered, but Darcy nodded. “I am pleased your journey to Hertfordshire proved so successful.”

Mr. Bingley grimaced. “In truth, the mother and youngest two sisters were somewhat distressing. If I do take that estate, I will lease it. It wouldn’t do to buy so near to them without a bit of a trial first.”

Darcy raised his eyebrows. “Do you mean you are not certain in your esteem of Miss Bennet?” If Mr. Bingley broke her sister’s heart, would Elizabeth blame Darcy?

“What? I mean no such thing,” Mr. Bingley exclaimed. “Merely uncertain if I wish for us to reside near her relations once we’re wed and all that.” He grimaced again, red coloring his neck once more. “Her youngest sister, a mere girl of fifteen mind you, lay one on me under the kissing bough, you know. Twice. I had to tell Miss Bennet before she heard some other way. Can’t begin a courtship with something like that hanging over us, can we?”

“I would think not,” Darcy said, starting to see why Elizabeth had been quite so put out about him encouraging Mr. Bingley to meet her relations, and to guess at the impetus of Miss Bennet’s earlier blushes.

Mr. Bingley frowned at him. “If you don’t mind me asking, Darcy, are you quite certain about the unsuitability of Mr. Wickham? Only, Caroline will not heed me one bit. She goes to him with every caution I utter and he has an answer for them all.”

“He always does,” Darcy said dryly.

“Hm. Yes, well, perhaps a removal to Hertfordshire is just the thing. Get her away from his clutches and all that.”

“Perhaps.”

“You’ll come by the park tomorrow?”

“Come by the park?” Darcy asked, uncertain at the change in topic.

“Certainly. We can say you are dropping by to bring me a few books.”

“Why?” Not that he didn’t wish to see Elizabeth, but Darcy couldn’t socialize with her. Not on a picnic when she knew him only as a shop owner.

And not with the trouble his regard would bring her and her relations.

“To chat with Miss Elizabeth for a minute or two. Make ground, so to speak.” Mr. Bingley gestured in the direction Mr. Gardiner’s carriage had gone. “You did me a good turn. I would like to repay you.”

Was his regard that obvious? “By providing me the opportunity to speak with Miss Elizabeth?”

Mr. Bingley shrugged. “You seem to fancy her, and she speaks with you a great deal when she comes in here. At least, the times I’ve been in she has.”

Darcy shook his head. “I am afraid Miss Elizabeth is a bit out of reach for a shopkeeper.”

His eyes narrowing, Mr. Bingley countered, “If you are a relation of the Darcys of Pemberley, you cannot be that far beneath her, shop or no shop.”

Finding that precarious to refute, Darcy merely shrugged.

“Very well. Keep your counsel.” Mr. Bingley tapped his hat down on his head, as he seemed wont to do before departing. “I’ll send word round tomorrow as to where we’ll be. If you happen by with a volume or two for me, it will be a simple thing to add to my account.” He gave a sharp nod and strode to the door. As he went out, he began whistling.

Darcy stared after him. He should not go to the park. Nor should he have admitted his desire to see Elizabeth to her. His absorption with her was getting out of hand. He spent far too much time thinking about her. Wondering about her likes and

dislikes. Pondering what points she would raise in an argument.

Imagining how soft her skin would feel.

He shook his head. Determined not to think of Elizabeth, Darcy fished his spectacles out of his coat pocket, and then the pencil. He had inventory to take, and he certainly would not be closing up his shop during his busiest month of the year so that he could hand-deliver a book to the park.

At least, he truly ought not.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



A book borrowed from her uncle in her lap, Elizabeth sat in the Gardiners' small front parlor, certain she was pleased to go to the park. Going to the park on a fine December day was the sort of activity Elizabeth very much enjoyed. Out of doors. Social but not a crush. She definitely wanted to be on their planned outing supporting Jane, and not to be in Mr. Darcy's shop. She'd silently reiterated as much at least twenty times so far that afternoon.

For all Elizabeth's internal agitation, Jane seemed even less sanguine where she stood at the parlor window watching for Mr. Bingley's carriage. It was not, however, the anticipation of seeing Mr. Bingley that had Elizabeth's sister riled. Nor the fact that their aunt was once again otherwise occupied, mostly with the still fruitless search for a suitable governess. What seemed to trouble Jane was the prospect of being properly introduced to Mr. Bingley's sisters.

Elizabeth could understand Jane's worry. They had yet to meet Mrs. Hurst, but they had encountered Miss Bingley in Mr. Darcy's shop. Mr. Bingley's unmarried sister had obviously thought a great deal of herself. Her clothing had been much finer than Elizabeth's and Jane's, and her coiffure far more fashionable. What would she think of her brother's obvious infatuation?

"Will you not sit for a time?" Elizabeth asked in a bid to distract her sister. "Perhaps take up your embroidery? You are nearly finished with Frances's gown."

Mutely, Jane shook her head. Gaze still turned out the window, she wrung her hands, much to Elizabeth's annoyance. Her sister was too perfect to care so much for the opinions of women Elizabeth expected would be quite snobbish.

"Jane, please do try to calm yourself. You will ruin your gloves, twisting them like that."

“Oh Lizzy, do you think they will like me?” Jane blurted, her fingers still twined tight. “Miss Bingley seemed very fancy the day we saw her at the bookshop.”

“If they do not like you, the fault is with them,” Elizabeth replied and flipped back several pages in her book, seeking the last words to which she’d actually attended. Finding her place, she endeavored to ignore both Jane’s handwringing and to read, even if she found the book she held dull.

If only she could return to Mr. Darcy’s shop and select a volume or two. He was certain to know what might best suit her. He had such a mind for knowledge, and she knew she’d touched but lightly on his thoughts, and on so few subjects. Why, the discussions they could have over the classics, or something more adventure-filled such as *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World* or *The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Or even, she speculated, on more mundane topics such as husbandry and land management. She imagined Mr. Darcy had opinions about most anything and she longed to explore them.

More than that, the look in his eyes when he suggested that he wanted her there, with him... A thrill went through her at the memory. His admission had instantly melted away any lingering annoyance at his advising Mr. Bingley to visit Longbourn.

“He’s here,” Jane cried, then rushed to the small mirror hung above an equally delicate table on the opposite wall of the parlor.

If Mr. Bingley were not so amiable and so obviously in love with Jane, Elizabeth would resent the reduction of her most reasonable sister to Lydia’s standards of behavior. “Jane, you look lovely, as always. Please strive for calm.”

Turning from the mirror, Jane drew in a long, slow breath and let it out. She adopted a serene smile, nodded to Elizabeth, and went into the hall. Marking her page, Elizabeth closed the book and followed, calling for the maid Aunt Gardiner had allotted to go with them.

They found that Mr. Bingley had come for them on his own, for his sisters would join them in the park. Soon, they were seated across from him, Jane appearing calm and demure beside Elizabeth as they rolled through increasingly crowded streets. Elizabeth trained her gaze out the window. She envied their maid, who'd elected to ride up top with the driver. Jane and Mr. Bingley, she'd found, could be roused to little in the way of conversation when they were in the mood to gaze at each other.

"Oh," Mr. Bingley said as the carriage came to a halt alongside the park. "I nearly forgot. I told that Darcy fellow, the bookseller, where to find us. He said he might bring by some reading material for our picnic. Deliver it personally and all that."

"Did he?" Jane asked, turning a narrow-eyed look on Elizabeth. "How considerate of him."

Elizabeth shrugged at her, hoping the casual motion hid the way her heartbeat sped up at the sound of Mr. Darcy's name.

"Terribly good chap that Darcy," Mr. Bingley continued as his tiger clambered down the outside of the carriage. "Rumor has it he's related to the Pemberley Darcys up in Derbyshire. Good people. Even Wickham agrees with that, and he is quite close with the Pemberley Darcys. You'll meet him today."

Elizabeth had never heard of Pemberley or of Darcys from Derbyshire, but she nodded nonetheless, asking, "We will meet a Darcy of Pemberley today or Mr. Wickham?"

Mr. Bingley chuckled, as if her confusion were part of a jest. "Mr. Wickham. He'll join us. Caught wind of the picnic from Caroline. She arranged it all, you know, and insisted on him coming. He's keen to meet you, Miss Bennet."

Jane blushed prettily and looked down at her hands, but Elizabeth scrutinized Mr. Bingley. Was it her imagination or did he sound displeased by the addition of this Mr. Wickham to their picnic?

They disembarked and Mr. Bingley offered Jane his arm, leaving Elizabeth to walk with the maid. She looked about

with interest, having spent little time in London's grandest of parks. Though it was December, the grass unfurled before them in an emerald carpet and the denuded branches, which might have appeared grim, stood out white and silver against the stark blue of the sky. Not a cloud could be seen, and the sun imparted enough warmth that Elizabeth slipped off her gloves and loosened her scarf.

They found Miss Bingley and another man and woman on the leeward side of a hill overlooking a narrow ribbon of water. A large rug had been set out and piled with cushions and a warming brazier stood at each corner. To one side, two footmen and a maid waited by a bench laden with covered baskets. Elizabeth raised her eyebrows at such an ostentatious show of wealth. This would obviously be the least rustic picnic she'd ever attended.

Of Mr. Darcy, there was no sign, and the shattering of her expectation of seeing him made the scene before Elizabeth dreary. Which was silly. The sun remained as bright and the sky as blue, and surely the likelihood of Miss Bingley saying something entertaining, such as that books should be selected based on the color of their spines, remained just as high.

Mr. Bingley took them down the hill and introduced them first to Mrs. Hurst, who appeared to be a smaller and more faded version of her younger sister, and then to Miss Bingley, whose hat was so elaborate as to be its own woodland scene, with both feathers and fur, and the gleam of crystal. Lastly, he turned to the smiling, handsome gentleman at Miss Bingley's side. "And this is our friend, Mr. Wickham."

"Miss Bennet." Mr. Wickham bowed to Jane, but that didn't keep Elizabeth from observing the way his gaze raked over her in appreciation. "You are every bit as lovely as Mr. Bingley has boasted."

"Thank you," Jane murmured. Her cheeks pink, she glanced shyly at Mr. Bingley.

"And Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Wickham continued, turning to her. "Your region of Hertfordshire must be renowned for



women of great beauty, if you and your sister are our examples.” He awarded her a dazzling smile.

Elizabeth dipped a curtsy. “Thank you.”

“Oh Wickham.” Miss Bingley batted playfully at his arm. “You are always such a charmer, but you must take care. Dear Eliza is from the country. She will not know you are the most notorious beau in London and mean none of what you say.”

Mr. Wickham turned his smile on Miss Bingley. “How now? What of earlier, when I acclaimed you to be the most fashionable miss I have ever set eyes on? Am I to learn now that I did not mean that?”

Miss Bingley leaned closer to him. “Well, we all know that to be simple truth.”

“She’d best be, for what I pay for those frocks, and what is on your head, Caroline?” Mr. Bingley asked. “Is that a stuffed mouse?”

Unlike the teasing looks she awarded Mr. Wickham, the one Miss Bingley turned on her brother held a venomous edge. “Do not be silly, Charles. It is ermine.”

“Caroline has the loveliest cape to match,” Mrs. Hurst put in. “But I daresay it is too fine for the park.” She looked about at the rug, braziers and cushions and wrinkled her nose.

“Miss Bennet,” Mr. Bingley said eagerly, sparing his sister hardly a glance. “I asked Caroline to have bread packed. Would you care to feed the ducks?”

Jane smiled at him. “I would be delighted to.”

Miss Bingley nudged her sister with her elbow, then slanted her gaze at Jane.

“I would enjoy feeding the ducks as well,” Mrs. Hurst declared.

Elizabeth looked down at the river, seeing little in the way of waterfowl save for gulls. She didn’t think any of the three cared at what sorts of birds they tossed crumbs, and so didn’t suppose it would matter. She did wonder, as they gathered

bread from one of the baskets, if Mr. Bingley's sisters sought to intervene between him and Jane.

"Mr. Bingley has mentioned your shire but nothing more, Miss Elizabeth," Mr. Wickham said, turning back from watching the three depart down the hill. "May I enquire for greater detail?"

"You may, and I will even be so polite as to answer," Elizabeth replied. "We hail from Longbourn, near the village of Meryton."

Mr. Wickham frowned slightly. "Longbourn? I have not heard of it."

Elizabeth smiled. "I daresay there is not much of which to hear."

"It is no great estate, then?" Miss Bingley asked.

Understanding that they quizzed her on Jane's suitability, Elizabeth answered with forthrightness, for she would not have Jane accused of prevaricating. "My father's estate is small, and also entailed away from us when he dies." Wryly, she added what else they must wish to know. "We have no brothers, but do have three more sisters, all younger and unmarried as of yet, and we none of us have a dowry to speak of."

Miss Bingley cast a horrified look down the hill after Jane.

"But you cannot claim your father lacks in wealth, Miss Elizabeth." Mr. Wickham caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "Not with such lovely daughters as you, for you are a treasure." His eyes gleamed and he squeezed her hand before letting go.

Miss Bingley turned back to observe this with a frown. Putting on a false smile, she stepped between Mr. Wickham and Elizabeth. "Miss Eliza, let me persuade you to walk with me. I assure you it is very refreshing after the ride here, particularly after coming all the way from Cheapside." She threaded her arm through Elizabeth's and led her away from Mr. Wickham.

Bemused, and not entirely certain she'd enjoyed Mr. Wickham's attention no matter how handsome he was, Elizabeth went willingly. Miss Bingley elected to walk in a wide circle about the picnic rug, turning them first downhill. Farther below, gulls swooped around Jane, Mr. Bingley, and Mrs. Hurst, and Elizabeth hoped they would not become too aggressive in their pursuit of victuals. Higher up the hill beside their picnic, Mr. Wickham stood speaking with the Gardiners' maid.

Miss Bingley said, "Miss Elizabeth, I do not mean to overstep, but I must reiterate what I said in jest earlier. Mr. Wickham is a flirt. Do not permit him to raise your hopes."

Though the words were said with a false kindness she felt certain masked jealousy, Elizabeth nodded politely. "I thank you for the warning, but you must not fear. I do not believe myself much in danger of being moved by his charms."

Miss Bingley's grip on Elizabeth's arm, which was rather tight, eased. "Oh? Have you set your cap on someone else, dear little Eliza?"

Had she? Elizabeth fought down the heat that threatened to rise in her cheeks and shook her head. "I have not."

"Then you are still in danger, for Mr. Wickham is very charming and I can see that he has taken a liking to you." Miss Bingley eyed Elizabeth askance as their path took them around the picnic area and started back up hill. "I would be terribly distraught if your lack of London sophistication caused you to see hope of attachment where no hope exists."

Mr. Wickham must be very wealthy, Elizabeth concluded. "Do not fear for me. I have not the temperament to esteem a man with Mr. Wickham's liberally shared charms."

Miss Bingley frowned.

A tall figure crested the hilltop above them and Elizabeth's breath caught. Mr. Darcy.

Sighting her, he smiled. Then he shifted his attention and his countenance darkened.

Following his gaze, Elizabeth spotted Mr. Wickham glaring up the hill. He stood with his hands balled at his sides and a smug, snide curl to his mouth. He caught her looking and the expression shifted back to his easy, charming smile with such swiftness as to cause her to doubt her first glimpse of his reaction to seeing Mr. Darcy.

How singularly odd.

“Miss Elizabeth. Miss Bingley,” Mr. Darcy greeted, coming to a halt before them. “I have come to deliver the volumes Mr. Bingley requested for your picnic.”

His nearness setting joy fluttering about in her chest, Elizabeth replied, “How kind of you, Mr. Darcy.”

“I will tell Charles his books have arrived.” Miss Bingley extracted her arm from Elizabeth’s and turned away.

Mr. Darcy aimed a sardonic look after her. “Do you wish to flee my lowly presence as well, Miss Elizabeth?”

She shook her head. “There is hardly a need. I believe that delivering the knowledge of your presence is entirely within Miss Bingley’s capabilities.” She gestured to the rug. “She did, after all, organize this outing, so she must have some skills.” Such as ordering people about and spending her brother’s money, Elizabeth suspected.

“This does seem to be a rather lavish picnic you are on.”

“I imagine it will be, but thus far, only the gulls have sampled anything.”

He looked past her again and Elizabeth followed his gaze to see Miss Bingley and Mr. Wickham on their way down to join the others. Turning back to her, Mr. Darcy said, “I daresay I should deliver these volumes and depart, so as not to impose on your meal.”

Elizabeth did not want him to depart. “What volumes did Mr. Bingley select for our picnic?”

“I have brought travel poems, the content of which should be appropriate to all.”

She smiled, not missing how he adroitly avoided confessing that Mr. Bingley had left the selection to him. “Nothing to offend my sister’s sensibilities, then.”

“Nor yours, though I suspect them to be of a hardier nature than Miss Bennet’s.”

“Are you calling me unrefined, sir?” Elizabeth said with a laugh.

“Rather, open minded, a highly laudable trait.”

Elizabeth stared at him, taking in the way he studied her as he spoke, as if her answers greatly interested him. She imagined he applied the same intensity to a puzzle of logic. No one had ever paid her such keen regard before, and his look differed from those men gave Jane. Men always looked at Jane with appreciation, but few ever saw her. The way Mr. Darcy watched Elizabeth, she felt eminently seen.

Warmth unfurled in her gut, radiating outward to fill her limbs until her palms tingled. What would it feel like to lay one of those palms along Mr. Darcy’s smooth-shaven jaw?

She flushed, dropping her gaze. Confusion filled her. Jane was correct. Elizabeth should not permit such thoughts. Not unless she truly did wish to end up as the wife of a bookseller.

“Have I distressed you?” he asked softly.

She shook her head, not certain if she dared meet his gaze. She felt as if one more delve into those dark eyes would see her caught for all time.

Would being the wife of a bookseller truly be so bad? Elizabeth could think of no reason for it to be.

A scream cut through the winter air and she whirled to face the sound.

Down by the river, Miss Bingley waved her arms, shrieking as a hawk flapped upward with her hat. Mr. Bingley called out, exhorting the bird to drop the headpiece. Predictably, the hawk ignored him, winging up the hill in Elizabeth and Darcy’s direction. Mr. Bingley rushed after it.

Mr. Wickham made a jump for the bird, but missed. The hawk careened left, in the direction of a copse of trees. Flying over, it released the hat to plummet into the reaching branches, then soared away in the direction of the Thames.

“I imagine that headpiece is quite costly,” Mr. Darcy observed in a neutral tone.

At the base of the hill, Miss Bingley howled at her brother, “Do something, Charles. Those are real gemstones.”

“There you have it. Real gemstones. On a hat.” Elizabeth could not quite match Mr. Darcy’s neutrality, amusement sneaking into her voice.

He cast her a quick look, his eyes alive with mirth.

Elizabeth struggled to suppress her smile.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



In short order, the seven of them, along with the maids and footmen, were among the trees searching. Darcy did not believe Miss Bingley would have helped, except that Wickham offered to escort her. Even as it was, the two, and Mrs. Hurst, merely meandered about at the edge of the trees. Undoubtedly, Miss Bingley worried to snag the fine fabric of her gown, and Wickham was always disinclined to do anything even reminiscent of work.

But Elizabeth tromped in quite cheerfully. Amid the calls from Miss Bingley exhorting them to look harder, Darcy kept pace with Elizabeth as they pressed deeper into the trees and underbrush along with the servants, Jane, and Mr. Bingley. The copse proved larger than it seemed from the outside, and the trees more dense. Soon, he and Elizabeth lost sight of the others, though sounds of searching rustled all about them.

“It’s likely caught in the top of a tree,” Mr. Bingley called loudly.

“Then find the tree and climb it,” Miss Bingley screeched back. “That headpiece cost me a fortune, and no one has even seen it yet.”

Darcy looked to Elizabeth to find her regarding him with an amusement to match his own. Apparently, they did not count as anyone. Somewhere to Darcy’s right, Mr. Bingley had some unflattering words about the intelligence of wearing costly accessories on a picnic, but if Miss Bingley could hear, she gave no indication of such.

They entered a clearer space where a fallen tree left a gap in the canopy of denuded branches above. Elizabeth halted to turn in a slow circle, searching the leaf strewn ground. Rather than augment her effort, Darcy drew nearer to her, a moth to the vivacity that flamed so brightly in Elizabeth. Apparently not sighting the hat on the ground, she raised her gaze to the branches above, turning in another slow circuit.

Only to come around to meet his gaze. Surprise suffused her features, jarring him into the realization that he stared down at her intently. He blinked and smoothed his expression into polite neutrality, but Elizabeth must have read the regard in his eyes. Heat rose in her cheeks.

“My pardon, Miss Elizabeth,” he said softly. “I will search over there.” He pulled his gaze from her, turning away. He was a fool to look at her in such a manner. She was a proper young miss and he had nothing to offer except the condemnation of a trio of wealthy and powerful gentlemen.

“Wait.”

He turned back, surprised, an expression mirrored on her face. Had she not meant to speak? Her breath quickened and a flush touched her cheeks, and yet she hadn't seemed as if hunting through the copse was an exertion. Dare he hope he affected her thusly?

Elizabeth drew in a deep breath. “I... You must know that I would bring nothing by way of funds to a union.”

She was reiterating her warning about lacking a dowry? Then her words had not been for him to pass along to Mr. Bingley. Or at least, not only for that purpose. She wished Darcy to know. Warmth unfurled inside him. Quietly, uncertain precisely where the others were, he asked, “Do you mean to imply, Miss Elizabeth, that you would consider a union with a bookseller?”

She nodded, her nervousness such that he could see her tremble. “Would it truly be so terrible a life? You said that affection is worth more than land or wealth or connections.”

“I said affection and security, and by security, I meant the surety of knowing your affection is returned and will be, always. The security of trusting that the person you esteem above all else esteems you that much in return, so the love in your union will not be worn away by the hardships of life.” Or driven off by his interfering relations.

Hurt filled her eyes, stabbing pain into his chest more surely than any blade could. “You believe that a gentleman's



daughter would grow to resent the life of a bookseller's wife." She swallowed. "That a woman such as I would be inconstant in her love."

He caught one of her hands, so small and delicate in his. "I believe that life holds many trials and surprises and that we must be honest in our estimation of how we will bear up."

Elizabeth pulled her hand free, the December air bitterly cold after the warmth of her. "You believe me naïve and fickle."

"You cannot help but be naïve when you do not possess full knowledge of my circumstance, and coming to do so is what would drive you to fickleness, not your nature." Could he make her understand without confessing the truth? If he confessed, would she deem him mad? Would she resent the façade of bookseller? Worse, did she only think she esteemed him, driven by some romantic notion of finding love beneath her station? He'd seen such stories put forth in many a gothic tale.

But Elizabeth did not read those books.

Anger and entreaty warred on her face, and he held his breath, waiting to see what havoc he'd wreaked on his fate. Finally, she said, "Then acquaint me fully with what it is to be Mr. Darcy, bookshop proprietor. Leave no detail out. Relieve me of my ignorance."

How he longed to. How he wanted to confess all and have her declare that she would weather any storm, be it enforced poverty or the retribution of the angry patriarchs. Out of sight nearby, Mr. Bingley called out again about the futility of their search, only to be berated by his sister for his lack of perseverance.

Darcy shook his head, the exchange returning him to reality. "I fail to see when and where such a lengthy discourse could take place between us."

Elizabeth pursed her lips, thinking, all the while unwittingly evoking a longing to kiss her. "Write it all down.

That will be safe enough, if you employ no names. Hide it in a book and send it to me.”

Should he? With the hold she had over him, could he not? “I will,” he finally said, instantly buoyed by the joy that lit her face. “Once you know the truth of my life, it will be up to you to decide if you hold any esteem for me.”

Her eyes seemed to glow from within. She took a step closer. “There is but one thing more, then.”

He frowned. “And that is?”

She took a quick, anxious breath. Her features settled into a look of resolve. She came up on her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Heat shot through him. He remained motionless for an astonished moment, then gathered her into his arms and lifted her closer. She melted against him, deliciously warm and pliant.

If he could, Darcy would keep her there forever.

Mustering all his will, he broke their kiss and set her away. He settled his hands on her shoulders, steadying her, unable to release her entirely. “We should not have done that.”

She raised her palms to red-scalded cheeks, her expression quite stunned. “I know.”

He searched her face. “Then why?”

“I wanted to know what it is to be kissed, and I knew that if you were not the one to teach me, I would forever regret it.” She dropped her gaze for a moment, then met his to add, “And I know it is silly, but I had the sudden, inexplicable dread that I would never see you, Mr. Darcy bookshop proprietor, again.”

His hands tightened on her shoulders, the very idea that her words could hold any truth striking dread in him. He drew in a ragged breath. “What you do to me...from the moment I saw you step from your uncle’s carriage, I have known no peace.”

“Me? You were looking at Jane that day.”

He stared at her in surprise. “Miss Bennet? No. I hardly saw her. There was only you, enchantress that you are, Elizabeth.”

She stared at him, her mouth slightly open, so stunned that it was all he could do not to kiss her doubts away. How could she think he’d been looking at Miss Bennet that morning? There was only Elizabeth.

He drew in a deep breath and opened his hands slowly, then lifted them from her shoulders and stepped back, feeling for all the world as if doing so was the hardest act he’d ever undertaken. “I will write to you as you ask, but we must guard against a repetition of today. Of being unchaperoned. I will not have your choice taken from you.” Marshaling his resolve, he took several more steps back and turned away, raising his gaze to the treetops.

Behind him, he could hear each breath she took, as if his every sense was attuned to her. He hoped the deep, slow exhales helped her regain her composure. He studied the tree before him, seeking his.

And sighted a mass of feathers and fur, glinting with gemstones.

“There it is,” he exclaimed, pointing. He raised his voice to call, “We found it.”

Striding over to the tree, he looked up, then dropped down to collect a fallen branch. Rustling sounded and Darcy glanced over to see Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet come through the trees. Turning back, Darcy jabbed with the stick. More crashing signaled the approach of the maids and footmen as the hat dropped free. Darcy dipped down to pluck the headpiece from the layer of dead leaves.

“Well done, Darcy,” Mr. Bingley cried.

“What is happening in there?” Miss Bingley called.

“Darcy found your hat.”

They all tromped back out of the copse, and Darcy presented the hat to Miss Bingley.

She plucked it from his hands, her face crinkled in distaste. "It's dirty."

"It's only dry leaves, Caroline," Mr. Bingley said.

To one side of her, Mrs. Hurst leaned closer. "I daresay your maid can put it right."

Miss Bingley sniffed. "I should hope so. That is what she is for." She turned the bedraggled hat over in her hands.

On Miss Bingley's other side, Wickham smirked. "Darcy. Always the hero."

"One of the stones is missing," Miss Bingley cried.

Mr. Bingley shrugged. "Probably in the gullet of that hawk. Not much to do about that, Caroline. We can hardly gut every bird in London."

Miss Bingley's gaze narrowed in on Darcy. "They were set very well. I cannot believe one would come loose."

Darcy raised his eyebrows. Was she implying what he thought she was?

"Tut, tut, Darcy." Wickham smirked at him, his eyes gleeful. "Have you swiped one of Miss Bingley's gemstones?" In mock sympathy he added, "Is the book business truly that terrible?"

Darcy offered him a sardonic look.

"Mr. Darcy did not remove any gemstones," Elizabeth said with a touch of anger in her voice.

Mr. Bingley nodded. "We saw him knock the hat down from the tree." He gestured to Miss Bennet.

"He could have taken it after he knocked it down." Miss Bingley regarded Darcy as one might something found wriggling among the detritus from which he'd plucked her hat. "They are not very precious but I daresay they are tempting enough for a bookseller."

Repulsed by the idea of defending against such ridiculous charges, Darcy instead said, "We could return and look through the leaves at the base of the tree."

“There is no point when the stone is surely in your pocket,” Miss Bingley stated. She slanted a look at Wickham. “I have some idea of how desperate a man you are, Mr. Darcy.”

Darcy could easily guess what sorts of fabrications Wickham had told her, principally after his warning to Mr. Bingley. That was what he got for interfering.

“Really, Caroline, that is too insulting even for you,” Mr. Bingley said angrily. “Mr. Darcy only came here to bring me something to regale you all with while on our picnic, which is still waiting to be enjoyed, I might add.”

“Mr. Darcy undoubtedly came here to attempt to better his circumstances, which one of my gemstones would accomplish.” Miss Bingley turned a snide look on Elizabeth. “And accomplish more surely than seducing a miss with no dowry or connections.”

Elizabeth gasped, a hand going to her cheek.

“Caroline, employ your manners,” Mr. Bingley snapped.

“On a bookseller?” Scorn colored Miss Bingley’s tone.

“That is enough.” Mr. Bingley stepped forward to stand between his sister and Darcy, effectively blocking Elizabeth from Miss Bingley’s ire as well. “If you cannot keep a civil tongue, this outing is over.”

She raised her chin to glare at her brother.

“Come, Miss Bingley,” Wickham said in a bored tone. “I am starved after all that searching. Let us dine and I will regale you with some limericks.” He cast another grin at Darcy. “I need no book. I have several memorized.”

Wickham offered Miss Bingley his arm and they started across the grass, Mrs. Hurst and a maid hurrying to follow. Wickham looked over his shoulder once, smirking.

Mr. Bingley turned back with a grimace. “Sorry about that. Caroline thinks a bit much of herself at times.”

“I am certain she was merely distressed,” Miss Bennet said softly. “How dreadful to have that bird fly at her head. She must have been quite shocked.”

Mr. Bingley gave Miss Bennet a grateful smile. “Yes. It was startling.”

A glance showed Elizabeth with her mouth clamped closed and her expression blank, but she caught Darcy looking and raised her gaze skyward.

“Should we go search under the tree, sir?” one of the lingering footmen asked Mr. Bingley.

“Well, yes, I suppose. But not for too long. Can’t say as I think you’ll be able to find it. Little thing like that in the leaves.”

“It could have fallen off at any point,” Elizabeth observed, her gaze traveling from the copse down to the water. “In fact, depending on how carefully Miss Bingley examined her hat, the stone could have been lost long before this outing.”

“True enough,” Mr. Bingley said, cheerful once more. He extended a hand to Darcy. “I’ll take the volumes you brought so we can free you to return to your shop. Splendid of you to deliver them.”

Darcy bowed and fished the books from his coat pocket. “Think nothing of it.”

“Could be I’ll need even more soon.” Mr. Bingley gave Jane a dotting look. “Of late, I have a strong inclination to repair to the country, and that estate I looked over has a large library.”

“I will, certainly, be happy to provide you with more volumes, but an estate may well come with books. Regardless, I wish you good fortune in that endeavor.” Darcy bowed again, aiming the gesture somewhere between Elizabeth and Miss Bennet. “Miss Bennet. Miss Elizabeth.” Greatly daring, he added, “Miss Elizabeth, I will send over the volume you asked for soon, and if you care for it, you can come by at your convenience to settle up.”

She met his gaze with turbulent eyes. “Thank you.”

With a tip of his hat, Darcy left them. He would never have imagined he would so envy George Wickham an afternoon in the park.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



The day following the picnic was as lovely as the last, but Elizabeth remained at the Gardiners while Mr. Bingley took Jane for a morning drive in his rather flashy curricle. Elizabeth strongly suspected his choice of activity had as much to do with not being obliged to include his sisters as with the weather, and didn't mind. She enjoyed luncheon with her aunt, and without Jane keenly studying her for signs of mooning over Mr. Darcy.

More than that, Elizabeth did not want to be out when his longed-for explanation arrived. She dared to hope he might even personally deliver the book in which he'd promised to hide his letter. That would make for a brief encounter, but an encounter nonetheless.

But no book arrived, via a hired lad or Mr. Darcy, and Jane returned rosy cheeked and full of exclamations over Mr. Bingley's skill with his matched pair of bays.

Later that afternoon, a note did come but it was only another message for Jane. She read it and turned to their aunt, filled with excitement. "Mr. Bingley asks if he may take me for ices and says he will call to collect me soon."

"Two outings in one day?" Elizabeth exclaimed, happy for her sister. "He is quite smitten."

Jane dropped her gaze to the note she held, blushing.

Aunt Gardiner looked over from her desk and smiled. "I will shortly be engaged in interviewing governesses for your cousins, but I can spare a maid."

"Thank you, Aunt." Jane turned to Elizabeth. "Do you want to accompany us, Lizzy?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I have the suspicion that Mr. Bingley wants you all to himself."

"Oh, but it's not right, me getting to have ices and you not. He already had me to himself this morning."

“Need I remind you, if your outing with Mr. Bingley becomes a group affair, he will be obliged to invite his sisters?”

Jane’s expression of entreaty transformed into thoughtfulness. “Well, it would help them to come to know me better, and me them. I am certain they will improve upon further acquaintance. When meeting strangers, many people do not put their best foot forward.”

Elizabeth shook her head, in part for Jane’s too-positive outlook and in part because she did not want to be kept from Mr. Darcy’s letter, which surely must arrive soon. “I am perfectly content here. You may enjoy your Mr. Bingley and your ices and tell me all there is to tell about both.”

“So long as you are content,” Jane said by way of agreement. “May I borrow your green ribbon?”

“Certainly. I have no need of it today.” Elizabeth looked back down at her book, but her mind whirled. Were ices the sort of enjoyments Mr. Darcy feared she would miss if she gave her heart to a bookseller? If so, she would set him straight. How could such frivolity compare to his ready wit and wry humor? His kindness to others, like the Scottish couple at the market? What need had she for iced sweets when a man of Mr. Darcy’s obvious character could be hers for all time?

“You aren’t remaining behind simply to await that book Mr. Darcy promised to send you, Lizzy?” Jane asked, interrupting Elizabeth’s thoughts.

She looked up to find her sister scrutinizing her. “I am not. I have enough reading to occupy me right here.” Elizabeth tapped the mildly interesting catalog of nature open before her. “Why would I so desperately require another book when I have yet to complete this one that Uncle Gardiner lent me?”

Jane continued to scrutinize her. “You didn’t say what book it would be.”

Elizabeth’s mind whirling, for she and Mr. Darcy hadn’t discussed books while in the copse. She held up the volume



she read. "It is an account of English moths and butterflies."

"Not that book," Jane said flatly. "In the park, Mr. Darcy said he would send over the book you two had discussed, and you gave him the oddest look."

"Did I?"

Jane nodded. "You did."

"Mr. Darcy joined you in the park?" Aunt Gardiner said, frowning. "I am not certain I approve of that."

"He did not join us so much as drop by to deliver some books to Mr. Bingley," Elizabeth said quickly. Her aunt's instant disapproval troubled her. Aunt Gardiner had married a man in trade, after all, and she seemed very happy.

"Ah." Their aunt nodded. "Well, that was thoughtful of him, but you should not have kept him there chatting about books, Elizabeth. A man like Mr. Darcy needs to be in his shop if he wishes to eat regularly."

Was Aunt Gardiner reminding her that Mr. Darcy was poor? "He did not remain to discuss books with me, but to help search for Miss Bingley's hat."

That elicited precisely the question Elizabeth hoped, and she derailed Jane's and Aunt Gardiner's thoughts of Mr. Darcy with an outrageous retelling of Miss Bingley's hat being purloined by a hawk. Soon Aunt Gardiner was too busy chuckling, and Jane too busy correcting Elizabeth's exaggerations, for either to worry about Mr. Darcy bringing Elizabeth a book.

"Well," Aunt Gardiner said when Elizabeth finished speaking. "It seems it was fortunate for Miss Bingley that her brother requested books from Mr. Darcy. I am certain she was very grateful to him for locating her hat."

"She said one of the gemstones was missing and accused him of pocketing it," Elizabeth said dryly.

"Oh dear. If a stone was missing, it could have come off at any time during that ordeal," Aunt Gardiner said sympathetically.

“Jane and Mr. Bingley were right there when Mr. Darcy knocked the hat out of the tree,” Elizabeth said. “I am certain they would have noticed if he had begun pulling it apart.”

“Who puts precious gemstones on a hat?” Aunt Gardiner shook her head, bemused.

“And was that before or after you discussed books?” Jane asked suddenly.

Elizabeth turned an innocent look on her sister. “Was what before or after?”

“When Mr. Darcy knocked Miss Bingley’s hat out of the tree.”

“After, of course. We discussed books while we searched.”

“And what book did you agree that he is bringing you?”

“Castle Rackrent,” Elizabeth said with sudden inspiration.

“And what is it about?” Jane pressed, as tenacious as a hunting dog.

Elizabeth smiled sweetly. “It is the story of the ruin of an estate, and is both comical and tragic.”

“That does sound like something you would enjoy,” Aunt Gardiner noted, her attention once more on the pages spread out on her desk.

“Yes.” Elizabeth smiled. “I anticipate it will be.”

Jane shrugged and finally returned to the embroidery she’d set aside when Mr. Bingley’s note reached them.

Later that afternoon, Aunt Gardiner met with prospective governesses and Jane departed on Mr. Bingley’s arm, a maid following, and so Elizabeth had the rare blessing of being alone. She could not have wished for a better time to receive such a gift, for a lad delivered a wrapped volume for her, and Elizabeth had no one to answer to when she went up to her room to remove the paper and discover *Castle Rackrent*. She grinned at the cover, ridiculously pleased that Mr. Darcy had recalled his brief mention of the book and her interest in it.

But an entertainingly tragic tale of ruin was not what she wanted to read at that moment. She flipped through the book until she found several pages of fine, carefully folded paper. Her hands shaking, she opened the letter. Now she would learn what Mr. Darcy felt to be so terrible about his life as to turn her from him.

*To be denied a salutation is cruel, though I comprehend the need, for I would address you with warmth and have the pleasure of penning your name.*

Elizabeth read that line twice, wondering how the lack of a salutation could affect her so much more than the existence of one.

*What you must first know is that I was born into a great family and am heir to that house.*

She frowned down at those words, penned in a firm, bold script. If Mr. Darcy was heir to a great family, presumably that Pemberley estate Mr. Bingley had mentioned, why would he fear that would send her fleeing his affection? And why would he not tell her? And why be a bookseller?

*You will doubt me, but it is true.*

That evoked a smile and she read on, resolved to withhold further judgment. Or at least to try.

*My mother and her sister were the daughters of an earl, born not two years apart, and were quite close. They both married wealthy men, who were also close, though not related, in the same year at the same ceremony. Thus, it surprised none when they both gave their husbands' heirs on nearly the same day the following year.*

*That is where the similarities diverge, for while my mother gave my father a son, my aunt bore my uncle a daughter. Quickly seeing a way to unify both families and fortunes, the four set upon the notion that we two babes should someday wed.*

Elizabeth gasped. Was Mr. Darcy engaged, then? Or married? He was correct in thinking that would drive her away.

And they had kissed.

A kiss she initiated, she recalled, her face heating. She also recalled how stunned he'd been, although he could hardly be more shocked by her behavior than she was. Elizabeth did not know what had come over her, except for the dreadful fear that she would never see him again. That notion had seemed silly, but if he meant to tell her now that he was spoken for, her fear would be realized.

Hoping he did not mean to impart such dire news, particularly after their kiss, she read on.

*The two, my mother and her sister, had as well an older brother, the earl apparent. He, too, took a liking to the idea and threw the weight of his approval behind it, as did his wife. I must express clearly, however, that neither I nor my cousin were consulted in this, and I have never asked for her hand, nor has she ever accepted such an offer from me.*

*Still, the six were well pleased, I am told, and celebrated the pact whenever they were in company, which has always been reported as often, this despite the distance between the two sisters being nearly two-hundred miles. But what is two hundred miles of good road? Little more than half a week's journey. Yes, I call it a very easy distance.*

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. Half a week's journey? Only if horses were changed at every opportunity, a greater expense than anyone she had ever traveled with had taken on.

*But now the tale turns to tragedy, for my mother and both of my aunts died, not at once but in short order, leaving the three gentlemen widowed. One might think that would put an end to the gatherings and the pact of marriage, but somehow the notion only strengthened.*

*Growing up, I was often in the presence of my cousins and both uncles, and I am quite fond of the cousin they wish me to marry, but I do not love her in that way, nor she me. When the agreed upon time arrived, shortly before we reached our majority, I realized I did not wish to marry her. I believe she would have endured the union, but only out of a sense of duty.*

*Before the banns could be read, I went to the patriarchs and confessed my decision. To say they were displeased is to say the ocean is a teacup. They ordered, ranted, and threatened, but I stood firm. In retaliation, they stripped me of my allowance.*

Elizabeth read on, fascinated.

*The more I resisted, the more pressure they applied to me. Finally, fearing physical restraint, I fled to London. I sold what I could of my possessions and purchased the bookshop from an elderly gentleman, then set about slowly augmenting the collection. For a time, I did well. My former companions from school and university found great enjoyment in patronizing my shop, though I would never confess to them the impetus behind the turn my life had taken. But in short order, the patriarchs learned of the new life I had built and used their influence and power to curtail clientele. Now, I depend upon patrons like your father and uncle, who are not under the sway of London's elite.*

He meant, she surmised, men so far beneath the notice of the *ton* as to be quite ignored by them. Not that he hinted at any such thing. If anything, his words imparted a soupçon of nobility to Elizabeth's relations for not being easily swayed. She appreciated Mr. Darcy's tact, particularly if he was truly as elevated as his letter claimed.

*So you see, I do not offer only the simple, rigorous life of a shopkeeper's bride. Did I, your decision might be made easy, but espousing me comes with the censure of three great and vindictive men, one a peer. I cannot say that they would take vengeance on your relations should you be a part of forever ending their quest for me to wed my cousin, but I cannot promise they would not. You would risk disappointing your family, a terrible burden to be certain, but more than that, you would risk harming them.*

*And that is why, even were you to forgive my status as a poor bookseller, I cannot court you. In truth, I deem it best you are never again alone with me for even a moment, for I have already proven I am not the gentleman I should be. Not*

*when it comes to you. I took a liberty I should not have, and you have my deepest apology.*

*Yours in heart if not in name,*

*Adieu*

Elizabeth stared down at the page in disbelief. Could any of it be true? It was sheer lunacy.

But what had he to gain by such a lie? A wife who believed she'd married a man who was secretly above her? That was hardly worthy of such a ruse.

Could Mr. Darcy be mad? He seemed quite sane.

Or was this some sort of elaborate way to disengage her interest? Again, it seemed overly convoluted for that. The very intricacy of the tale coupled with no discernible gain on his part inclined her to believe him, yet all incredulity bade her not.

She read the letter twice more, seeking anything that could explain so strange a story. Finally, she felt her serendipitous solitude wane and folded the pages. She knew the letter should be burned, even lacking in names and details as it was, but could not part with his salutation and adieu. Leaving the book on the bed, Elizabeth dug into her wardrobe. She pulled free her cloak and yanked at the stitches of the lining. Opening a small hole, she shoved the pages in, then got out her sewing kit to mend the seam.

She was nearly finished when the bedroom door opened.

Jane halted for a moment in the doorway, then came in. "Why are you mending in here and not the parlor?" Her gaze dropped to the book that lay on the bed.

Elizabeth watched her sister take in the title and suppressed a smile. "I came up to read but became distracted by mending. It seemed too much trouble to take everything down." She added a final stitch and stood, hoping the pages were flat enough not to rustle. Her cloak seemed silent as she replaced it in the wardrobe.

"Why did your cloak need mending?"

Elizabeth shrugged. "I am not certain. I suppose we can blame the hunt for Miss Bingley's hat." Taking in the deep suspicion in Jane's eyes, Elizabeth continued, "Did you have a nice outing with Mr. Bingley?"

Jane's face lit with joy. "Oh Lizzy, he said the most marvelous thing. Do you recall how Mama wrote that he came to Longbourn for tea, brought by Uncle Phillips?"

"I could hardly forget something both so horrifying and so wonderful."

Jane shot her a quick look for that, but her joy was such that she did not pause to issue a reprimand, continuing, "Well, Mr. Bingley has been corresponding with Uncle Phillips. He has decided he will indeed let Netherfield Park."

"Truly? Netherfield Park is let at last? Mama will be so happy. Sir William will be overjoyed." Sir William, father to Elizabeth's dear friend Charlotte, soon to be Mrs. Collins, was at least as social as Mrs. Bennet.

"Do you think, Lizzy, that his letting it has anything to do with me?" Jane asked, hope shimmering in her voice.

Elizabeth raised both eyebrows. "Do you imagine it does not?"

Pink suffused Jane's cheeks. "I would like to believe it does, but we met so recently, and have courted for but a week."

"Jane, he is smitten with you. I have never seen two people so utterly enchanted with one another."

Jane let out a happy sigh. "I do hope you are right."

"I cannot imagine I am wrong." Elizabeth tried to maintain her cheerful tone, but envy pulled at her. Jane seemed so happy, and Elizabeth would never begrudge her sister a moment of joy, particularly as finding Jane a husband had been a hope of this London journey. Yet, Elizabeth had found someone she esteemed as well, but she must take all care not to reveal her admiration.

Worse, she was not even certain she should admire Mr. Darcy. She could not quite believe his story, and yet could not dismiss it. He had the polish of a gentleman. She'd thought that since his first bow to them in his shop. But it was all so unbelievable, her meeting a bookseller who was secretly a gentleman, and a wealthy one at that. It was akin to something from a story.

Perhaps too akin? He claimed to have read nearly every book his shop held. Could he have pulled the tale straight from one?

She did not know what to think, but if Mr. Darcy were to be believed, even if her reputation would bear having their affection discovered, the wrath of three mighty men would fall on them and perhaps even on her family. Men, she inferred, with enough clout that even Mr. Bingley's wealth couldn't protect them, should he marry Jane.

Pure madness.

"Elizabeth?"

She focused on Jane, taking in her worry. "Yes?"

"Are you well?"

Elizabeth forced a smile. "I am, but I have been too long alone in this room. Come, let us go find our aunt and you can tell her of Mr. Bingley and Netherfield, and we will all share your joy."

Jane nodded happily and they left the room. If only Elizabeth could so easily leave her worries behind.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Darcy stood behind his counter, the paper open before him. He meant to scour the pages for any book purchasing opportunities, but his mind kept ranging back over the letter he'd sent to Elizabeth.

Had he been too forward? Convincing enough? Would she deem him mad and never speak to him again? Should he have told her so much or had he revealed too little?

He glanced over his shoulder at the clock. She may not even have read the missive. She could be out, or with callers. Certainly, she would not unwrap the book and read his letter with witnesses at hand.

Removing his spectacles, he scrubbed a hand over his face. What did he believe would happen? That she would race to his shop with a declaration of undying love on her lips? Elizabeth was intelligent and thoughtful. If she believed his words, and he could not assume she would, she would comprehend the danger he warned of. He did not know if his father and uncles would be so vindictive as to seek vengeance on Elizabeth's relations, but was that a risk she could justify taking, no matter what her feelings for him?

The bell rang and he turned to the door with desperate hope.

A street boy came in, holding forth a folded bit of paper as a shield against being ordered out, for boys such as he had notoriously quick hands. "I've a note for you, sir."

Darcy came around the counter, going to meet the lad, although he'd found his books didn't hold much temptation. "Thank you." He traded the scrap of paper for a penny.

"And thank you, sir," the boy said and disappeared back onto the street.

Darcy unfolded the missive.

*This evening, half seven, in the tavern that bears the name of Henry's retribution, demanded by principle. Bring a book.*

Darcy turned the page over but found nothing more.

He recognized the handwriting, of course. Richard's. Darcy had been hoping to see his cousin, and Wickham had mentioned Richard being in England of late. But why a coded missive delivered by an urchin? Richard could simply enter the shop.

And what was 'Henry's retribution?' What book did Richard want? He requested 'a' book, not 'the' book, which implied the book's subject mattered less than its existence.

Could no one in Darcy's family behave normally?

He went back around the counter. On the off chance that any real need for secrecy existed, he burned the short note. Dropping his gaze to the open paper, Darcy wracked his brain for the connection between any tavern he knew of and Richard's older brother, Henry.

There was the *Earls Table, Inn and Public House*, but Henry was only heir apparent, not the earl, and that had nothing to do with retribution. There was the *Lord Popinjay's Pub*, which arguably described Henry but also had nothing to do with retribution. And why that last bit, about 'principle?'

A memory surfaced in Darcy's brain. One from half a lifetime ago. He'd been in a tree, he thought, with his cousins Richard and Anne below. Anne had been angry with Henry, and she and Darcy had disagreed about the meaning of the word principle. Principle, Anne had felt, meant getting back at Henry.

And they'd dumped ink over his head. Could Richard mean the *Inkwell Inn*? Darcy believed it had a public room.

He had more than enough time to contemplate Richard's riddle as time ticked away, punctuated by a final customer and no sign of Elizabeth. When evening came, Darcy selected a book that was small enough to fit in his pocket, closed up, and walked to the *Inkwell*, still his best guess of where Richard

waited. He supposed that if his guess proved wrong, at least he could have a warm meal before returning to his shop.

He entered the boisterous, nearly full pub and scanned the room, but saw no one he recognized. He contemplated the crowd. Few seats were open. Perhaps bread and tea above his shop would make a better dinner.

“Oy, Fitz,” a voice called.

Darcy peered in the direction of the sound.

A couple of roughly dressed men at the back of the room raised their tankards to him. The bulkier of the two gestured, urging him to come over. Darcy vacillated between curiosity and suspicion for a moment, but the former won out. He made his way across the room.

Reaching the table, he studied the two. The leaner one grinned, showing even white teeth.

“Anne?” Darcy hissed, stunned.

She grinned wider. “—thony”

“I beg your pardon?” What was she doing here?

“You left off the ‘—thony.’ Anthony Bourg, at your service.”

“Sit down, Darcy,” the other fellow said in a low voice. “You are going to attract notice.”

“Richard,” Darcy observed, feeling marginally better about finding a disguised Anne in a tavern now that he realized Richard escorted her, but also marginally angrier. He settled onto the bench across from them. “What are you two about?” Addressing Anne, he added, “You should not be here, nor dressed like that.”

“We had to talk to you.” Richard’s tone implied that should be obvious. He scratched at the beard he wore.

“Stop that. You’ll pull it off,” Anne said.

“Not with all the glue you used. It itches.”

“Poor you.” She turned to Darcy. “You look well.”

“And you look as if you are flirting with ruin. If you needed to speak with me, why not come to the shop?”

Anne grinned. “Well, for one thing, this is much more fun.”

“That is not—”

“For another,” Richard cut in, interrupting Darcy. “We wanted to avoid Wickham’s spies.”

Darcy stared at them. “What spies?”

Anne shook her head. “You are always so naïve, Darcy.”

“He has two men on the bookshop at all times,” Richard said with quiet seriousness. “One to watch the shop and one to follow you whenever you go out.”

“Do not be ridiculous.”

“Oh?” Anne nodded with her chin. “See that fellow who squeezed in at the end of the bar? He followed you in, and if you think about it quite hard, I believe you will realize you have seen him before.”

“Don’t stare,” Richard snapped when Darcy started to turn. “Signal like you want the barmaid.”

Darcy did, using the excuse of searching her out to glance at the end of the bar. The man there did look distressingly familiar.

“Good,” Richard continued. “Now turn back and get out the book. You did bring a book?”

Darcy pulled out the small volume. “I did.”

“Put it on the table,” Richard ordered. “So it looks as if we are discussing it.”

A barmaid sidled up to Darcy. “What will you have?”

“What is hot?”

“We have some stew. Comes with a roll that’s baked fresh this week.”

Meaning, they had stale rolls left over, but Darcy nodded. “I will take it.”

“Ale?”

“No. Thank you.”

She shrugged and left.

Darcy leaned forward and tapped on the book, playing along with Richard’s likely ridiculous and unnecessary charade. “Let’s start over. Why do the two of you so desperately need to speak with me and why would Wickham have my shop watched and me followed?”

Richard shrugged. “He’s always had your shop watched and you followed, so when you showed no inclination to return home in view of recent events, Anne and I set spies on his spies. We strongly suspect Wickham is intercepting your correspondences, both those you send to Pemberley and those sent to you.”

“You mean he is stealing my letters?” Darcy frowned. Was that why Georgiana no longer wrote to him? Or, at least, why he thought she did not? And why she’d said he did not know how to put pen to paper?

“It is the only explanation we can come up with.” Anne took a swig of her ale.

“Explanation for what?” Darcy asked. Worry shot through him. “What did you mean by, ‘In view of recent events?’”

Richard turned his mug in his hands. “Your father is dying.”

Shock rocked through Darcy, but cold suspicion followed. “It is one of his tricks.”

“So you have received his letters?” Anne asked.

Darcy shook his head. “I have not heard from my father since he lured me home with claims that Georgiana was ill.”

“Ah yes.” Anne took another swallow. “The so-called hunting trip.” Her expression brightened. “After you stormed off, I bagged three rabbits. Fine hunting you have at Pemberley.”

“Uncle George is not feigning illness,” Richard said firmly. “I have been to see him.”

“Papa has too,” Anne added, serious now. “And I think he’s wavering, Darcy. They all are. Henry has a few bastards, but neither he nor Richard have married. The patriarchs are getting old, and Uncle Darcy’s health is scaring them. They want grandchildren, and I think they are starting to want them more than they want to be right.”

“Be right?” Darcy frowned at her. His father being ill would definitely explain all the comings and goings Wickham had alluded to.

So would colluding to trap Darcy.

Anne shrugged. “That’s what this is all about, you know. They want to be right about our union being the best for us. They don’t want to admit that all these years of persecuting you for resisting were wrong.”

“It’s all a matter of pride,” Richard said sagely.

Coldness settled in Darcy’s gut. “My father truly is ill?”

“Very,” Richard said. “He was hardly coherent when I visited.”

Anne nodded.

Which explained Georgiana bursting into his shop with a letter filled with accusations. “And Wickham has been stealing my mail? To what end?” Maintaining the wedge between Darcy and his family suited Wickham, but would even he keep Darcy from his ailing parent?

“To be named heir to Pemberley when you do not put aside your anger and return to your father’s side,” Anne said.

“Is there really a danger of that?” Darcy asked, shocked.

“Of your erstwhile companion charming an ailing, lonely old man out of everything that you should inherit?” Richard’s words held a sardonic edge. “I would say it is what he’s been working to achieve for quite some time.”

“And there’s no way to know how far he will go to succeed,” Anne added.

Darcy sat back on the bench, stunned. George Darcy wasn’t old. True, he hadn’t seen his father in years, but Darcy had many memories of him hale and well, and always in company. Specifically, that of Sir Lewis and the Earl of Matlock.

A bowl clunked onto the table before him. Darcy looked down at the bobbing chunks of unknown meat, nauseated. Was his father truly dying, with only Wickham to offer what comfort a son could?

Richard paid the waiting barmaid and she left.

Anne leaned forward again, intent. “Listen, Darcy, I don’t think Wickham will give up easily. I want you to go with Richard now, tonight. We have horses, and a carriage waiting at an inn outside town. Wickham is here in London. If he doesn’t have any warning, you can get to Pemberley before him.”

“You think that is necessary?” Their words swirled in Darcy’s head, centered around the thought of his father dying. He couldn’t let his father die believing he didn’t care enough to come home. Their last exchange surged to the surface of Darcy’s thoughts. The accusations. The angry words and ultimatums. That could not be the last conversation he and his father ever had.

Anne nodded. “I do.”

“As do I,” Richard added.

“And you are not coming?” Darcy addressed the question to Anne, a small part of him clinging to the suspicion that this was all an elaborate trick to get him to Pemberley with her. If they traveled hard, they might even make it in time for the banns to be read on Sunday.

She shook her head. “I can’t accompany you. Mrs. Jenkinson may be willing to turn a blind eye to me sneaking out from time to time in exchange for proper behavior on other occasions, but if I disappeared for days, Father would notice.”

Darcy nodded. Anne's companion, Mrs. Jenkinson, hired when Anne was fourteen, had proved adroit over the years at keeping both her ward and her employer happy, and at wringing at least semi-respectable behavior from Anne...most of the time.

"Fortunately, Georgiana returned to Pemberley earlier this week to be by your father's side," Anne continued. "Otherwise, we would need to collect her as well."

"Surely she is not at odds with our father?" Darcy asked.

Anne cast him a pitying look. "Certainly not, but I don't want her anywhere near Wickham when he realizes you have finally gone home. Not with the dowry she has."

Darcy digested that, recalling how grown up his sister had looked when she'd come into the shop a few weeks ago. "I am certain she sees Wickham as a brother." At least, Darcy hoped so. What had he done, leaving his sister to associate with George Wickham for years?

"I believe she does," Anne replied. "I also believe that he sees her as a possible consolation to not securing the whole of your father's wealth."

"And we cannot have that." Richard drained the remainder of his ale. "The horses are at Sir Lewis's." He stood.

"We are going now?" Darcy asked, rising along with Anne. "I should check the shop." He'd doused the candles and locked up, but still... "And pack a bag." And what about Elizabeth?

"He's watching us," Anne said in a low voice.

"Hand me that book and shake hands," Richard ordered.

Darcy looked down at the small volume and blinked. He'd forgotten he'd brought the outdated collection of herbal remedies. Plucking it up, he handed it to Richard.

Richard shook his hand. "You go out first. He will follow you. We will follow him."

"You will have more of a head start if he doesn't report back to Wickham this evening," Anne added.



Even through his worry for his father and sister, Darcy recognized trouble in her gaze. “What are you planning to do?”

Anne shrugged. “Richard and I will have plenty of time to discuss that as we walk.”

Darcy didn’t care for the sound of that. “Is all this truly necessary?” he reiterated.

“This is your best chance to outmaneuver Wickham,” Richard said. “He will already find you meeting people in a tavern suspicious, even if his lackey appears to be fooled. If you go back to your shop and seem as though you are making ready to leave London, you will lose all advantage of surprise.”

Darcy nodded. His cousins were correct. Given any warning that Darcy intended to return to Pemberley, there was no telling what Wickham would do. He had enjoyed all the privileges of Darcy’s life for years. He would not give that up lightly.

“And Darcy,” Anne cautioned before he could turn away. “When you get there, be careful. Wickham has had plenty of time to arrange things at Pemberley to his liking. Who knows what loyalties he holds among the staff?”

Grimly, Darcy nodded. Turning from his cousins, he set out across the tavern.

As for Elizabeth, he would come up with some way to apprise her of his whereabouts. Assuming that, after reading his letter, she would even care to know.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



Elizabeth would have preferred to read the book Mr. Darcy had given her rather than mend, but she knew her flagging concentration would not allow it. Not with the revelations and claims in his letter swirling through her mind. So after breakfast she sat in the front parlor with her sister and aunt while Jane stitched flowers and Aunt Gardiner read over her notes on potential governesses, and fought valiantly not to pick apart every word in Mr. Darcy's letter again and again. When one of the maids entered with the day's post Elizabeth looked up from the hem before her in relief, hoping for a distraction from her thoughts.

The girl took several letters to their aunt, then turned to where Elizabeth and Jane sat on the sofa. "There is a letter for Miss Elizabeth and one addressed to both Miss Bennets." She extended the envelopes.

"Thank you," Elizabeth said, taking hers and handing the other, which she could see was from their father, to Jane.

Elizabeth opened her letter, from Charlotte, to read,

*My Dearest Lizzy,*

*I know I have been remiss in writing to you. You must know what I will say, for rumor will have carried it to you almost faster than a letter travels, and yet I am so leery of your scorn that I have held my pen. But I must be brave, for I am happy in my choice and so will own up to it: I am betrothed to your cousin, Mr. Collins.*

*There. I know what you will say. I am well acquainted with your opinion of the man. Did you not flee to London to avoid his attentions, taking Jane with you to move her beyond his reach as well? And yet, he is not so terrible as that. He is honest, god-fearing, and good, with a fine living and the patronage of a great man. Moreover, married to Mr. Collins I will be mistress of my own home, rather than a burden to my family. It is more than I have dared hope for*

*many long years. Please see that this will be good for me and does, indeed, make me happy. If you love me as dearly as I suppose, it will make you happy as well.*

*Yours Always,*

*Charlotte*

Elizabeth lowered the page with a sigh, hating to think of her intelligent, capable, reasonable friend wedded to the sycophantic oaf who was her cousin. Yes, she had known of their betrothal, but until she heard the matter from Charlotte, she'd held out hope. After all, Elizabeth's mother, sisters, and aunt had all gleefully passed along false rumors before. Why, in one recent letter, they'd had a local heiress, Mary King, wedded to one of the officers, a Captain Carter, stationed in Meryton, yet in their next correspondence, they'd owned to her only having danced several times with the man and then having been spirited away to stay with her uncle.

"Papa wants us to come home," Jane said.

Panic shot through Elizabeth. "What? Did he say when? Or why?" If she left London now, when would she see Mr. Darcy again?

"I imagine because Longbourn is our home," Jane said mildly. "And apparently Mama insists, having received a letter from Aunt Gardiner pertaining to Mr. Bingley."

Aunt Gardiner looked up from her reading. "I did write to her, to make matters clear regarding Mr. Bingley and Lydia. I felt she would pay me more heed than she might either of you."

Jane cast their aunt a grateful look. "That was very kind of you. Mama is certain that as he is leasing Netherfield Park, he will want to retire to the country for the remainder of the Yuletide season."

"But you and Mr. Bingley are both here in London already," Elizabeth protested.

Jane shrugged. "Regardless, Papa says we must select a day next week and write to tell him which, and he will send

the carriage halfway to meet us so our uncle's need not go so far."

Aunt Gardiner looked up from her reading again. "Nonsense. I know how much your mother enjoys making calls at this time of the year. Our driver can make the whole trip. You need only select a day."

"Why would we not remain with you until you travel to Hertfordshire for Christmas?" Elizabeth asked, trying to settle the torrent of emotions roiling inside her.

"But that is over a week away." Jane's brow creased. "I would much rather go sooner and enjoy the celebrations of the season. Why, they have begun the decorations and have hung kissing boughs already, without us." She blushed.

Seizing on the impetus of that blush, Elizabeth said, "But how can we leave when you have not yet secured an offer from Mr. Bingley?"

Jane's blush deepened. "I have every hope that when he hears we will go, he will elect to celebrate the season at Netherfield Park as Mama believes. Then we will see ever so much of him, and he can come to know Papa, Mama, Mary, Kitty, and Lydia better."

"Do you truly want him to know them better before he has offered for you?" Elizabeth asked desperately.

"He has already met them all except Papa," Jane said primly.

"Yes, and you know how horribly that went. How much of Mama's and Lydia's attention can you expect Mr. Bingley to endure?"

Aunt Gardiner lowered the page she read. "Is there some reason you do not wish to return to Longbourn, Elizabeth?"

Battling for calm, Elizabeth replied, "I simply do not want Jane to jeopardize her match with Mr. Bingley. I can see how fond she is of him."

"I do not believe his affection so tenuous and fickle that a removal of twenty-five miles will be the end of his attention to

me,” Jane said firmly.

“Very well, then. If you are certain.” Elizabeth looked back down at her mending, her mind flailing.

“Elizabeth, have you paid Mr. Darcy for the book he sent?” Aunt Gardiner asked.

Elizabeth jerked her gaze back up. Mutely, she shook her head.

“Perhaps you and Jane should go now and settle up so that you are at home later this afternoon.” Aunt Gardiner turned to Jane. “Mr. Bingley did say he would call later, did he not?”

Jane nodded. “He did.”

“Then this is the perfect time for you to visit the bookshop one final time, and with that done, you may select any day next week on which to depart, and we will follow on the twenty-third.” Aunt Gardiner smiled cheerfully at them, then returned to her reading.

“I suppose we should not depart without you paying him,” Jane said slowly.

“Yes.” Elizabeth attempted to hide her nervous excitement at the idea. Perhaps she could impart some message to Mr. Darcy. Some hope...of what? That if he was telling the truth, she would very much like him to court her? And if he was not? How was she to judge?

Uncertainty sped through her, but she suppressed the emotion. She would see the truth of his words when she looked him in the eye. She had always been proud of her ability to quickly assess and evaluate people. She would apply that skill to Mr. Darcy.

“Elizabeth?” Jane said loudly.

Elizabeth turned to her, realizing she hadn't been paying Jane's and their aunt's continued discourse any heed. “Yes?”

“Aunt Gardiner said she will send for the carriage and a maid if we will go make ready to depart.”

Nodding, Elizabeth stood.

Soon enough, they were in their uncle's carriage on their way to Mr. Darcy's bookshop. Elizabeth fixed her gaze on the passing buildings, conveyances, and people, and tried not to fidget. What would he say to her? Surely, he would be pleased to see her.

Would he kiss her again?

She cast a quick glance at Jane, who watched her surreptitiously. No, Mr. Darcy would not kiss Elizabeth today.

Nor would she wish him to. She'd yet to make up her mind as to whether she believed his wild claims or, if she did, what there was to do about them. It was one thing to avoid an offer from Mr. Collins, even knowing that accepting would provide security for her mother and sisters, and quite another to encourage a gentleman whose affection would see her relations tormented by three powerful men.

They reached the bookshop and Elizabeth alighted without waiting for her uncle's man. She rushed to the door, eager to see the happiness on Mr. Darcy's face when she entered. He would smile, which always made him more handsome than any man had a right to be, and his eyes would fill with warmth, and—

The door wouldn't open. Peering through the glass, she realized there was no evidence of life within. She went to one of the large side windows and cupped her hands to shield her eyes from the sun. In the light streaming through the thick panes, dust motes hung nearly motionless as they made their slow way to settle on the books and the floor. Mr. Darcy would never have permitted that, were he within.

"Oh dear," Jane said behind her. "He is not in. I am sorry, Lizzy."

Not only was the shop closed, to Elizabeth it seemed...left. Empty. She could almost feel the lack of Mr. Darcy's presence. "He lives above the shop," she murmured, stepping back from the window to look up.

"Well, we are not going up there." Jane sounded horrified.

Elizabeth turned to her. "Certainly not." Not with Jane and a maid as witnesses. She looked up and down the street. "He likely went to the market for lunch."

Uncertainty wrinkled Jane's brow. "We should simply come back another day."

"Don't be silly. It is not far. The footman can come with us while the driver waits here."

Not giving Jane time to argue, Elizabeth called to the maid and the footman and set out. When Jane caught up, she awarded Elizabeth an annoyed look, which she stoutly ignored.

Her steps grew eager as they walked through the market, following the path he'd taken on the day of their walk. Surely, they would locate him now, out buying his dinner. He would tease her for following him into the market, but his eyes would fill with pleasure that she had.

Eventually, they reached the stall where the Scottish couple sold bread. Elizabeth approached with a smile. "Mrs. Watson, I doubt you recall me, but I am a friend of Mr. Darcy's, and we are searching for him. We went to his shop, but it is closed, so we thought he might be here somewhere. Have you seen him?"

"To be certain I remember a pair of pretty lasses like you, miss, but I'm afraid we've seen neither hide nor hair of him. Passing odd, as he usually would have been for his breakfast this morning. I'd put aside some of his favorites, but he never did show."

"I hope he hasn't found a new baker," Mr. Watson grumbled from deeper in the stall. "Our best customer, he is."

"True enough, Mr. Watson. True enough," his wife agreed cheerfully.

"Would that I were a bookseller," Mr. Watson continued. "A nice shop like Mr. Darcy's, and books don't require a man to be up and baking hours before the sun."

"Now Mr. Watson, you know what they say. The early bird catches the worm." Mrs. Watson turned back to Elizabeth,

shaking her head at her husband's grumbling. "Don't mind him, lass. And I'm sorry we cannae say where your Mr. Darcy is."

Though disappointment welled through her, Elizabeth kept up her smile. "Well, if you see him, please let him know Miss Elizabeth was looking."

"Oh, we will, lass." Mrs. Watson's expression grew hopeful. "You wouldn't be needing any bread now, would you?"

Elizabeth did not as the Gardiners kept a very competent cook, but she bought a few rolls nonetheless and paid a little extra, as she knew Mr. Darcy would. Saying farewell to the Watsons, she led the way back to the carriage. As they drew near, hope once more touched her, weaker this time, but was dashed when they drew within sight of the shop. It was still closed. In the carriage once more, Elizabeth fixed her gaze on the darkened windows and unyielding door as they rolled away.

"I am sorry he was not in," Jane repeated.

Elizabeth shrugged, endeavoring to appear indifferent. "It is no real matter. I can always ask Papa to settle up with him for me."

She turned her gaze back out the window, confusion and despair roiling through her. Why did the shop seem so very still and empty? Had he up and left? But why? Why kiss her and write her such a letter and then disappear? She'd been warned many times by her mother that there were men who would take advantage of a lady and then leave, but even with her lack of actual experience in that area, Elizabeth did not believe that a single kiss was what her mother meant. A kiss was a prelude, not the goal of a man.

So why had he gone? And where?

She pondered that to little avail as they returned to the Gardiners. They informed their aunt of their lack of success over luncheon, then went to freshen up before afternoon calls began. True to his word, they'd hardly settled in the parlor



when one of the maids presented Mr. Bingley's card and asked if they were at home to him and, unfortunately, Miss Bingley.

Mr. Bingley knew Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth realized. She turned to the door, no less eager than Jane in that moment to see Mr. Bingley. To learn Mr. Darcy's whereabouts, she would even endure Miss Bingley.

Mr. Bingley's gaze fixed on Jane the moment he entered the room. He greeted their aunt without looking at her, though his words and tone were polite, then bowed to Jane, who blushed and curtsied. Turning to Elizabeth, he offered yet another greeting. As with their aunt, his form may have addressed Elizabeth, but his attention remained fixed on Jane. Miss Bingley managed the slightest dip of her head for all of them.

Once they were seated and tea sent for, Elizabeth leaned forward to ask, "Mr. Bingley, have you any notion why Mr. Darcy's bookshop is closed?"

He glanced at her in surprise. "Closed?"

"Yes. We went by earlier to find the shop closed and no one about. Nor had anyone seen Mr. Darcy of late." Elizabeth didn't elaborate on how she'd dragged Jane through the market searching for him, something she'd also neglected to mention to her aunt.

"Can't say," Mr. Bingley replied. "I haven't seen the fellow since that day in the park." He turned back to smile at Jane.

"More likely than not, he was sleeping off a bout of carousing," Miss Bingley said. "You know how tradespeople are."

Aunt Gardiner's eyebrows shot up.

Mr. Bingley cast his sister a hard look then turned back to say, "He was likely just out. All on his own there, you know. He must need to step out sometimes."

"The shop seemed very quiet and empty." Elizabeth declined to add that Mr. Darcy had also failed to visit the market as usual.

Miss Bingley sniffed. "He has probably run off. He stole my stone, sold it, and ran before I had any opportunity to inform the authorities. Based on what Mr. Wickham has told us of him, it is something this so-called bookseller would do."

Anger shot through Elizabeth.

"That is ridiculous, Caroline, and you ought not to put gems on a hat," Mr. Bingley snapped.

*Or believe everything Mr. Wickham tells you,* Elizabeth thought, and tried not to let it trouble her that a man who knew the Darcys of Pemberley should have such a low opinion of this Mr. Darcy.

Miss Bingley gave her brother a sour look.

"How go your plans to lease Netherfield Park?" Jane asked brightly.

Mr. Bingley cheered instantly. "Very well, for the place is mine for a twelvemonth. Your uncle has been exceedingly helpful in ensuring that we are staffed and soon Caroline and I will go up to see to any last details. To wit, may I enquire as to your Yuletide plans, Miss Bennet? Miss Elizabeth?"

"Our father has requested our return to Longbourn as soon as our uncle can spare his carriage," Jane said.

"Has he?" Mr. Bingley's eyes brightened. "Well, we can save your uncle's team and equipage the wear. We're happy to depart for Hertfordshire on Monday and would be very pleased to take you."

Miss Bingley frowned. "I am certain there is not room, Charles."

For once, Elizabeth agreed with Miss Bingley. She couldn't leave London so soon. Not without seeing Mr. Darcy.

"Nonsense." Mr. Bingley didn't bother to look at his sister as he spoke. "The four of us will fit with ease and any extra staff can come in the second carriage with the cases."

"We have no staff," Elizabeth said quickly. "And if we accompany you, we cannot borrow one of our aunt's maids, for how would she return?"

“I daresay you will be chaperoned enough with the both of you and Miss Bingley.” Aunt Gardiner turned a warm look on Mr. Bingley. “I have no thought that my sister Bennet would oppose the arrangement, and it would be very kind of you to take them, Mr. Bingley, as you are already going.”

“That’s settled, then,” Mr. Bingley said cheerfully. “Monday it is. We’ll make a fine day of it.”

“I suppose we will, as I can think of no reasonable objection,” Miss Bingley said flatly.

Jane and Mr. Bingley smiled at each other, hardly seeming to hear.

“It needn’t be quite so soon,” Elizabeth ventured. “We do not want to hurry you. You must have a great deal to see to, moving to the country for the first time.”

“We won’t be hurried,” Mr. Bingley said affably. “And if we forget anything, the Hursts can bring it on when they join us.”

“Your sister and her husband will spend the Yuletide with you at Netherfield Park?” Aunt Gardiner asked, likely fishing for information on how long Mr. Bingley intended to remain in Hertfordshire.

“They will,” Miss Bingley answered for her brother. “Between them and dear Wickham, we are assured a modicum of civilization.”

Mr. Bingley frowned. “I didn’t invite Mr. Wickham. I daresay he’ll be off to Derbyshire for Christmas.”

Miss Bingley looked down her nose at her brother. “I invited him. I am certain he will want to celebrate such an important season with me.”

Mr. Bingley cleared his throat. “Yes, well, we can discuss our list of guests later. The important bit is that we will be at your service come Monday, Miss Bennet. And yours, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Monday is very soon,” Elizabeth reiterated. Pain lodged in her bosom. Mr. Darcy’s shop would not be open on Sunday.

How could she leave London without seeing him again? “And I owe Mr. Darcy a sum for a volume he sent over.”

Jane turned to her, that flash of suspicion back in her eyes. “I am certain Uncle Gardiner can be trusted to get the payment to him, and if we depart early enough, we could be to Longbourn for luncheon. You know Mama will want Mr. and Miss Bingley to dine with us.”

“That would be splendid,” Mr. Bingley said with considerable enthusiasm.

“Well, this is very fortuitous,” Aunt Gardiner declared. “I will write to my sister Bennet of your plans, and inform her most directly of your desire to assist Jane, to whom you have been paying the courtesy of your particular attention.” She smiled warmly at Mr. Bingley.

By which their aunt meant, Elizabeth assumed, that she would ensure there were no lingering notions that Mr. Bingley held any interest in Lydia. Elizabeth swallowed down her agitation, for once not caring about Jane’s prospects. Not when she was being forced to leave Mr. Darcy behind without a word of explanation. Perhaps she should post a letter to his shop? Would it reach him or be returned to the Gardiners, leaving her found out?

What would such a letter even say? *If you are not a liar and a cad, please close up your only means of income and come court me, even though your affection may see my family ruined?*

Thoroughly confused, Elizabeth twined her hands together in her lap. Mr. Darcy had her address. He had sent books to Mr. Bennet many times. Elizabeth would not write to him. Instead, she would wait and hope. Should he not be a cad, did he want to speak with her even to tell her they could not be, he knew where to seek her.

She prayed he would.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Dark as the night was, Darcy recognized every tree, every stone, as they drew near Pemberley. He rode a hot-blooded, hired mount as they'd left the carriage and the last team they'd hired behind for greater speed, and the beast demanded his concentration. Still, corralling the stallion's enthusiasm didn't distract Darcy enough to keep at bay the dull pain that filled him, memories swarming like flies. The most acute were of his last two visits, both ending in horrible rows. Him yelling. His father cursing. Darcy closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again to the night. He turned off the main road and up the drive, Richard following.

Though the hour was late, light still shone from several windows and a footman came out to hold their reins when they dismounted. Darcy trudged up the steps, weary after so long a journey undertaken in so short a time, and knocked. The door swung open to the familiar, though aged, face of Stevens, Pemberley's butler.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam," the man greeted, looking past Darcy. "How unexpected. You have come to visit Master Darcy? And brought with you..." Stevens trailed off. His eyes went wide. He thrust out a hand to grasp Darcy's shoulder. "Young Master Darcy." Tears welled in Stevens' eyes. "You have come home at last. Oh, sir, it is good to see you. Thank heaven you have returned in time. Come in. Come in." He backed inside, pulling the door open and turning to a waiting footman. "Send to the stables to take in the horses. On your way, summon Mrs. Reynolds. Tell her young Master Darcy has come home." Turning back to Darcy and Richard as the footman scurried away, Stevens added, "I will see your bags are taken up."

Darcy shook his head. "We have no bags. We came with all haste the moment I knew my father to be ill."

"The moment you knew?" Stevens repeated, lines marring his brow. "But Mr. Wickham has made innumerable attempts

to collect you from London.” He looked past them, out into the night, as if he might have missed a third man. “He is even now on that very errand.”

“Then Mr. Wickham is dreadfully inept with the English tongue, for he has never conveyed such news to me,” Darcy said dryly, stripping off his worn coat.

Stevens accepted the garment, his expression thoughtful.

“Oh, Mr. Darcy,” a woman’s voice cried.

Darcy turned to see Pemberley’s housekeeper, Mrs. Reynolds, hurrying down the hall at a far greater speed than her dignity usually allowed.

She flung her arms about him, much to his surprise, and hugged him tight. “Thank heaven you have come home. I had begun to despair.” Lowering her voice, she whispered, “Mr. Wickham has been at your father to change his will, and he had his man in,” then released Darcy to turn to Richard. “Thank you, Colonel, for doing what Mr. Wickham apparently could not.”

“Or would not?” Stevens made the words a question.

Mrs. Reynolds cast him a pinched look and nodded.

“What is all the—” Georgiana’s voice said from the top of the staircase, breaking off as she sighted Darcy. “Fitz! You are here!”

She rushed down the staircase at such a speed that Darcy jumped forward to catch her at the bottom, fearing she wouldn’t be able to halt.

“Oh Fitz,” Georgiana cried, hugging him even tighter than Mrs. Reynolds had. “You came to see Papa. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I think you refusing to see him is killing him more quickly than his ailments.”

Darcy hugged his sister close.

“Mr. Darcy,” a voice said with somewhat less warmth. “How is it you have arrived without Mr. Wickham?”

He looked over Georgiana's head to see her companion, Mrs. Younge, studying them from the top of the staircase.

Georgiana released him, her smile radiant through the tears streaking her cheeks. "Who cares why George is not here when Fitz has finally come home."

Mrs. Younge frowned. "Now, Miss Darcy, do not speak that way about Mr. Wickham. He has been a staunch and loyal companion to you for these many years."

"And we are all very grateful, but it is young Mr. Darcy who Mr. Darcy has longed to see," Mrs. Reynolds said in clipped tones that alerted Darcy to her dislike of the other matron.

"Richard, did you bring him?" Georgiana asked, turning her smile on their cousin. "Thank you."

"It was all Anne's idea," Richard replied. "She was of the opinion that Darcy could not be so great a clod as all that, and that if he truly knew how things stood with Uncle Darcy, he would return to Pemberley immediately, and she was correct."

Georgiana's brow puckered with confusion. "Truly knew? But I have written and written, and so has Papa, and George has been to see you ever so many times, Fitz. How could you not know?"

Darcy looked about, taking in Stevens and Mrs. Reynolds, Mrs. Younge and a smattering of maids and footmen drawn by the commotion and waiting to carry out tasks. "Ah, I imagine that is something we might discuss at another time."

"But I do not understand," Georgiana said.

"Your pardons, sirs, miss," a woman in a nurse's uniform said, joining Mrs. Younge at the top of the staircase. "Mr. Darcy wishes to know what the hubbub is about. He is becoming agitated."

Happiness removed all consternation from Georgiana's face. "He is awake?" She grabbed Darcy's hand. "You must come see him. He will be so pleased."

Mrs. Younge descended several steps. "I am not certain that is a good idea, Miss Darcy. Your brother is tired and travel-worn, and Mr. Darcy should already be asleep at this hour. We do not want to rile him when he is obviously already having trouble finding rest." She turned to the nurse. "Do we, Nurse Parker?"

"Nonsense." Georgiana tugged on Darcy's hand. "Papa sleeps all day. If he is awake now, he will want to see Fitz."

"I concur with Miss Darcy," Nurse Parker said.

Darcy permitted his sister to lead him up the steps and past Mrs. Younge, who wore a pinched look, and Nurse Parker, who studied him curiously. As he strode down the familiar corridor, disjointed dread filled Darcy. The last time he'd seen his father, George Darcy was hale and vital. Angry, too, with a fine lung capacity when he elected to use it, and very much a commanding figure.

In the carriage they'd taken for much of their headlong journey from London to Pemberley, Darcy had quizzed Richard about several things, one being the state of his father. No one knew what ailed the elder Darcy. Sir Lewis believed the ailment a simple weakening of spirit, but Richard's father, the earl, thought George Darcy had contracted a wasting disease. Regardless, Richard described Darcy's father as diminished, hollow-cheeked, and frail. It pained Darcy to think of him that way, and he knew that pain would be so much deeper once he witnessed his father's deterioration.

He'd also asked Richard what he and Anne had done to delay Wickham's informant. With great levity and, Darcy hoped, exaggeration, Richard had described Anne, as Anthony Bourg, pretending to know the man and approaching him on the street as they'd neared the de Bourgh residence. When Darcy had gone around to the stables, Anne had drawn the informant into conversation and, somehow, orchestrated pulling out a knife and dropping it point down into his foot. She'd then dosed the now hopping and wailing spy with laudanum, which she apparently had on her person at the ready, and paid several onlookers to take him to a surgeon.



Georgiana stopped walking and Darcy shook his head to clear away memories of their mad dash to Pemberley. He focused on the familiar door before him and drew in a deep breath.

His sister pushed open the door to their father's chambers. "Go in," she whispered. "I will wait out here." She squeezed his hand. "I am so happy you are home, Fitz." Letting go, she stepped back, as if speaking with George Darcy were a trial that Darcy must face alone.

And so he supposed it was.

He stepped into the familiar sitting room to find all as it had been, except that to the portraits on the mantelpiece had been added a rather large painting of Wickham. To Darcy's surprise, his father sat, blanket swaddled, in an armchair by the fire. Darcy had assumed he would need to go into the bedchamber to find him.

George Darcy looked up from the book in his lap and his expression went blank. He simply stared, his eyes over large in his thin and drawn face.

Darcy bowed. "Father."

The book thudded to the floor as George Darcy struggled to his feet. He reached out with both arms. "My son. My son, you are home at last."

He shuffled forward and Darcy moved to meet him, worried his father would fall, his legs tangled in blankets as they were. Darcy was enveloped in yet another hug, his father's arms thin but strong as he clutched Darcy to him for a moment, then pushed him away to take him by the shoulders.

"Look at you, so tall and upright. The very image of a Darcy of Pemberley. Ah, how I have missed you, boy. Why have you remained away for so long? Why torment an old man so?"

"You are not that old," Darcy said quickly, his throat threatening to close over the words, though they were true. Indeed, his father did not appear half so bad as he'd feared. Thin and drawn, yes, and pale, but not a man so near to death

as Darcy had been afraid to find. “And I am sorry. I did not realize you were so ill.”

“But I told you as much when I wrote to you,” his father said. “It was in the letter I sent directly following the one where I informed you that I am willing to renegotiate regarding your marriage to Anne. You cannot tell me you do not recall that, even if you did not deign to reply.”

Within Darcy, hope bloomed that his father’s words meant he would give up on a union of the Darcy and de Bourgh houses. Still, sudden leeriness sped through him as well, born of any mention of marriage and Anne by this man. “I received no such letters.” And he had a good notion of why.

As if to prove him right, his father shook his head and stated, “To be certain you did. George said he delivered them personally.”

Darcy stiffened, sensing an argument brewing already. “Wickham is far less honest than you credit him to be.”

George Darcy shook his head. He sank back into his chair, sorrowful. “He warned me you would be this way.”

“What way?” Darcy tried to steady his tone against his growing anger.

“He has told me many times that when you have talked of coming home, you have expounded on how you will blame him for what has befallen you. For your own stubborn decisions. That you will never own up to what you have done to me. To this family.” George Darcy raised stricken eyes. “I did not wish to believe that George’s assessment was true, and yet, here you are, behaving precisely as he said you would.”

Darcy ground his teeth. Did Wickham have a lie in place for every eventuality?

Voices sounded in the hall. Darcy picked out Georgiana’s, Richard’s, Mrs. Reynold’s, and a fourth he thought might be the nurse. With sudden relief, Darcy realized that Richard would add the weight of his word to anything Darcy might say against Wickham.

But taking in his father's drawn face and the dark rings under his eyes, Darcy merely bowed. "We will discuss this at greater length come morning, Father."

George Darcy nodded. "That would be best, I believe. You should have time to think on what your conscience bids you say, Son. Remember, pride goeth before the fall."

"I am unlikely to forget," Darcy said blandly.

"You will join us at church in the morning?"

"I will." Darcy studied his father a moment longer, wishing he had Wickham's charm so he might easily persuade his patriarch of the truth.

"I am certain you will find Patrick ready to assist you."

"Patrick?" Darcy repeated. He had not thought of his erstwhile valet in years, although when he'd first left Pemberley, he'd missed the man sorely.

"Yes. His family has served ours for generations. His father is my valet still. You did not believe I would cast him out over your contrariness?"

With effort, Darcy refrained from further teeth grinding. "I hoped you would not, and I am pleased to find that hope realized."

His father nodded, seeming satisfied on that count, at least. "It is good to have you home, Son. Rest well."

"And you, Father."

Darcy retreated into the hall. Nurse Parker dipped her head to him as she went into his father's room, and he turned from her to find that only Georgiana waited.

She hurried to his side. "How was he?"

"Better than I had dared to hope," Darcy replied, relief leaching into his tone.

Georgiana nodded. "He has been much improved the past few days. Since Nurse Parker took over his care."

"Nurse Parker is new?"

“Yes, and I believe her to be a fine improvement.” She cast Darcy a quick apologetic look. “Not that I mean to criticize George. He has been simply wonderful, to be certain.”

“Yes. I am sure he has,” Darcy said sardonically. “But why would complimenting Nurse Parker’s skills be an insult to him?”

“When Papa contracted a head cold this autumn none of us thought much of it, but George was certain it was worse than we knew and he went to London specially and brought back Nurse Bell, and she has taken care of Papa ever since, until this past week when she got sick.” Georgiana’s features pinched. “We were terribly worried, because we did not believe that what Papa has is contagious, and George was away in London, too. But Mrs. Reynolds found Nurse Parker and she has been a godsend.”

“Where is Nurse Bell now?” Darcy asked, a horrible suspicion brewing in him. Anne had said Darcy should be wary of members of the staff colluding with Wickham, and when it came to plotting, Anne was usually right.

“Nurse Bell has been confined to the maids’ quarters. Mrs. Reynolds insisted she be removed as far from Papa as possible so as not to reinfect him, or infect anyone else. Mrs. Younge said she should stay in her room beside Papa’s, and they had a bit of a row, but Mrs. Reynolds won.”

Darcy looked up and down the familiar hall. “And where is Mrs. Younge now?”

Georgiana shrugged. “She said she had a letter to write.” Standing straighter, his sister added, “She does not need to stay with me at all times. I am not a child anymore.”

“No. Certainly not.” Darcy scrubbed at his forehead, his mind in tumult. “Richard and I traveled hard to get here. I believe I will retire.”

“You do look tired,” Georgiana said gravely. Quickly, she hugged him. “I am so happy you are home.” With that, she disappeared into her chamber.

Such was the chaos of Darcy's mind that it wasn't until he stepped into his room that he recalled his father's words about Patrick. Darcy halted, staring at his valet, uncertain of his reception. He had, after all, abandoned Patrick as well, when he left his family and Pemberley behind.

"Mr. Darcy," Patrick exclaimed, rushing across the room. "It is so good to have you back, sir." He looked Darcy up and down with a critical eye. "I believe your old trousers may fit still, and waistcoats should not be too great a trouble, but from your greatcoat I had surmised you have grown broader through the shoulders, and I was right."

Darcy supposed he had, what with years of moving books about. Bemused, he stood still as Patrick circled him, clicking and tutting.

"Yes, I can find trousers that will do, but where I will find a shirt and coat, I do not know. If you do not mind, I had best take what you are wearing down and launder it all immediately, in case I am unable to locate suitable garments by morning. To think, you and the colonel arriving all of a sudden with no luggage to speak of. He can borrow from Mr. Wickham's wardrobe I warrant, but you are far too tall and even if I manage to get one of Mr. Wickham's coats on you, you will split the seams. We will need to have the tailor in first thing Monday." Patrick came full circle and halted before Darcy.

"Patrick, I am sorry," Darcy said, the words awkward in his mouth. "I do not see how I could have included you in my leaving, but I am sorry I left without warning."

Patrick looked down for a moment. When he looked back up, he said firmly, "I understood, sir. We all did, and it has been good I have not had any of my usual duties because I could assist Mrs. Reynolds."

"Assist Mrs. Reynolds?" Darcy repeated, attempting to loosen his cravat. If Patrick wouldn't be able to sleep until he laundered Darcy's clothes, he wanted to hurry up and hand them over, for his valet's sake.

Patrick batted his hands away and deftly untied the knot. "Yes. I have been assisting her with...well, with safeguarding the females of the household."

Darcy frowned down at him. "How do you mean?"

"Mr. Wickham is liberal in bestowing his affection," Patrick said flatly.

"Does my father know?" Darcy asked, shocked. No matter how much George Darcy cared for Wickham, he wouldn't put up with his female staff being abused.

"He will not believe any of it. He and Mrs. Reynolds had a real knock-down about it. She threatened to tender her resignation, but we persuaded her to stay. Stevens pointed out that if she went, Mr. Wickham would likely have a say as to who took her place, and then what would happen to the girls?"

"Very wise," Darcy murmured, dazed. What had he done in leaving? He'd worried about Georgiana, but thought her safe enough as a woman of privilege. He hadn't even considered the staff.

Patrick helped him with his coat as he continued, "So Mrs. Reynolds and I worked it out that I guard the stairs leading up to the ladies' quarters at night and if it ever came to blows, which it nearly has on a few occasions, and I got sacked, I was to go live with her sister and her husband, and have half of Mrs. Reynolds' pension when she retired."

Horrified, Darcy stared at his valet's back as Patrick took the coat across the room to hang it. When Darcy left Pemberley, he'd thought only of his principles. Of right and wrong, and standing up for himself. He had given little thought to all those he left behind. To his responsibilities to them.

Had he, would he still have gone? Could he have? It was one thing to stand firm in his wishes, to relegate dialogue with his sister to the written word, but quite another to put his desires above the wellbeing of so many others. Particularly those who looked to him, as the next master of Pemberley, for their safety and wellbeing.

“Are you well, sir?” Patrick asked.

Darcy blinked, realizing his valet stood before him once more. “No. I am a fool. A bounder and a cad. I cannot believe I left you all to Wickham’s care.”

“It has not been so bad, sir. He is in London a great deal.”

“Yes, well, I am here now, and I will set things right.” No matter what it took.

Patrick grinned. “That is what we are all hoping, sir.”

Darcy nodded, purpose warring with guilt within him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Elizabeth took in the familiar countryside through the window of Mr. Bingley's carriage with a mixture of feelings. She loved her home and was pleased to return, but a sharp pain tugged at her heart. A string was tied round the organ, and it stretched all the way back to London, wrenching at her.

"What a lovely countrified location," Miss Bingley said.

"Isn't it, though?" Mr. Bingley said enthusiastically, smiling across the carriage at Jane.

Elizabeth wondered if he truly didn't realize his sister meant her words as an insult or if he simply preferred to ignore Miss Bingley's jabs.

They turned up the lane to Longbourn and soon the curve of the drive brought the manor house into view. Elizabeth took in the familiar stone, the slightly in need of repair roof, and the way the curtain in the front parlor twitched, indicating that at least one of her sisters watched.

"And this is Longbourn, then?" Miss Bingley asked, her sweeping gaze taking in every blade, bush, and cobble visible from the carriage. "How quaint."

"Is it not the most picturesque location?" Mr. Bingley said brightly. "Such a lovely, historic home. Such well-tended countryside."

Seated beside Elizabeth, Jane smiled at him. "We have many fine walks. I would be pleased to show them to you, Mr. Bingley."

"I am certain you would," Miss Bingley said flatly. "I cannot imagine Charles will wish to spend much time in so obscure a region, however."

"I mean to spend a great deal of time here," Mr. Bingley said firmly. "Have I not leased an estate not two miles away?"



It was three, but Elizabeth saw no reason to correct him. Blandly, her words a jab at Miss Bingley, she said, "There is, in fact, a pleasant walk from here to your new home, Mr. Bingley. I am certain Jane would be pleased to show you the way."

Jane blushed and nodded.

Mr. Bingley beamed at her. "Splendid. Can it be ridden? Why, I could be here in a trice, couldn't I?"

The carriage halted and they all spilled out, even Miss Bingley pleased to be walking rather than jostling along. Not that Mr. Bingley's conveyance wasn't fine, but the roads were always pitted in winter.

Mrs. Bennet came out, followed by Kitty and Lydia, and rushed forward to greet them. "Mr. Bingley. How very wonderful to meet you again, sir. How kind of you to bring our Jane home. My sister Gardiner wrote and explained all. How very naughty of you, last time, not to tell us that you are courting Jane. But then it does make sense, for Jane is the prettiest of my daughters. Do come in for tea."

Lydia slanted a look at Jane before batting her lashes at Mr. Bingley. "Did you bring me any presents from London, Mr. Bingley?"

Jane frowned at her youngest sister.

Miss Bingley looked from Bennet to Bennet in undisguised horror. "Really, Charles, we dare not tarry. We must go to this Netherfield place you have taken on. If what I have seen so far of Hertfordshire is any indication, it will be a great deal of work to ready it for the Hursts' arrival."

"Netherfield Park is a splendid home," Mrs. Bennet said, addressing Miss Bingley even though they had yet to be introduced. "Very fine. And the staff have been putting everything in order. The whole of Meryton has awaited your arrival."

"You see?" Mr. Bingley said to his sister. "All is in hand."

"You expect a country staff to order your household to your satisfaction?" Miss Bingley sniffed. "Really, Charles."

Lydia giggled and left off preening for Mr. Bingley to whisper something to Kitty, who looked at Miss Bingley and laughed.

Mr. Bingley turned to Mrs. Bennet. "Mrs. Bennet, may I present my sister, Miss Bingley? Caroline, this is Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth's mother, Mrs. Bennet, and her sisters, Miss Kitty and Miss Lydia."

"You do not have to put Kitty first, Mr. Bingley," Lydia said, moving nearer to him. "I know she is so much older than I am, but everyone says I am prettier."

"Not everyone," Kitty snapped.

Mrs. Bennet seemed for all the world not to hear the two. "We are so pleased to have you in our home, Miss Bingley." She turned as she spoke, gesturing for them to follow her inside. "Hill has a lovely tea prepared. Simply delightful. You will not even know you are in the country."

So her mother had understood the insults Miss Bingley lobbed at her, Elizabeth realized, impressed with Mrs. Bennet's forbearance. But then, she very much wanted Mr. Bingley to offer for one of them. Fortunately, from the way she'd ignored Lydia's flirting, Elizabeth deduced that Mrs. Bennet did not care if he offered for Lydia or for Jane. Aunt Gardiner's letters must have been very direct.

Inside, they were given a moment to freshen up and then assembled for tea. Once they were seated and the maids had departed, Mrs. Bennet turned to Jane. "Jane, dear, you serve. I want Mr. Bingley to see how very decorous you are. The perfect hostess. Why, Mr. Bingley, Jane's manners are such that she could serve any manner of gentleman or lord and do a husband much credit."

"Mama," Jane murmured, blushing.

"It is uncommon for any of your daughters to be proficient at pouring tea, then?" Miss Bingley asked sweetly.

Mrs. Bennet stared at her blankly.

"Why would anyone want to be good at pouring tea?" Lydia asked with a laugh. "Such a boring skill."

Kitty giggled.

Miss Bingley eyed the two as if she'd found them under an overturned rock.

"I have already observed Miss Bennet's elegance," Mr. Bingley said, earning a grateful look from Jane.

"Jane's elegance?" Lydia said with a huff.

Mrs. Bennet cast her youngest a warning look before turning back to Mr. Bingley. "Yes, well, Mr. Bingley, you said you have more guests arriving soon?"

"In actuality, I said that to my brother." Miss Bingley emphasized the final three words.

Mrs. Bennet turned eagerly to her. "And will these be your brother's bosom friends? Other wealthy gentlemen up from London?"

Miss Bingley appraised Mrs. Bennet much as she had Kitty and Lydia. "They will be our married sister and her husband."

"But after that?" Mrs. Bennet asked Mr. Bingley. "Oh, but you must invite all of your usual companions, for I am certain a dashing young man such as yourself has many." Her eyes widened. "You could hold a Christmas ball."

"Oh, yes, do hold a ball," Lydia cried. "All we have here are officers and I have no use for them. I require dashing young men from London."

"You only dislike the officers because they are all sweet on Mary," Kitty said.

"They are only sweet on Mary because she has been living in the village with the Phillips, so they see her daily." Lydia tossed her curls. "If I had been allowed to stay with Aunt Phillips, I would have secured the hand of an officer by now."

"But I thought you didn't want one." Glee shone in Kitty's eyes at the opportunity to tease her younger, more vivacious sister.

"Mary will not have one either, even if Mr. Bennet has given his permission for Mr. Denny to court her. Not now that

Mr. Bingley is here.” Mrs. Bennet smiled at him as she spoke. “Why should Mary settle for an officer when Mr. Bingley is certain to bring droves of eligible gentlemen here?”

“Droves of gentlemen?” Miss Bingley’s lips curled with disdain. “I would rather advise them all to remain in London.”

Mr. Bingley cast his sister a sour look. “Then why did you invite Mr. Wickham?”

Mr. Wickham? Elizabeth had seen little of the man but had already begun to dislike him.

“Mr. Wickham?” Lydia repeated. “What an amiable sounding fellow. Is he tall? Handsome?”

“Wealthy?” Mrs. Bennet added.

Elizabeth wondered if they would notice if she left. Her agitation at departing London without speaking with Mr. Darcy rendered her far less tolerant of her mother’s and sisters’ behavior. She exchanged a look with Jane who shrugged to indicate her helplessness to halt their ridiculous behavior and handed her tea.

“More importantly,” Kitty said. “Is he seeking a wife?”

“Mr. Wickham is connected to the Darcys of Pemberley,” Miss Bingley said stiffly. “And I have never known him to take an interest in courting children.”

Kitty’s mouth gaped open.

If Mr. Darcy’s letter were to be believed, he must know Mr. Wickham well, Elizabeth realized. Her mind returned to the looks of dislike the two had exchanged in the park.

Lydia smirked and tossed her curls. “If Mr. Wickham does not court children, it is a happy thing that I am not a child.”

Miss Bingley’s eyes narrowed.

Mr. Bingley chuckled, the sound nervous for the first time. “I am afraid my sister carries a tendre for Mr. Wickham.”

“But have agreements been made?” Mrs. Bennet asked.

Elizabeth winced at her mother’s bluntness.

Miss Bingley angled her nose into the air and said frostily, “We have an unofficial understanding.”

Mrs. Bennet shrugged. “Then Mr. Wickham is still free to choose.”

“Mama,” Elizabeth cut in.

“Well, he is.” Mrs. Bennet shrugged again and reached for a miniature cake.

“I bet he will choose me over her,” Lydia whispered loudly to Kitty.

Mr. Bingley cleared his throat, looking about the table. When he reached her, Elizabeth offered him a grimace of sympathy. He cleared his throat again and said, “Yes, well, Mr. Wickham may join us. We are hoping to have a lovely Yuletide here in the country. So much preferable to spending Christmas in London. Do you have any special plans for the season, Mrs. Bennet?”

“We will have the Gardiners, who you must know well by now,” Mrs. Bennet replied. “And Mr. Collins will arrive this evening, though he will not remain for Christmas.”

“Mr. Collins is visiting?” Elizabeth asked. Mr. Bennet had made no mention of that in his letter. Their cousin may not be a threat to Jane any longer, but he was still unpleasant company.

“Yes, although why he must reside here while courting Charlotte Lucas I do not know.” Mrs. Bennet huffed. “He should stay at Lucas Lodge if he prefers Lucases so strongly.”

Kitty giggled again. “Mama, he can’t stay at Lucas Lodge while he’s courting Charlotte. That would be so inappropriate.”

“Do not say her name in this house,” Mrs. Bennet cried, as if she had not done so moments ago. “I will not have it.”

“Who is Mr. Collins?” Miss Bingley asked, her eyes bright with interest.

“The horrible man who will cast us from our home,” Mrs. Bennet wailed, then began flapping a hand before her face,

fanning.

“Mr. Collins is our cousin,” Elizabeth temporized. “I believe I have mentioned that Longbourn is entailed? It is to him, but at this time, he is a parson in Kent. He is betrothed to the daughter of our neighbors and friends, the Lucases.”

“Oh, they are no friends to me.” Mrs. Bennet fanned harder.

“Mama, please be calm,” Jane murmured.

“And his patron is Sir Lewis de Bourgh,” Lydia added in a fake highbrow accent.

“Sir Lewis de Bourgh of Rosings?” Miss Bingley asked eagerly. “The Rosings de Bourghs are well acquainted with Mr. Wickham. They are relations of the Darcys of Pemberley.”

Elizabeth digested that. Would Mr. Collins, then, be able to offer some insight into the truth of Mr. Darcy’s letter? She suspected Mr. Wickham could, but what she’d seen of him, and his close association with Miss Bingley, did not encourage her to seek his opinions.

Mrs. Bennet left off fanning to frown ponderously. “Mr. Collins speaks endlessly of Sir Lewis and Miss de Bourgh, and of Rosings, and if he likes them so excessively, I do not see why he cannot remain in Kent, rather than come here to oust me from my home.”

“Mama, it is not Mr. Collins’ fault that he will inherit Longbourn,” Jane said.

“And Papa is very hale,” Elizabeth added.

Lydia smiled brightly. “And now we have Mr. Bingley. You keep saying that Mr. Bingley will bring lots of handsome, wealthy gentlemen here to meet us, Mama, and so I should let Jane have him.”

Elizabeth sank down in her chair. She did not need to look at Miss Bingley to sense the sneer on her face.

“Ah, yes, well...” Mr. Bingley trailed off, casting Jane a nervous look.

“And we can begin with this Mr. Wickham,” Lydia added brightly.

It wouldn't matter if Mr. Darcy had powerful, vengeful relations. Elizabeth's family was quite intent on ruining themselves without any assistance. Eager to extract Mr. Bingley from the presence of her mother and sisters before they could spoil Jane's chances, Elizabeth said, “Miss Bingley, you must be very eager to inspect Netherfield Park. No matter how competent the staff, I imagine there is much to do, and Christmas is little more than a week away.”

Miss Bingley turned a sardonic look on her. “As I informed Charles earlier, I am indeed eager to view this rustic property he has settled on.”

Appearing quite glum, Mr. Bingley nodded and stood, causing everyone to rise. He bowed to Mrs. Bennet. “Mrs. Bennet. Miss Kitty. Miss Lydia. It is a pleasure to see you all once again.”

“But you cannot mean to leave now,” Mrs. Bennet cried. “We have only just sat for tea.”

“Mr. Bingley and his sister have traveled all the way from London to see Netherfield Park,” Elizabeth said firmly. “It is wrong of us to use their good manners to detain them.”

Mrs. Bennet appeared mutinous but, taking in the pleading look on Jane's face, she nodded. “Very well, then. You will return for a proper meal tomorrow.”

Mr. Bingley bowed. “We would be very pleased to, madam.” He turned then to Jane, all worry instantly replaced with a besotted look. “Miss Bennet. I hope to be in your company again soon.”

Jane smiled and dropped her gaze, her cheeks rosy. “And I in yours, Mr. Bingley.”

“Mr. Bingley.” Mrs. Bennet spoke loudly, as if volume gave her words more weight. “We are so pleased you have let Netherfield Park. You are such a fine addition to the neighborhood. And Miss Bingley, if you require any assistance

at all decorating, my girls are very proficient with ribbons and needles.”

“I daresay we are all needed here, Mama, to festoon Longbourn,” Elizabeth cut in quickly. “Particularly with Mary in town.”

“I told you, Mary is coming home. She does not need Mr. Denny when Mr. Bingley is going to—”

“Jane, will you walk Mr. Bingley out?” Elizabeth said over their mother.

Jane cast her a startled look but nodded. She looked from Mr. Bingley to Miss Bingley and back again. “Please, come this way.”

Mrs. Bennet turned on Elizabeth as the three left the room. “Elizabeth Bennet, how dare you interrupt me, and before guests. What will Mr. Bingley and his sister think of your manners? I will not have you ruining Jane’s chances with Mr. Bingley as you did with Mr. Collins.”

Elizabeth winced, certain her mother’s voice carried into the entrance hall, and said softly, “I am sorry, Mama. I will endeavor to display more decorum in the future.”

“Yes, well, see that you do. Now, go change out of your travel clothes before your cousin arrives. I will not have you appear as if you required his offer of marriage.”

Elizabeth had no idea what about her travel gown implied that she required Mr. Collins’ offer, but she was happy with any excuse to leave her mother’s presence. She went up to her room where she unpacked her trunk, already delivered by Longbourn’s competent staff. As she stowed her possessions, she could not help but wonder how the amiable, kind Mr. Darcy would react to her family.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Darcy sat in Pemberley's smallest parlor with his father, Richard, Georgiana, and Mrs. Younge. The room was overly hot, selected because its size let them keep it warm. Even so, blankets enveloped George Darcy, though by his son's eye, he appeared much improved over the day before.

The day before. Sunday. Darcy frowned at the memory of hours spent in his father's sitting room. He and Richard had attempted to persuade George Darcy of Wickham's lies and abuses.

They had made little progress, other than to anger Darcy's father. George Darcy truly believed that Wickham was good and loyal, and repeatedly reminded Darcy of all the times Wickham had attempted to bring him home. It mattered not how Darcy refuted the existence of such attempts, nor that Richard corroborated his account. To that, George Darcy merely pointed out that Richard served King and Country, and was rarely in England more than twice a year.

Now, they had fallen into a silence Darcy would describe as sullen should anyone ask, but he doubted any would. He and his sister read, the books in Pemberley's library like long lost companions to Darcy. Mrs. Younge sewed, and Richard glance through the paper. George Darcy sat adjacent to his son, glum and thoughtful among his nest of blankets. The only respite from his father's glower thus far that day was when Darcy had been measured by the local tailor.

Very clearly, footfalls sounded in the corridor. Darcy looked up from his book, still familiar with Steven's tread but uncertain to whom the second set of footsteps belonged. There was something familiar about...

Stevens entered, Wickham on his heels. "Sir, Mr. Wickham asks if you are—"

"I told you, Stevens, I require no announcing." Wickham chuckled easily, pushing past the butler. "I am always

welcome here.” His gaze settled on Darcy.

“To be certain you are, my dear boy,” George Darcy said, gesturing Wickham over.

Wickham went to him and bowed low. “Sir, it gladdens my heart to see you so well.”

“Yes, Nurse Parker is a wonder,” George Darcy replied. “Come, Son, sit beside me.”

The words, aimed at Wickham, cut into Darcy. He resisted the urge to rub his chest, his heart pierced to hear his father address Wickham that way.

Wickham shot Darcy a smirk and moved to sit on the settee with George Darcy. “Yes, I heard about your new nurse.” He cast a quick look at Mrs. Younge, then past her. “Georgie, you look well.”

“You look tired,” Georgiana replied, but smiled as she spoke.

“I rode hard to be here.” Wickham turned to Richard. “Colonel, I heard rumor you might be at Pemberley.”

“Wickham.” Richard dipped his head in greeting. “Enjoyable journey?”

“A touch frantic for my taste.” Lastly, Wickham addressed Darcy. “Darcy. How good to see you home.”

Darcy locked gazes with the other man but kept his expression mild. “It is good to be home.”

Wickham studied him, seeking what, Darcy did not know. Finally, Wickham smirked again, then turned to Darcy’s father. “Sir, if it is not too forward of me, I understand you had your solicitor to see you. Do you believe that was wise when you are so ill, and I was not here to assist you?”

Wickham’s false concern bordered on nauseating.

“I did have my man in, yes,” George Darcy said.

“Did you make the changes we spoke of?” Wickham said eagerly. “Not, to be certain, that it is my place to inquire.”

George Darcy smiled fondly at Wickham. “In view of our last discussion on the topic, you have every right to ask, my boy.”

“What changes did you make, Papa?” Georgiana asked.

George Darcy turned to her. “It is not a fit subject for a parlor, my dear, but I imagine there is no real harm in those in this room knowing. As you must surmise, George and I have already discussed the matter at length, although I was nearly out of my wits due to my ailment. Fortunately, George was there to advise me.”

Wickham cast Darcy a triumphant look.

Worry soured Darcy’s gut. Not for the wealth, for he now knew how pleasantly he could live on rather little, but for love of his home. For the people here who he had too long neglected. For the land and the tenants. His father could not leave Pemberley to Wickham, who would steward with tyranny and neglect.

“I had thought to do as we discussed, my boy,” George Darcy said to Wickham. “But my man had a preferable alternative. More than that, I realized I was too high in my emotions during our talk, particularly as my brain was in the fog of illness.” He glanced at Darcy. “When I heard my son was about to wed a country miss from Hertfordshire, I became quite incensed.”

“I was about to what?” Darcy asked, horrified that any word of Elizabeth had reached his father, particularly by way of Wickham.

“George informed me of your infatuation,” George Darcy said stiffly.

Darcy shook his head. “I have made no such offer, to any woman.” He would not have Elizabeth or her relations harassed.

“But, sir,” Wickham cut in, his glee dimmed. “What of your will? You did not take the steps we agreed upon?”

“Do not worry, Son, I have still been generous with you.” George Darcy reached to pat Wickham’s hand. “I have

invested twenty thousand pounds for you.”

“Invested? Twenty thousand?” Wickham repeated, his face reddening.

Richard’s eyebrows rose, for it was a significant sum, but from what Darcy had seen, twenty thousand wouldn’t last Wickham two years.

“Yes,” George Darcy said sagely. “You will not be able to access the principal until you retire from your career in law, but the interest will pay out quarterly, unless you wish to reinvest it, which I advise.”

“I will not have access to the money?” Wickham blurted.

“Oh, Papa, that is very fine of you,” Georgiana said. “George, you must be pleased, and you, of all people, deserve such generosity.”

Wickham pressed his mouth into something that might have been meant as a smile. “And the remainder, sir? Pemberley?”

“My will now states that if Fitzwilliam weds to my satisfaction, he will remain my heir, and I refrained from specific mention of Anne.” George Darcy let out a long sigh. “I find this ailment has spoken to me of my mortality. What I want most is to know that my bloodline will continue to steward these lands, be it through Miss de Bourgh or another, equally acceptable young lady.”

“That is so good of you,” Georgiana said. “It is good, is it not, Fitz?”

Darcy nodded. “It is an improvement, but I would know what qualities are deemed satisfactory in a lady, and where my affection for her ranks among them.”

George Darcy raised his gaze heavenward. “Affection. Your generation puts far too much stock in wedding for affection. Marriage exists to forge unions between houses. To amass fortunes, so that those of us destined to steward England maintain the means to do so.” He shook his head.

Wickham's eyes glinted. "So you are not giving up on Darcy's union with Miss de Bourgh?"

"I have no intention of wedding Anne," Darcy said firmly.

His father let out a sigh. "In truth, I am inclined to give up on this Anne business. All else aside, my niece is growing too old to bear children and you will require an heir."

Anne would not find that observation flattering but putting that aside, Darcy repeated, "Inclined to?"

George Darcy nodded. "Yes. Your uncles have been summoned. The matter will be put to a vote between the three of us."

"The earl and Sir Lewis are coming here?" Wickham asked.

Darcy took in the flash of panic on the other man's face.

George Darcy issued another nod. "As I said. They have been summoned. I had thought to my deathbed, but I am much improved under Nurse Parker's care."

"I do not think Nurse Bell was very good," Georgiana said, wrinkling her nose. "I am sorry to say it, George, but I am pleased she is no longer caring for Papa."

Wickham's smile was oily, yet strained at the edges. "No doubt she nursed your father through the worst of his ailment, so it only seems as if this new nurse is more skilled." His gaze narrowed in thought. "I will speak with Nurse Parker and see what she thinks, and with Nurse Bell, if she can be located."

Mrs. Younge looked up from her sewing for the first time. "Easily. She is recuperating in the maids' quarters." Her words were clipped and hard, an odd tone to take when speaking of an ailing nurse who had taken such diligent care of Darcy's father, but perhaps that was the tone she always took with Wickham?

"Yes. I will speak with both of them and see if I cannot get to the bottom of who and what have served you so well, sir." Wickham's eyes were flat, the perfect reflection of Mrs. Younge's tone.

“It hardly matters,” George Darcy said. “I will reward them both. To think, not long ago you bade me summon my solicitor to ensure my will was in order, and now I feel nearly well.”

“Well, you will not remain that way if you do not rest,” Wickham said with a warm smile for George Darcy that turned Darcy’s stomach. “It is the perfect time of afternoon for a nap, do you not believe?”

George Darcy looked over to the clock on the mantel. “I do suppose you are right, my boy. And if you do not mind me saying, you look as if you should rest as well.”

Wickham nodded. “I daresay you are correct.”

George Darcy started to rise, and Wickham immediately jumped up and offered his arm. “You are such a dear boy,” Darcy’s father said.

Darcy and Richard stood as well, and Darcy exchanged a look with his cousin. Richard gave the barest nod to the parlor door.

“I will walk with you, sir,” Wickham said, all solicitousness. George Darcy leaning on his arm, they left the room. Wickham looked back once, his eyes flinty with dislike.

“What was that for?” Georgiana asked, looking from Darcy to Richard.

“What was what for?” Darcy hedged. It was bad enough to have his father continually side with Wickham. He did not want to hear his rival’s virtues extolled by his sister as well.

“George looked so angry with you,” Georgiana clarified. “What have you done?”

“My mere existence vexes him,” Darcy said blandly.

“Surely not.” Georgiana shook her head. “I am certain there is some misunderstanding between you, however. I see the way you look at one another. It is as if you are not even friends.”

Darcy had no answer to that.

“You see it as well, do you not?” Georgiana asked Mrs. Younge, her expression full of question.

“I am certain the two merely compete for your father’s affection,” Mrs. Younge said sagely.

“Well, that is silly,” Darcy’s sister said primly. “Papa has enough affection for the both of you. I will simply have to admonish George to behave, because I am very happy you are home, Fitz, and George is not to drive you off with silly jealousy.”

Relief filled Darcy, to have at least one family member choose him over Wickham.

“And you are to be pleasant to him as well,” Georgiana continued, stealing Darcy’s happiness. “George has been very good to us while you have been away on your silly quest to stand up to father and our uncles, and he deserves your thanks, not your rivalry.” She nodded firmly at her own words, glaring at Darcy.

Beside her, Mrs. Younge dropped her gaze to the sewing in her lap but not before Darcy caught what might have been amusement on her face.

Richard cleared his throat. “Yes, well, I will speak to them both as well, Georgie, worry not.”

“Thank you.” Georgiana smiled sweetly at their cousin.

“In fact, Darcy, let us speak now,” Richard said with a nod to the hallway. “If you will excuse us?” He bowed to Georgiana and Mrs. Younge.

Darcy followed his cousin out. Richard did not stop but led the way down the hall and around the corner. Finally, he ducked into a dark dining room.

He turned to Darcy. “I would like to ask this Nurse Bell a few questions.”

Darcy nodded. “No time like the present?”

“Indeed, before Wickham can get to her.”

Darcy started. Of course. That was why he'd left the parlor with Darcy's father. He would deliver George Darcy to his chamber and then seek the nurse, to make whatever offer or threat he felt most likely to secure her silence. It was not even nighttime, so Patrick wouldn't be guarding the stairwell to the maids' quarters.

They hurried to the back of the house. The stairwell to the maids' quarters ended in the kitchen, as Darcy recalled. He had no idea how Wickham would charm his way up, but maybe the bustle of dinner preparations would avail them in passing without anyone taking the time to wonder at their presence. Not that anyone should question him and Richard, odd as them taking that staircase would be.

They entered the kitchen to a blast of warm air and a barrage of noise and motion. Darcy rocked back on his heels. He'd forgotten the chaos of a well-staffed kitchen.

"Master Darcy," a voice called.

He and Richard both turned to find Mrs. Reynolds approaching. Darcy glanced across at the door leading to the stairwell. They likely had little time. Wickham wouldn't spend too long with George Darcy.

"A word with you both, please," Mrs. Reynolds said when she reached them.

Darcy exchanged a look with Richard. The housekeeper's tone had been polite, and yet conveyed her absolute certainty of being obeyed. It was a voice Darcy recalled well from his youth.

But he was no child now. "We will be happy to speak with you once we have concluded our present errand."

Mrs. Reynolds leaned a touch closer and, in a voice barely audible over the din of the kitchen, said, "He is already up there and I know all you need to know."

Richard shrugged at him, so Darcy nodded to Mrs. Reynolds and gestured for her to lead the way.

She led them into her office, an airy, pleasant room off the kitchen. It wasn't lost on Darcy that once she closed the thick



oak door, the din without was nearly extinguished. A stout door, to inhibit eavesdropping.

Mrs. Reynolds moved around her desk and sat. "I am sorry I cannot offer you chairs. Usually, the staff do not linger when they come to see me, except in the case of a dressing down, for which I prefer they stand."

"I am certain we can both remain on our feet," Richard said. "What is it that we need to know, dear lady?"

Mrs. Reynolds smiled slightly. "You and your flattery, Master Fitzwilliam. Do not for a moment think I am not aware of how many sweets you have charmed from this kitchen over the years."

Richard adopted a hurt expression. "A misspent youth. I assure you, I am reformed."

"I have no doubt." She smiled a moment longer, taking them in fondly, then shook her head. "Now, as to Nurse Bell, she is a deplorable person. Perhaps even criminal, but I will leave that to your discretion, Master Darcy."

"Criminal?" Darcy repeated, wishing he were shocked. "Was she actively discouraging my father's recovery?"

"She was dosing him several times a day with a concoction she would not name." Mrs. Reynold's mouth pinched into a hard line. "I stole a bottle of it from her room and began pouring it into her tea, and I still am. Ingesting it has rendered her quite insensible. She is weak, pale, and confused. All the symptoms your father once evidenced and now recovers from quite quickly, under Nurse Parker's care."

Darcy digested that, relief welling up at him. His father was not dying. "You are still dosing her?"

Mrs. Reynolds raised her chin defiantly. "I required someone on whom to test my theory that she was poisoning your father. As Mr. Wickham was away, Nurse Bell seemed the fittest subject."

"If Wickham had a hand in Nurse Bell's work, he will attempt to suborn Nurse Parker," Darcy said, worried.

Richard turned to him. "He will want to return your father to his confused state. He was surprised not to be given more. Anyone could see that. He will want more time to work on your father. To get him to change his will again."

"You, I am told, brought in Nurse Parker," Darcy said to Mrs. Reynolds.

"She is my niece," Mrs. Reynolds replied. "I trust her implicitly."

Darcy nodded. "When I leave here, I will go to my father. We should attempt not to leave him alone with Wickham at any point, both to mitigate Wickham's influence and to ensure Father does not ingest any more of Nurse Bell's concoction."

"I will tell Patrick Sr. of our concerns," Mrs. Reynolds said. "We will ensure your father is not left alone for so long as Mr. Wickham is in residence."

"Thank you," Darcy said gravely. He shook his head, his world swirling about him with no indication where the pieces would settle. He hadn't had any notion of the trouble he would find at Pemberley. Wickham's machinations made his fear of being locked away and forced to marry seem almost foolish.

Yet, even more than ever he wanted the opportunity to choose who he would wed. If his father and uncles gave up their insistence that he marry Anne, would he be free to properly court Elizabeth? From what Darcy could glean from the conversation in the parlor, his father had nearly changed his will to leave his entire estate to Wickham, all to avoid having Elizabeth as mistress here.

Assuming she even wanted Darcy to court her. Had she believed anything he'd written, or did she think him mad? Or worse yet, some sort of rake?

When he had a better sense of where he stood, he would write to her father. He knew Mr. Bennet's address by heart. Little had he known how much that organ would someday treasure the information.

"If it is not too bold of me to ask," Mrs. Reynolds said, "I, and the staff, are very worried about what changes Mr.

Wickham may have persuaded your father to make to his will.”

Darcy appreciated her worry. “I can assure you that I am still heir, not Wickham.”

Mrs. Reynolds sagged in relief, her eyes closing for a moment. “Thank heaven for that.”

Darcy could only nod his agreement.

“We will need to stop dosing Nurse Bell,” Richard said thoughtfully. “We may need her testimony, assuming we can get an honest statement from her.”

“If so, she must be removed from this house,” Mrs. Reynolds declared with equal authority. “She cannot be trusted.”

“Could we secure her somewhere in Lambton?” Richard suggested.

Mrs. Reynolds nodded. “I am certain I can find someone to care for her, and to keep an eye on her. Leave Nurse Bell to me.”

Darcy studied Mrs. Reynolds, taking in the gray in her hair and the lines on her face, and again felt a surge of guilt for abandoning his home to Wickham. “I cannot thank you enough for the care you have taken of Pemberley in my absence. More than that, I beg your forgiveness. I did not think...I was unaware of the hardship I put you all through. On my honor, I will make it up to you.”

“My dear boy, we raised you, the lot of us. If you find the love of a kind, honest woman, that will be all the recompense we require.”

He shook his head. “It will not be all the recompense you receive. I owe you far more.”

Mrs. Reynolds smiled. “Do not be overly awash in guilt. It has not been so terrible as you believe. Mr. Wickham does not attend your father so often as that, usually preferring London. And I will add, if I may be so bold, that from all this I believe we will have a better master in you than we once would have.

I can tell your time away has done you good. You are not the proud, arrogant youth who stormed out of Pemberley in defiance.”

Darcy smiled slightly. “No. I suppose not. For one thing, I am much better read.”

Mrs. Reynolds chuckled, but he could see a sheen of tears in her eyes. “Go to your father. Do your best to keep Mr. Wickham from influencing him, and do not let that man give him a drop to eat or drink. I will organize the staff.”

Richard bowed to her. “Let us know if you require anything of us.”

“To be certain I will, Master Fitzwilliam.”

Darcy bowed as well, and they quit the room. As worrying as Mrs. Reynolds’ revelations were, as horrified and angry as Darcy was at how low Wickham seemed prepared to sink, he dared to hope that all would be well soon.

And Anne had been wrong, for once. Wickham had not suborned the staff. Only Nurse Bell, and he’d brought her from outside Pemberley. Of all the times for Anne to err, Darcy was pleased it was in this. Obviously, Wickham had treated everyone so horribly that no one at Pemberley would collude with him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Elizabeth lay awake most of the night, her turbulent thoughts whirling from the pain of not seeing Mr. Darcy before departing London, to the fear that he was not sane, or a liar, and either would shatter her. Him being a liar would be the very worst outcome, for then she must question her every power of discernment and observation. She already did, could not help but, and feared the lack of answers one way or the other would drive her mad.

Finally, as much as it galled her to admit it, she concluded that it was good that Mr. Collins had arrived the evening before. If what Miss Bingley said was correct and the Pemberley Darcys were relations to Mr. Collins' vaunted patron, Sir Lewis de Bourgh, her cousin might have insight into the truth of Mr. Darcy's claims. And if they were true...

If they were true, then he was honest and honorable, and she would beg to return to London with the Gardiners after Christmas, for she must see Mr. Darcy again.

That decided, she joined the other occupants of Longbourn for breakfast. Resolved to create an opportunity to speak alone with Mr. Collins, a situation that, upon their last meeting, she had avoided above all else, she took the very seat she had when she'd last breakfasted with her family.

Lydia laughed. "Are you certain you want to sit in the drafty chair?"

"We call it the drafty chair," Kitty added, giggling.

Mr. Collins frowned at them. "I still feel no draft."

"There is no draft," Mrs. Bennet snapped.

Mr. Bennet's hand reached from behind his paper to secure his coffee.

"Lizzy could always sit in Mary's chair." Lydia said loudly, a glitter of mischief in her eyes.

“Mary should be seated in Mary’s chair.” Mrs. Bennet glared at the paper hiding Mr. Bennet as she spoke. “With Jane certain to marry Mr. Bingley, none of my daughters should be thrown away on lowly officers. Particularly not ones foolish enough to court Mary over my Lydia.”

“We may not agree on the precise nature of foolishness, my dear,” Mr. Bennet said behind his paper. “And we have already had this discussion. Ad nauseam.”

“No. I discussed. You read your paper and then refused to send for Mary.”

“Mary is very happy residing with the Phillips.” Mr. Bennet’s tone was bored. His hand reappeared from behind his paper and set down his now empty coffee cup. A footman came forward to refill it.

Kitty let out a sigh. “I would be happy with the Phillips. I want a redcoat, too.”

“Then get Mr. Collins to propose so you can refuse him,” Lydia said. She tossed her curls and added, “I have no interest in redcoats.”

“You were terribly interested when they arrived,” Elizabeth felt obliged to point out.

Lydia glared at her. “That was before Jane brought Mr. Bingley into our lives.”

“And before Mr. Denny picked Mary over her,” Kitty added with a smirk.

“Sir Lewis de Bourgh approves of the stationing of militias in local communities,” Mr. Collins intoned in a voice that suggested repeating Sir Lewis’s thoughts was tantamount to reading from scripture. “He feels the dispersal of gentlemen can only improve English stock.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows. “Do you mean, as if we are sheep being bred?”

Mr. Collins blinked at her in confusion. “Sir Lewis has not mentioned sheep. Not, at least, in that context. He has told me many times of the superiority of sheep over cattle. Sheep, Sir

Lewis says, has a less stringent diet, may pasture on non-arable lands, gives milk fit for consumption and turning into cheese, and, when slaughtered, is a healthier addition to the English diet than beef.”

“How interesting,” Jane murmured politely when none of the rest of them spoke.

Mr. Collins turned to her. “Sir Lewis knows a great deal about sheep. About all aspects of farming, as Rosings is a fine estate.”

“Must we speak of sheep?” Mrs. Bennet said. “We should be discussing how Jane will get Mr. Bingley to throw a ball.”

“Mama,” Jane said, stricken.

Mr. Bennet lowered his paper. “What of wool? Sheep also provide both leather and wool, only one of which can be had from cattle.”

Mr. Collins turned to him. “Sir Lewis de Bourgh is a proponent of wool. He does not hold with foreign fabrics, deeming our increased dependence on foreign trade to be a weakness. He refers to the now ubiquitous consumption of cane sugar as one of the greatest threats to English society.”

And the greatest threat to other societies given how cane sugar was produced, Elizabeth felt. If the sardonic glint in her father’s eyes was any indication, his thoughts mirrored hers on the subject.

He met her gaze and then raised his heavenward before hoisting his paper once more.

Seeking a lighter topic, Elizabeth quipped to her cousin, “I will place cane sugar directly above the addition of serviettes to our tables on my list of ruinous introductions to English society.”

Kitty giggled.

Mr. Collins smiled at Elizabeth. “Very good, Cousin. You have retained Sir Lewis’s sage advice on the diabolical serviette trend.”

Elizabeth nodded, seeing her opening. “Indeed, and I would gladly hear more on the matter. I would also enjoy a visit with my dear friend Charlotte. Perhaps we could walk together to Lucas Lodge this afternoon?”

Mrs. Bennet glared at her. “I will not have those words used in my home.”

“Which ones, Mama?” Lydia asked. “Walk, together, or afternoon?”

Kitty giggled again.

“You know which words,” Mrs. Bennet snapped. “Charlotte and Lucas and Lodge.”

“Regardless, I would still like to visit there,” Elizabeth said firmly.

Mr. Collins bobbed his head cheerfully, apparently undaunted by Mrs. Bennet’s disapproval. “A splendid notion, Miss Elizabeth.” He looked about the table. “Would any others of my fair cousins care to join us?”

Elizabeth held her breath. She needed to speak with Mr. Collins alone.

“Oh, no,” Lydia said. “None of us want to go there and upset our mama. Charlotte is Lizzy’s particular friend and upsetting Mama is her special province.”

Elizabeth cast Lydia an amused glance and let out her breath. To her right, the paper rustled. She looked to see her father raising it back up before his face. Had he been watching her? It was not so odd that she would want to see Charlotte.

The remainder of the morning passed in slow agony for Elizabeth, lack of sleep robbing her of patience. To know that her cousin might have the answers she sought but be unable to quiz him due to the presence of others was maddening. Finally, afternoon came, and she hurried to collect her outerwear. Not giving any of her sisters the opportunity to change their minds about accompanying them, she bustled Mr. Collins out the door.



The walk to Lucas Lodge was not long and, when it came to nuance, Elizabeth felt it lost on Mr. Collins, so once they were away from the house she asked, "You are aware that a Mr. Bingley and his sister are at Netherfield Park?"

"I am. Your mother mentions it frequently."

Elizabeth cast him a startled look for his dry tone but could read no hint of anything save bland amiability on his face. "Yes, well, we became acquainted with the Bingleys while in London, and with a Mr. Wickham and Mr. Darcy as well. Mr. Wickham may join the Bingleys for the Yuletide. He hails from a place called Pemberley."

Mr. Collins frowned. "Sir Lewis de Bourgh does not approve of Mr. Wickham, if it is the same Mr. Wickham."

Elizabeth suppressed her excitement at such quick success. "No? He seems a rather charming gentleman."

"Sir Lewis has not seen fit to take me into his confidence on the matter."

"Then how do you know he disapproves of Mr. Wickham?" Elizabeth required facts to aid her ever-revolving reasoning, not vague conjecture.

"Miss de Bourgh is very vocal in her dislike, and Sir Lewis does not gainsay her. Sir Lewis is very wise and very freely and eloquently blesses us with his opinions. That he does not contradict Miss de Bourgh speaks of his disapproval."

Elizabeth nodded, digesting that. Was Miss de Bourgh the female cousin in Mr. Darcy's letter? Did he have other cousins? She simply did not know. "Perhaps Mr. Wickham spurned Miss de Bourgh in some way and Sir Lewis is simply disinclined to comment."

"Miss de Bourgh?" Mr. Collins cast Elizabeth a startled look. "Spurned? I hardly see how that would be possible. Miss de Bourgh is a paragon of womanhood. She has every quality. She hunts, rides, and fishes trout, and her presence is commanding."

"Then it is a wonder she is not yet wed," Elizabeth said with feigned casualness, hoping to finally get the answers she

required.

“There is no fear of her falling into spinsterhood. She is engaged to marry Mr. Darcy of Pemberley.”

Though Elizabeth had half expected the words, pain shot through her. She drew in a deep breath. She knew not if Mr. Collins even referred to the same Mr. Darcy she knew. “And yet they are not yet married?”

They crested the final hill between them and Lucas Lodge, the home nestled in a lovely dell before them, and a smile spread across Mr. Collins’ face, happiness brightening his eyes. For the first time, it occurred to Elizabeth that he might actually care for her friend. That Charlotte was not simply a consolation for not winning Jane, and with that revelation came guilt. Elizabeth had not realized she’d made the assumption that he did not hold true affection for Charlotte until the confuting of it.

“I have not yet offered my best wishes for your upcoming union,” Elizabeth said impulsively.

“Thank you. Sir Lewis de Bourgh said that I must find an intelligent, reasonable woman to secure my future happiness.”

Elizabeth smiled as they descended the hill. “I am certain that you have.” She reordered her thoughts, realizing that she had derailed her own inquiry. “And I am certain that Miss de Bourgh will be happy in her union with Mr. Darcy as well.”

She waited, hoping that Mr. Collins would not notice the oddness of her continued questions about Miss de Bourgh and Mr. Darcy.

“Miss de Bourgh will ensure her happiness. She is exceedingly competent in all ways, being Sir Lewis’s offspring.”

“Then perhaps she has not yet married this Mr. Darcy because she does not care to,” Elizabeth suggested.

Mr. Collins shook his head. “There is some trouble with the gentleman, although how he can deny the combined wills of Sir Lewis and Miss de Bourgh I do not know. I have not inquired as it is not my place to question Sir Lewis de Bourgh

but rather to receive his wisdom, and should I know aught about Miss de Bourgh's betrothal, I certainly would not pass along any detail. Sir Lewis de Bourgh speaks strongly against gossip. He calls it water in the garden of strife."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows at that. She pressed no further as they drew near the lodge. She already had much to think on, and wished she could be away to do so, but by necessity she must now remain and call on the Lucases. Fortunately, she truly did wish to see Charlotte.

They were shown into the drawing room which contained Charlotte, her mother, and her younger sister, Maria. Elizabeth instantly noted the smug gleam in Lady Lucas's eyes and read that same emotion in her plump cheeks as she smiled. No wonder Elizabeth's mother was so put out with her longtime friend and rival.

"Elizabeth," Charlotte cried, rushing forward to greet her. "It has been so long." She clasped Elizabeth's hands warmly, then turned to Mr. Collins, pink rising in her cheeks. "Mr. Collins. I have awaited your return most eagerly."

Elizabeth took in Charlotte's rosy blush and the way she cast down her gaze and began to wonder if her friend genuinely cared for Mr. Collins as well. Could they, the two of them, have both found affection? It seemed impossible and yet both gave clear signs.

"Miss Lucas." Mr. Collins bowed. "I have longed to be once more in your company as well. Sir Lewis de Bourgh decries a long engagement. He urged me to return with all haste to advance our union, although I am unable to remain over the Yuletide. Sir Lewis advises that the Christmas sermons are the most important of the year, being on par with Easter and Good Friday."

Elizabeth refused to smile but could not help wondering how the Christmas sermon could both be the most important and yet equally important to the others.

"Sir Lewis is very wise," Charlotte said with no hint of annoyance nor even a touch of sarcasm. "I look forward to the day I may meet him and Miss de Bourgh. Come, sit."

“You will, to be certain, be awed by both,” Mr. Collins said as they followed Charlotte deeper into the room where her mother and sister still waited to greet them. “They are both imposing and impressive figures. I know I will not need to advise you on being properly deferential, as they inspire the necessary level of reverence, and you will behave with all propriety. Sir Lewis says that a lady must always behave with all propriety.”

“Not only some?” Elizabeth murmured, earning a quick look from Charlotte.

“Mr. Collins, we are so happy you have returned,” Lady Lucas greeted. “You have no fear of Charlotte behaving with anything other than propriety.”

“I am certain I do not,” Mr. Collins said cheerfully, taking a seat beside his betrothed. “Sir Lewis assures me that a woman such as I describe Miss Lucas to be will always behave with absolute propriety.”

The call continued in that vein, with Mr. Collins imparting Sir Lewis’s wisdom on many subjects and the Lucas women hanging on his every word, expressing their appreciation. Elizabeth endeavored to find her cousin amusing, and devoutly hoped that Charlotte held him in enough esteem to bring her happiness in her union.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Reassured by the diligence of Pemberley's staff in watching over his father, Darcy elected to take a well needed respite in the form of visiting the library. He walked along the shelves, the volumes there old friends, and could not help but imagine showing Elizabeth the room. Somehow, he knew she would enjoy Pemberley's library at least as much as he did. He stopped before the complete collection of the Bard's work, all finely bound in matching blue leather. He trailed a finger over the spines and, smiling slightly, extracted *Macbeth*. Taking the volume, he settled on one of the deep couches to read.

Macbeth had not yet spoken with the Weïrd Sisters when the library door opened. Darcy looked up as his sister slipped in and greeted her with, "Georgie."

Her return look was grave. "Fitz. May I speak with you?"

"Certainly. I am always at your disposal."

"Always?" she repeated with a bemused look.

Darcy grimaced. "Truly, I am. I never turned my back on you, or our family, or Pemberley. I simply do not wish to be ordered into so great a decision as marriage is."

"That is what Anne always says." Georgiana crossed the room to him.

"You discuss my removal from Pemberley with Anne?" he asked, surprised.

"Yes. I always feel dreadful for her. Imagine being told you are so awful that a gentleman would rather live in poverty than marry you."

He shook his head, hoping Anne had never seen his refusal in that light. "It was never about Anne."

"I know." Georgiana settled onto the sofa beside him. "Anne maintains it is not her, but the principle of the thing, and that you have always been a great one for principles. She

emphasizes principles as she says it and I can tell she means it to be amusing, but I have no notion why.”

“Yes. Well, none of this is truly amusing, is it?”

“It is not,” Georgiana agreed. She worried at her lower lip. “Fitz, I do not know what to think. Richard says that you wrote to me and to father all this time, but that George kept the letters from us, and that you almost never received ours, and that you had no notion Father has been ill since autumn.”

Darcy nodded.

Before he could speak, Georgiana continued, “But George says that Richard is going along with the tale you have invented to excuse your behavior. He says that you and Richard want to ensure that Father does not change his will any further, giving more to George. He says Richard and Uncle Matlock do not want to see someone of common blood possess any of Pemberley.”

Darcy swallowed an angry retort and forced rational thought. He didn’t want a repeat of his father’s stubborn refusal to see any evil in Wickham. “And what do you believe?”

Georgiana shook her head. “I do not know. George has always been good to me and to Father. He has been here, Fitz. You have not.”

What could Darcy say to that? “Perhaps if you ask some of the staff to speak frankly with you, they might offer some further insight into Wickham’s character?”

“Well, the maids will all say he is horrible.”

“They will?” Darcy asked with a touch of hope, and worry for what his sister may have heard.

“Yes. You see, they are all in love with him and as he does not return their love, they are prone to inventing all sorts of awful stories about him.”

“I see.” Darcy should have realized Wickham would have a lie in place against any accusations leveled against him by the

female members of the staff. “What about some of the senior staff, like Patrick Jr. or Sr., or Mrs. Reynolds, or Edwards?”

“Patrick Jr. does not like George. He is jealous because all the maids prefer George over him. He caused a great to-do over it some time ago and Father nearly let him go, but Mrs. Reynolds and Patrick Sr. dissuaded Papa from doing so.”

“Well, then, what about the other three?” Dryly, Darcy added, “You cannot accuse Mrs. Reynolds, Patrick Sr., or Edwards of jealousy over maids.”

“No. I suppose I cannot.” Georgiana worried at her lower lip with her teeth again. “You are correct. I will ask them their opinions.” She considered a moment longer. “I may ask Mrs. Younge as well but she does not care for George so she will likely side with you.”

“Does she not?” So her clipped tones had been aimed at Wickham. That surprised Darcy. Fifteen years Wickham’s senior, the widowed Mrs. Younge seemed precisely the sort of woman with whom he usually enjoyed the most success.

“She calls him a scamp and often reminds me that he is not a true brother to me.”

Relieved to know his sister’s companion wasn’t under Wickham’s spell, Darcy temporized with, “Well, you may still wish to speak with her on the matter.”

Georgiana shrugged. “Perhaps I will. We are going out for a walk, and it will be difficult to speak of much else, I must admit.”

Darcy supposed he must be satisfied with that. “Where will you walk?”

“Mrs. Younge wishes to go to the old Roman tower.”

The ruins, hardly a structure at all, were several miles away across hill and dale and rolling fields. “That is rather far for an afternoon jaunt, is it not?”

“I believe she means for us to be out for some time. She says, and I agree, that the atmosphere has become quite tense since your and Richard’s arrival.”

“I apologize for that. I do not mean to drive you out of doors.” In truth, Darcy would prefer to accompany them, but he supposed if they meant to exchange confidences, in particular about Wickham and him, he would only be in the way.

“Nonsense. It will be a pleasant exertion, and you have given me much to think on.” Georgiana stood. “I am happy you are home.”

“I am as well.”

She smiled, departing the library with a much livelier step than when she’d entered.

Darcy returned to his reading, though the task proved difficult. Each passage brought to mind Elizabeth, and wondering what she thought of the text. That, in turn, led to recollections of his every interaction since the first moment he saw her. Which always resulted in dwelling on their kiss and then devolved into worry over what she must be thinking now. Still, he’d made fair progress into Macbeth’s ruin by the time the library door opened again, and Richard entered.

“There you are,” his cousin said, coming over to drop down onto the seat Georgiana had vacated several hours ago. “Have you seen Georgiana? I wanted to further plead your cause, but I cannot find her.”

“She and Mrs. Younge have walked to the Roman tower.”

“The Roman tower.” Richard grinned. “For how many summers did we defend it?”

“Quite a few of them,” Darcy replied.

“You would think we would have grown bored of the game but somehow Anne always invented an entertaining new twist.”

Darcy could only smile at that. Anne had always invented the best games. “Until the year with the catapult.”

Richard winced. “We did get into a great deal of trouble over that.”



Anne had decided that instead of defending the ruined tower that stood in the corner of one of the fields, they should bombard it. They'd spent days building a catapult, and days more testing it, until they dragged it all the way to the tower and commenced to rather successfully lob stones. But then, he supposed predictably, one of their shots had sailed over the tower and out into the road that ran alongside the field, landing right beside a farmer on the seat of his cart. Hearing his panicked yell, they'd run for the road, happy to find him well. As always, Anne had confessed to the game being her idea. Also as always, that had not in any way deterred George Darcy from punishing Darcy for going along with it. "I was made to go to bed without supper for a week."

"Were you?" Richard appeared surprised. "My father asked if I planned to do anything so foolish again, I said no, and that was the end of it." Richard shrugged. "I doubt Anne was punished. Uncle Lewis has always doted on her."

"Uncle Lewis may, but as I recall, Mrs. Jenkinson made her compose an essay, in French, about the wrongness of harming others, complete with biblical and Greek citations, in Latin and Greek."

Richard chuckled. "Mrs. Jenkinson is always one for combined lessons. I often imagine that Anne received a more complete and rigorous education at her hands than either of us did at Eton or university."

Darcy raised a lofty brow. "I beg to disagree. Some of us studied."

Richard offered another shrug. "Only because some of us don't know how to have fun. At least, not without Anne and her ideas, and it truly wasn't a terrible idea. It can hardly be considered her fault that the road runs so near the old tower, or that we had terrible aim, or even that a cart was coming by. We were lucky it was a local man, though, so your father could settle things so easily. On that road, it could have been anyone. It's one of the best places to cut across from the London road to the one leading up through Manchester and then on to—"

“Gretna Green,” Darcy exclaimed, surging to his feet. He caught *Macbeth* before it could hit the floor and tossed the book on a nearby table. “You have not seen Georgiana, but have you seen Wickham?”

Richard blinked up at him, surprised. “No. Nor have I sought him.”

Darcy started across the library. “We must find my sister.” He was a fool. Scamp? That was no insult to level at a grown man. Scamp was nearly a term of affection. “Wickham is not going to wait for a fresh opportunity to drug Father and talk him into further changing his will,” Darcy elaborated as he strode free of the room, Richard hurrying to catch up to him. “He is going to marry Georgiana.”

His stride matched to Darcy’s, Richard asked, “Has she shown any indication of wanting to marry him?”

“Her wants will mean little by the time he gets her to Gretna Green.” Darcy increased his pace, calling for servants. In minutes, he had the entire house in an uproar. He hoped fervently that Wickham would appear any moment, amused and mocking, to question the chaos.

But Wickham did not appear, and by the time Darcy and Richard were astride, a group of grooms with them, a footman reported as to the empty state of both Wickham’s and Mrs. Younge’s rooms, although Georgiana’s had not been disturbed and her maid pleaded no knowledge of her mistress planning to journey anywhere.

“You half, follow Colonel Fitzwilliam across the fields,” Darcy ordered the gathered men. “We will take the roadway.” Across the field was the shorter distance, but a horse could maintain a faster pace on the road, and Darcy meant to ride hard.

“What is the meaning of this?” Darcy turned to find his father, a blanket about his shoulders, on Pemberley’s top step. Nurse Parker wrung her hands behind him.

“We go to retrieve Georgiana from Wickham’s clutches, Father,” Darcy said firmly.

“Do not be ridiculous. You have the entire house in turmoil.”

“Father, I cannot argue with you about Wickham. I must save Georgiana. Men, with me.” Darcy kned his stallion, selected for his similarity to the last mount he’d ridden on his dash from London to Pemberley. The beast leaped forward down the drive.

Hooves clattered after him, but he would have gone even had his father ordered the grooms to remain. He may have abandoned Georgiana when he defied his father and uncles, but he refused to fail her now. He would not relegate his sister to a life as Mrs. Wickham.

Darcy leaned low in the saddle, urging greater speed from his mount. When had Georgiana and Mrs. Younge departed, precisely? Immediately after she spoke to him, or later? No one had known offhand, and he hadn’t taken time to search out the information. How quickly would they walk? Had they reached the tower yet?

The roadway was rutted and muddy, winter having already exacted a toll. Darcy strove to guide his mount along the safest path. Speed was paramount, but if his horse stumbled and he broke his neck, Wickham would possess all of Pemberley in a matter of months, Darcy had no doubt. Still, with his sister at stake, he took far greater risks than he might have.

Mud coated both him and his mount by the time Darcy rounded the bend that should bring the old tower in sight. His heart stuttered as he took in the empty roadway. Was he too late?

A cry came from the far side of the vine-choked ruin. Darcy urged his horse from the roadway and around the tower.

In the grass on the other side, a team of four fidgeted, nervous as three people struggled beside the carriage, their backs to Darcy. Georgiana, in the center, thrashed and yelled. Mrs. Younge gripped one of her arms with both hands and Wickham had the other. They were trying to shove her through the carriage door, but Georgiana had her feet braced against the step, pushing back with all her might.

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Georgie,” Wickham growled.

“Let me go,” she cried.

With his free hand, Wickham pulled a pistol from his belt. Reversing the weapon, he raised it to strike her.

“Wickham,” Darcy roared, not aware that he barreled up to them until he had to yank on the reins or risk trampling his sister along with the villain.

The stallion reared, hooves pawing the air. Georgiana let out another scream.

Darcy gained control of his mount, the beast’s front hooves dropping to the soft earth. He jumped free of the saddle to scoop up his sister, who sprawled on the ground. Mrs. Younge bolted right and Wickham left. Darcy stood, cradling Georgiana. Where were the grooms?

They’d followed him, he knew. He’d looked back several times to be certain. But they’d been unable to keep up, having neither the quality of mount he’d commandeered nor his skill at riding.

Or, perhaps, his disregard for his and his horse’s safety, as all he had been able to think of was Georgiana in Wickham’s clutches.

“Fitz,” she choked out. “He tried to take me.”

Darcy looked down to see tears and mud on her cheeks.

“He said I had to marry him because he deserved more than twenty thousand,” she sobbed. “And Mrs. Younge tried to make me go with him. H-he said he would pay her. She is meant to safeguard me.”

Darcy squeezed his sister close. Shouts sounded out of sight on the other side of the tower. He wished he could see where Wickham and Mrs. Younge had gone. Surely, with half a dozen men following him, they hadn’t got far.

A report rang out, the unmistakable sound of a pistol. In his arms, Georgiana flinched. Darcy set her on her feet beside the

carriage, bracing her shoulders. "Can you stand? I must see what's transpiring."

She grabbed his arm. "You cannot leave me here with the carriage. What if they come back?"

"They ran that way, undoubtedly right into the men who accompanied me. They will not come back."

Her eyes wide and her face white, she clutched the sleeve of his borrowed coat. "Don't leave me here alone."

Darcy caught her hands, suddenly reminded of the little girl he'd left behind years ago. "No. I won't leave you alone." He put an arm about her and waited, trying to unravel the shouts he heard and struggling not to grind his teeth. He could only pray Wickham did not escape them.

A steed rounded the tower, Richard on top. Sighting them, he rode up with far more restraint than Darcy had and swung free of the saddle. "He got away."

"Oh," Georgiana cried and buried her face in Darcy's shoulder.

"He got away?" Darcy repeated, stunned. "How?"

"He menaced the men with a pistol. Apparently, they rushed him. He shot one and commandeered his mount, then threatened to unleash the second barrel on the others."

"Apparently?" Darcy knew he was simply repeating words but he was too surprised to care. How could Wickham have escaped?

"It all occurred before I reached them. It was slow, muddy going across the fields. Lost one rider before we even reached the tower, but he and the horse should be well enough. Just an injured leg." Richard shook his head. "We did catch one prize in the brush, though." He nodded back at the tower. "We flushed a pheasant by the name of Mrs. Younge."

"You sent men after Wickham?"

"I did, but he has a head start, and I can tell you, they aren't overly enthusiastic what with him still having a ball left in that pistol."

“Will the man he shot survive?” At Darcy’s question, Georgiana cried harder. He regretted distressing her, but he needed to know.

“By my estimation he will. I’ve seen men survive worse.” Richard looked past them to the carriage. “We will need that to bring him back, and Mrs. Younge.”

“I am not riding in there with her,” Georgiana said quickly, pulling away from Darcy. She brought out a handkerchief far too delicate for the task and rubbed at her mud smeared cheeks.

Darcy realized one was far redder than the other. Another transgression Mrs. Younge would answer for. “Let us return to Pemberley. We will send more men after Wickham and call in the magistrate to deal with Mrs. Younge.”

“I want to question her,” Richard said grimly.

“As do I, but I also do not want to do anything regretful, and at the moment I am not certain of my restraint.” Not that he would ever harm a woman, but he did not know if he could trust his temper in that moment.

“Very well. Cooler heads,” Richard agreed.

He went back around the tower ruins, issuing orders in a loud, commanding voice while Darcy remained with Georgiana, who still clung to him with one hand, her other clutching her muddy handkerchief. Darcy tried not to resent staying to comfort her, but he felt certain that if he had gone around the tower, Wickham would not have escaped.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Elizabeth sat beside her cousin at breakfast again, feeling it would seem odd and insulting to change places now. She'd spent another restless night pondering Mr. Darcy, and remembering his kiss. Surely, a kiss could not be so wonderful if the man giving it were a cad and a liar? Could it?

"Are you visiting that place again this afternoon, Mr. Collins?" Mrs. Bennet asked, breaking into both Elizabeth's thoughts and the chatter between her youngest two sisters.

"I will visit Miss Lucas, yes," Mr. Collins said firmly. "Sir Lewis recommends daily affirmations of affection in the days leading up to a gentleman's nuptials, to reassure the lady."

"And what of the days after?" Elizabeth asked with real curiosity. Was Charlotte to be wooed and then ignored henceforth?

"Sir Lewis has not seen fit to inform me of the best form of behavior while in the matrimonial state."

"He will have time," Mrs. Bennet said sourly. "Once you marry that treacherous Lucas woman, you will be stuck with her for life. Think on that while visiting her."

"Mama, Charlotte is not treacherous," Elizabeth protested. "Mr. Collins offered to take one of us to wife and was refused. You cannot be angry with Charlotte for reciprocating his affection."

Mrs. Bennet huffed. "I can be angry with whomever I like, about whatsoever I choose."

"She can," Lydia said with wide, serious eyes. "While you were away, she became very irate with one of the songbirds. She berated him soundly."

"He was pecking at the kitchen window," Mrs. Bennet stated. "That sort of behavior is unacceptable in a songbird."

Elizabeth forwent asking what sort of bird it would be acceptable in. If Mr. Darcy turned out to be mad, perhaps he could come live with them. He would fit in quite well.

“And that is enough about songbirds,” Mrs. Bennet continued. “What is important is that you are excused from calling on the Bingleys with us this afternoon, Mr. Collins.”

“Us?” Elizabeth cast a quick look at Jane. “Perhaps you and Jane should call on your own. The Bingleys have only just arrived. I am certain they would like time to put Netherfield right before receiving a host of visitors.”

“You, your sisters, and your father and I hardly constitute a host,” Mrs. Bennet replied. “Even with Mary, whom I insist accompany us. All five of you should see the sort of life Mr. Bingley can offer. Then there will be no more talk of redcoats, to be certain.”

“Papa and all five of us?” Elizabeth sought about for another protest. “Surely, Mama, that is too many. We do not even know what state the kitchen is in. Let us give Miss Bingley more time to order her brother’s household.”

“Nonsense. Mr. Bingley sent ahead. Everything is arranged.” Mrs. Bennet eyed Elizabeth. “You, however, may remain behind if you like. Your contrary nature will only hinder Lydia making a good impression.”

Jane cast Elizabeth a beseeching look.

“I would like to accompany you, Mama,” Elizabeth said quickly. At least then she might do something to mitigate her relations’ behavior.

“Very well, then. Mr. Bennet, we will require the carriage this afternoon, and your attendance.”

Elizabeth waited, hoping her father would refuse, but his paper merely rustled. Mrs. Bennet’s pleased expression revealed that she considered silence as acceptance, which Elizabeth supposed it to be.

It was not too many hours later that they all boarded the carriage and went into Meryton to collect Mary from their aunt and uncle’s. Jane appeared positively radiant with excitement.



Her beauty reassured Elizabeth somewhat, for how could Mr. Bingley fall out of love with her, no matter how her relations behaved, when Jane was so lovely?

In contrast, Mary, when she joined them, climbed in with a frown. “Jane. Elizabeth. It is pleasant to see you.”

“Is it not good to see me and Kitty?” Lydia asked.

Mary’s gaze narrowed as she turned to their youngest sister. “I see you nearly every day.”

Lydia smirked. “How fortunate for you. I am delightful.” She leaned over and whispered something to Kitty, who giggled.

“I will have you smile when we reach Netherfield Park,” Mrs. Bennet said to Mary. “And pinch your cheeks. You have such a sallow complexion.”

“I am in no mood to smile. I was meant to go walking with Mr. Denny this afternoon.”

Mrs. Bennet sniffed. “You will forget about Mr. Denny the moment you see how wealthy Mr. Bingley is. I am certain he has friends enough for all my girls.”

“Even you,” Lydia added with another smirk at Mary.

“I do not require a friend of Mr. Bingley’s. I have Mr. Denny.”

Mrs. Bennet’s eyes went wide. “You have not agreed to marry him? I will not permit it.”

“We have not yet agreed to anything, and it will be up to Papa,” Mary cast back.

Elizabeth turned to look out the window, aware of her father doing the same, across from her. Letting her gaze take in the passing countryside, Elizabeth endeavored not to hear her mother and younger sisters for the remainder of the ride to Netherfield Park. Instead, she conjured up an image of Mr. Darcy. She wondered what he thought of *Hamlet*, or of Byron’s work? More than that, she wondered if she would ever have the opportunity to ask him.

Even under a gray winter sky that quite matched Elizabeth's mood, the grounds of Netherfield Park were lovely. More so than the house, which stood well situated atop a hill, tall, imposing, and box-like. Perhaps the effect would be mitigated by more plantings near the structure, but nothing stood near.

Mrs. Bennet turned to Jane, grasping her arm. "Oh, my sweet Jane. All of this will soon be yours."

"Mama," Jane murmured, red coloring her cheeks. "Mr. Bingley has made me no offer."

"Nonsense. He came to meet us. He rented this home. He brought you here from London. He will offer."

"He is obviously interested in seeing more of Jane and in assessing if he should make her an offer," Elizabeth said. "But that does not mean he will."

Mrs. Bennet sat back, her expression confident. "He will."

Looking past their mother, Jane gave Elizabeth a helpless shrug.

They were given admittance and shown to an ornate parlor where Mr. and Miss Bingley waited. Introductions were made, the former greeting them warmly, the latter with reserve. Tea was ordered and they settled in, Jane sitting by their host and Mr. Bennet as far removed as the seating allowed.

"Mr. Bingley," Mrs. Bennet said loudly. "How do you like the country thus far? Lovely, is it not? So much more so than London."

Mr. Bingley pulled his gaze from Jane to address Mrs. Bennet. "When I am in the country, I never wish to leave it, and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either."

Mrs. Bennet slanted a look at Jane. "You must allow, sir, that there is uncommonly good company available hereabouts."

"Oh yes. I agree to that." He smiled at Jane.

“Do you?” Miss Bingley sniffed. “I would rather imagine that in a country neighborhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society.”

“Certainly not,” Mrs. Bennet said stiffly. “Why, there are few neighborhoods larger. I know we dine with four and twenty families.”

“Four and twenty?” Miss Bingley repeated, then issued a tittering laugh. “You cannot compare that to London, surely.”

“There is no need to compare,” Elizabeth said quickly, wishing her father would intervene. “As Mr. Bingley pointed out, they each have their advantages.”

“From the sound of it, the best advantage of London will soon be here,” Lydia said.

Miss Bingley turned to her with a frown. “Which is?”

Her eyes wide and innocent, Lydia replied, “Why, you said a Mr. Wickham is to arrive soon. I could tell from your mention of him that he is the best of London.”

“Who is Mr. Wickham?” Mary asked.

Tension rippled along Miss Bingley’s jaw. “Mr. Wickham is, indeed, a sophisticated gentleman.” She eyed Lydia as one would a slug found in their salad. “He prefers all things refined, and generally eschews anything too rural.”

Mr. Bingley frowned at his sister. Her eyes sympathetic, Jane reached as if she might touch his hand, but withdrew her fingers before she did.

Lydia leaned over and whispered in Kitty’s ear, then turned back to Miss Bingley. “Mr. Wickham eschews the rural, does he? Perhaps he has not yet encountered the best and most fun aspects of country life. I am certain I can educate him in the matter.”

Miss Bingley’s glower deepened, her nostrils flaring, and Kitty giggled.

Mary looked from her sisters to their hostess in confusion. Elizabeth turned to Mr. Bennet beseechingly, but he did not appear to notice, his attention fixed on the far wall.

“Perhaps you should hold a ball to show this Mr. Wickham how lively country life can be,” Mrs. Bennet said loudly.

Mary turned to Mr. Bingley eagerly. “If you held a ball, the officers could come.”

“We do not need the officers,” Mrs. Bennet said. “If you would throw a Christmas ball, Mr. Bingley, and invite not only Mr. Wickham but all of your associates, you would quickly see the joy of country life.”

“A Christmas ball?” Mr. Bingley repeated, appearing slightly dazed.

“Christmas is in seven days,” Miss Bingley pointed out. “It is far too late to plan such an event.”

Mrs. Bennet leaned forward. “Certainly, it would seem too late to you, but I would be pleased to offer my assistance. I realize you are not familiar with the area or with what is available, but I am, and anything can be brought from London in such a span of time. It is only a question of money and Mr. Bingley has more than enough.”

“Mama,” Elizabeth cut in.

Her spine straight, Miss Bingley said, “I am perfectly capable of planning a ball, thank you.”

“So you will hold one?” Lydia asked.

“There will be no ball,” Miss Bingley said firmly.

Mrs. Bennet huffed. “That is for Mr. Bingley to decide, not you.”

Miss Bingley turned an aggrieved look on her brother.

Elizabeth followed her gaze to find that Mr. Bingley and Jane sat gazing into each other’s eyes, paying the conversation no heed. Wanting them to remain oblivious to Mrs. Bennet and Lydia’s behavior, Elizabeth looked about, searching for a change of topic. “That is a lovely pianoforte,” she said, sighting the instrument across the room.

As she’d hoped, everyone turned to look, even her father.

“Do you play, Miss Elizabeth?” Miss Bingley asked in a barely civil tone.

“Not as well as Mary,” Mrs. Bennet said. “Mary, dear, play for us. Show Mr. Bingley the sort of enjoyment he and his friends can expect from country life.”

Appearing pleased for the first time since she’d joined them, Mary stood.

“Mama, you cannot simply invite Mary to use Mr. Bingley’s pianoforte,” Elizabeth protested but Mary was already on her way to the instrument.

“Nonsense. Mr. Bingley does not mind. Do you, Mr. Bingley?”

“Mr. Bingley doesn’t mind anything so long as Jane is here,” Lydia said with a giggle.

“She is all he can look at,” Kitty added.

Mr. Bingley turned to them, blinking.

“That is enough, girls.” The smug look Mrs. Bennet turned on Miss Bingley belied the censure of her words.

Miss Bingley stood. “Miss Elizabeth, would you care to take a turn about the room with me while your sister entertains us with her playing?”

Surprised, Elizabeth joined her. Miss Bingley linked arms with her, permitting Elizabeth firsthand knowledge of the stiffness of her every muscle. She set a wide arc away from the others as Mary began to play a fortunately simple ballad.

Once they were on the other side of the room, Miss Bingley leaned near. “You must warn your sister that Mr. Wickham already has an understanding with a young lady. I would not want to see Miss Lydia brokenhearted, or embarrassed by attempting to attract a man who will deny her. It would not do for one so young to make such a poor impression on society. Particularly society as limited as you have here.”

Elizabeth nodded. “It is very kind of you to warn me. I will endeavor to curtail Lydia’s interest.”

“See that you do.” Miss Bingley squeezed her arm tighter. “For it is well within my and my sister’s power to curtail Charles’ interests as well, if we see fit.”

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, surprised to have her agreement met by threats to Jane’s happiness. “May I assume from your vehemence that you have a great interest in seeing that Mr. Wickham’s understanding comes to fruition?”

A touch of pink colored Miss Bingley’s cheeks. “You may.”

“But, if you do not mind me saying, is he a man of means? I know him only as an associate to the Darcy family, of Pemberley.”

Miss Bingley slanted a look at her. “He is far more than an associate. He is the godson of Mr. Darcy and, one might even say, a son to him. The son who has been there for him these many years and who will be rewarded well for his diligence.”

Elizabeth digested that. So, Mr. Wickham expected to inherit from Mr. Darcy. How much? Certainly not everything? Would Mr. Wickham be the beneficiary if Mr. Darcy married her rather than Miss de Bourgh? Mr. Wickham and, apparently, Miss Bingley, if she indeed became his wife.

Or was Elizabeth wrong about who her Mr. Darcy was? She shook her head. It was all quite confusing.

“Are you well, Miss Eliza?” Miss Bingley asked.

“Quite. I am simply sorting through my thoughts. I apologize for being a poor conversational partner.”

“You do not need to speak. Only to listen.”

They neared the pianoforte, Mary cheerfully pounding on the keys.

“Listen to what?”

“To the recommendations I gave you concerning your sisters’ hearts. As I said, I would not want anything to distress either Miss Lydia or Miss Bennet, dear girls that they are.”

“Then never fear, Miss Bingley. I heard you very well.”

“Good. Then let us rejoin the others. I cannot leave Charles alone for too long or he might give in to this ludicrous idea of a ball.”

“We would not want that,” Elizabeth murmured.

Miss Bingley pulled her arm free and returned to the couches.

Elizabeth watched her for a moment, then went to the pianoforte to turn pages for Mary. Miss Bingley had given her more to think about, and Elizabeth wanted time to do so, without talking.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Pemberley was quiet in the wake of Wickham's flight. Darcy's father had returned to his bed, stunned and shaken by Georgiana's tale of near abduction. He kept shaking his head and muttering, 'It cannot be. Not George.' The hurt in his father's eyes made Darcy want to throttle Wickham anew.

A caravan of carriages arrived the following day and Darcy strode out to welcome his uncles and Anne, Richard beside him. After greetings were exchanged, they started up the steps to Pemberley and Darcy said, "I am pleased you have come. Father is very distraught over Wickham's betrayal."

"Wickham's betrayal?" Matlock repeated. "What is this now?"

"Whatever he did, you should have seen it coming," Anne stated. "He's always been trouble."

"He attempted to abduct Georgiana, to remove her to Gretna Green and marry her." Darcy had to work to master his anger to get the words out.

Matlock shook his head. "I assume for her dowry?"

"My sister does not esteem him, if that is what you mean," Darcy replied.

Sir Lewis nodded. "Good. What is being done about the scoundrel?"

Richard grimaced. "He has thus far eluded us."

His father cast him a startled look. "Eluded you? How can that be?"

"He rode off, menacing everyone with a pistol," Darcy said flatly.

His uncles exchanged a glance, shaking their heads.

Anne turned to Darcy as they reached the top step. "I would have given chase regardless."



“Georgiana needed me.” Darcy spoke softly because the door opened for them, the staff waiting within. He did not want it said that his sister was to blame for Wickham’s escape. “And Richard arrived too late, and had a prisoner to see to.”

Anne raised her eyebrows. “A prisoner?”

“My sister’s companion, Mrs. Younge. She was party to Wickham’s plot.” Darcy waited for what he knew Anne would say next; *I told you so*.

“I warned you that he would have coconspirators,” she said in a low voice. “Really, Darcy, you must attempt to be more abreast of things.”

“You have alerted the local magistrate?” Matlock asked, handing off his greatcoat to Stevens. “You have men searching for him?”

“We do,” Darcy replied before Richard could, wanting to show that, despite what Anne undoubtedly thought, he was in charge of Wickham’s pursuit.

Sir Lewis handed over his coat as well. “Well, then, the first order of business is a meeting with George, if he is up to it.”

“He was in his sitting room when I checked on him an hour ago,” Darcy said. “I am not certain how well we will all fit. I can send for extra chairs.” His father’s private room was, in fact, quite large, but George Darcy preferred open space to copious seating. He always maintained that if any more than a few people wished to speak with him at once, they could repair to a parlor, not the chamber off his bedroom. Obviously, being a generally vital man, he hadn’t considered a scenario in which he was so ill.

“Extra chairs?” Matlock shook his head. “Lewis and I will be fine, unless your father has removed the sofa.”

Darcy frowned. “Yes, but Anne, Richard, and I may wish to be seated.”

Sir Lewis chuckled. “Don’t be absurd. This is to be a private meeting.”

His frown deepening, Darcy slanted a look at the staff still accepting outerwear, but decided to be frank regardless. “Do you intend discourse concerning my alleged engagement?”

Matlock nodded. “That is why your father summoned us here.”

“Then, do you not feel Anne and I should have our say?” Darcy asked.

“I do not see why,” Sir Lewis said with a shrug. “It is our pact. It has little to do with you and my daughter.”

“Little to do with us?” Darcy sputtered, well aware he’d begun repeating things again. But what more could he do when the people around him made so little sense? “Little to do, *with us?*”

“As Lewis says, it is not your pact.” Matlock turned to the staircase. “We know the way.”

“Come along, Darcy.” Anne looped her arm through his. “Let’s play a round of billiards. I have always been fond of your setup here.”

He looked down at her, too surprised to speak. She would play billiards while their fathers took it upon themselves to once again decide their fate?

“I call winner,” Richard added cheerfully.

They were all mad, but Darcy permitted Anne to lead him away while his uncles ascended the staircase to seek his father.

When they reached the billiards room Darcy nodded to the footman who’d followed them to see to their needs and politely closed the door in his face. That likely wouldn’t stop him from overhearing them, but it at least gave the pretense of privacy. Turning to Anne he asked, “How can you be so calm when they are up there arguing about whether or not to make another attempt to force us to marry?”

Anne crossed to the cues to select one. “You rack, Darcy, and I am calm because your father’s letter said that he wishes for the pact to be broken, and I already talked Papa into

agreement, so even if Matlock champions the idea, it will be two to one when they vote.”

“My father can be very persuasive,” Richard said, racking the balls. Darcy had not moved from beside the door. “Do you want to break, Darcy? A good break is your only chance of beating her.”

Darcy strode to the table. “Will Uncle Matlock attempt to maintain the pact?”

Richard shrugged. “No idea. I know Henry is keen on it, but I believe more to torment the both of you than out of any true desire to see Rosings and Pemberley unite.”

“My father can stand up to Uncle Matlock,” Anne said with a touch of asperity. She handed Darcy a cue. “Break. I want you to have a sporting chance.”

Darcy accepted the cue, studying his cousin. Anne had stopped growing around fifteen. The top of her head came only to his shoulder, but he knew her to be a dedicated pugilist and a fine fencer despite her stature. She was intelligent, and definitely more cunning than he, and had a pleasing, heart-shaped face and lovely wide eyes, and Georgiana was right. It must hurt his cousin to have him reject her so soundly. “Anne, please know that my reticence has nothing to do with you as a person. You know I care for you deeply, but simply not in that way. You are like a sister to me.”

Anne snorted. “Darcy, if I wanted to marry you, we would be married already.”

He blinked. “I am not certain about that, but I do regret any hurt to your feelings caused by me being so adamantly opposed to the idea.”

“I have never minded your adamance. It has saved me the trouble of preventing our union.” Anne became smug. “I got to live in luxury and freedom all this time, my Papa dedicatedly waiting for your will to break, while you have been in that bookshop. You don’t need to apologize to me.”

Darcy gaped at her. “You never wanted to marry me?”

She shrugged. "Oh, there was a time I would have because Papa said to, but no, not really." Anne patted his arm. "I'm sorry, Darcy, but the truth is you are a bit of a dunderhead. I care for you greatly as well, but marry you? I don't think so. Now break, or I may as well just play Richard, because we all of us know that if you let me break, I will win."

Mutely, Darcy went to the head of the table. Why didn't Anne want to marry him? He was well put together, exceedingly wealthy...or could have been all this time if she'd married him. What was there not to like about him? He jabbed the cue forward to a satisfying clatter of billiard balls. Dunderhead indeed.

Despite a good break, Anne bested him, and then Richard. Darcy did beat her once, but he strongly suspected she let him win. Only Henry could generally beat Anne at billiards, one of the few activities he would engage in with her. Henry did not routinely play a game if he didn't believe he would win.

"What will happen to you now?" Darcy asked Anne as he racked the balls for her and Richard.

"I'll beat Richard, and then beat you again," Anne replied.

"I believe he means, maritally," Richard put in.

Anne cast him a startled look, which faded into a grimace. "I suppose I must consider that, mustn't I? With the pact broken, Papa will soon turn his attention on precisely who I will wed, won't he? Mrs. Jenkinson will get that London season she's been longing for after all."

"Where is Mrs. Jenkinson?" Darcy asked. Anne was so frequently unchaperoned, he'd forgotten that her companion should be with them.

"She is visiting her sister. Papa deemed Uncle Darcy's summons too urgent to wait for her to get back, and it is not as if we are here to socialize."

"Will you truly have a season at your age?" Darcy asked.

Richard coughed into his hand.

Anne leveled a flat look on Darcy. "You see? Dunderhead."

“And what about you, Darcy?” Richard asked as he moved to the head of the table to break. “You will be free to marry as you choose now, too.”

Darcy looked away, uncertain if he wished to tell them about Elizabeth. He did not know if she had believed his letter, or what her reaction might be. How would he feel if she’d told him that she was not who she appeared to be? That she was secretly wealthy and connected to families that could, and very well might, ruin him and his family on a whim?

He would have thought her mad.

“What’s this?” Anne crowed. “Richard, look at his face. He already has someone.”

Richard looked up from lining up his shot.

Heat crept up the back of Darcy’s neck.

“I do believe you’re right, de Bourgh.” Richard lowered the butt of his cue to the floor, more interested in studying Darcy than breaking. “Well, out with it. Who is she?”

“And how did you manage to meet her?” Anne added. “At the market, perhaps? That would be rich. It would serve the three of them right if their machinations drove you to fall in love with a shopgirl. Or a fishmonger’s daughter. Please let her be a fishmonger’s daughter.”

“She is a gentleman’s daughter,” Darcy snapped. “She came to the bookshop to purchase a Christmas gift for her father, but it would matter not at all to me if she were a fishmonger’s daughter.”

“It matters to me,” Anne said. “I would prefer it.”

“My apologies for disappointing you,” Darcy replied dryly.

“Does she know that you hold her in esteem?” Richard asked, finally breaking. He let out a groan as not a single ball dropped, then glanced at Darcy. “Is there, in truth, a young lady from Hertfordshire, then?”

Hoping they would let the matter go, Darcy said simply, “Yes.”

Anne looked up from the table to study him with the same narrow-eyed scrutiny she'd applied to the billiard balls. "And does she know who you are? Your circumstances? There and there," she added to Richard, calling her shot.

Darcy rubbed at the back of his neck. "I wrote her a letter explaining both."

"What did she say to that?" Richard asked, then winced as Anne sank both balls with one shot, as she'd predicted.

"I do not know," Darcy admitted.

"You do not know?" his cousins chorused.

He shrugged. "I came here."

"She probably thinks you're fit for Bedlam." Anne pointed to the next pocket. "There." She sank the shot. "You should write to her."

"I cannot write to her. We have no understanding."

"You said she knows that you esteem her," Anne countered.

"I did not press her for an engagement," Darcy said stiffly. "How could I, under the circumstances? When last we spoke, I believed I was still living under Father's edict that I wed you. Can you imagine the wrath the three of them could bring down on a country gentleman and his relations?"

"So you told this girl you care," Richard began as they watched Anne sink another ball. "And you told her that you could not marry her because your father and uncles would ruin her entire family if you did, and then, insofar as she knows, you vanished?"

Darcy grimaced. "That is an accurate enough summary."

Richard let out a low whistle. "Not very good at this courting thing, are you?"

Darcy awarded him a sour look.

A knock sounded on the billiards' room door.

"Enter," Darcy called.

The door opened to Stevens. "Sirs, miss, your fathers have reached a verdict. They wish to speak with you."

Darcy exchanged a look with his cousins. Abandoning their game, which Anne would definitely have won anyhow, they marched from the room. As they traversed the halls of Pemberley, Darcy vowed that no matter which way his father and uncles had decided, or how George Darcy felt about a country miss from Hertfordshire, he would send off a letter to Mr. Bennet that afternoon explaining everything and asking permission to court Elizabeth. He may not be very good at courting, as Richard said, but he planned to do it, nonetheless. He refused to permit his relations to keep him from her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Neither Elizabeth nor any of her sisters were surprised when Mr. Bingley's carriage drew up before Longbourn the afternoon following their visit to Netherfield Park, but Lydia and Kitty still ran to the window to peek through the curtains. Jane calmly stowed her sewing, but a flush rose in her cheeks. For her part, Elizabeth looked up from her book, the one in which Mr. Darcy had hidden his letter, but then returned to reading.

"Oh, Mr. Bingley looks well today," Lydia whispered loudly.

"Miss Bingley looks as if our home is made of stinky cheese," Kitty added, giggling.

Suppressing a smile, lest they catch her amusement and be encouraged, Elizabeth gave silent thanks that neither Mary nor Mr. Collins were there to lecture them on decorum. As far as Elizabeth had ever been able to tell, rousing either to reprimand them delighted her youngest two siblings.

"Is Mama still recovering from Mr. Collins' talk of Lucas Lodge at luncheon?" Jane asked. "She will not be pleased they have arrived so early."

Elizabeth looked up from her book. "I daresay Mr. Bingley could endure a day without you no longer, and as it is Mr. Bingley, Mama will know no displeasure. She is nearly as smitten with him as you are."

Jane blushed, looking down.

"Who is that?" Lydia asked in an alarmingly awed tone. "He is so handsome."

"It must be Mr. Wickham." Kitty looked over her shoulder at Elizabeth. "Did you meet Mr. Wickham in London? Is that him?"

"Shh," Lydia hissed, swiveling away from the window to sit on the sofa she'd been kneeling on. "They're coming in."



“I did meet him,” Elizabeth replied in a low voice as the front door could be heard to open. “And he knows Papa’s estate is entailed.”

“Why would you tell him that?” Kitty whined.

“He looks very wealthy,” Lydia whispered, quieter than Elizabeth had realized her youngest sister was capable of speaking. “He won’t care about Papa’s money.” A distressingly determined look overtook her face, only to be replaced by a bright smile as the Bingleys and Mr. Wickham were shown in.

Mrs. Bennet came clattering down the staircase then and greetings were exchanged. Soon, everyone was seated, and Elizabeth found herself sharing a settee with Miss Bingley, who did indeed look as if she smelled something vile.

“Mr. Bingley, how good of you to call on us so promptly,” Mrs. Bennet said after tea was sent for.

“Almost too promptly for Mama,” Lydia whispered loudly to Kitty, who laughed.

“And to bring along a gentleman,” Mrs. Bennet continued as if she did not hear. “And such a fine young man. Mr. Wickham, if you are an example of Mr. Bingley’s London friends then you must help us to persuade him to throw a ball as soon as he is able and to invite everyone he knows from London.”

Mr. Wickham adopted a sorrowful look. “It pains me to inform you, Mrs. Bennet, but I am the very best of Mr. Bingley’s companions. A paragon among London gentlemen.” He slanted a look at Lydia, who sat forward in her chair, staring at him. “But even if all the other gentlemen he invites will be inferior to me, I agree that Mr. Bingley must entertain the community here with a dance. I, for one, would greatly enjoy a sojourn into the warmth of welcome offered by the local populace.”

Lydia leaned close to Kitty, in the chair beside hers, and whispered, “He wants to sojourn into us.”

“Lydia,” Kitty gasped and fell into a fit of giggling.

Beside Elizabeth, Miss Bingley sat very stiffly.

Mr. Wickham watched Lydia with bright eyes.

“Oh, Mr. Wickham, you are terrible to suggest that Mr. Bingley has no other worthy friends,” Mrs. Bennet said. “I am certain he has three more like you.”

“Three more?” Mr. Wickham’s gaze raked over them all, unsettling Elizabeth and returning to rest on Lydia. “Do you have yet another lovely daughter hidden away, Mrs. Bennet, or do you mean that none of them will dance with me?”

“My Mary is staying in Meryton with my sister Phillips,” Mrs. Bennet replied.

“But you wouldn’t like Mary.” Lydia leaned half out of her chair as she spoke, availing Mr. Wickham of a splendid view of her curves. “She has set her cap on some lowly redcoat.”

“And she is not even pretty,” Kitty added.

“How can that be when she has such lovely sisters?” Mr. Wickham asked.

“There is not going to be a dance,” Miss Bingley snapped.

Mr. Bingley, who’d been gazing at Jane without much sign that he heard the conversation around him, looked over at that. “That is, we may hold a ball, but it will not be for Christmas. I’m looking forward to a quiet familial celebration.”

“You said the Hursts will join you soon?” Elizabeth put in, hoping to steer the topic to something that Lydia couldn’t use for her outrageous flirting.

“Yes, yes, but they are married.” Mrs. Bennet waved a hand dismissively. “Do you not have any unmarried relations, Mr. Bingley?”

“Miss Bingley, you are not yet wed,” Lydia said sweetly. “Do the men of London not please you? I believe them to be very fine.” She returned to smiling at Mr. Wickham.

Miss Bingley frowned.

Elizabeth caught the quick, smug look Mr. Wickham sent Miss Bingley’s way, and realized he was deliberately goading

her with his attention to Lydia. Sudden sympathy filled Elizabeth. For as haughty as Miss Bingley could be, such treatment of a woman's affections was cruel.

"I meant male relations," Mrs. Bennet clarified.

"Ah, no." Mr. Bingley looked about the room, appearing slightly confounded. "We have no unmarried male relations."

The maids arrived then with trays of tea things and Elizabeth used the distraction to lean over to Miss Bingley to say softly. "He is only attempting to make you jealous. It is not well done of him, but it is in the nature of a compliment, really."

Miss Bingley sniffed. "I have no idea what you are on about, Eliza."

"What is all that whispering?" Mr. Wickham called. "Come, do not keep secrets from us, ladies."

Elizabeth shrugged. "We were merely speculating on the vagaries of human nature."

Mr. Wickham's eyes went a bit flinty at that, but his voice was light as he said, "A weighty topic for tea."

"Oh, Lizzy adores weighty topics." If Lydia hung out of her chair any farther, she would end up on the floor. "She doesn't know how to have fun, like some of us do."

"Oh yes," Mrs. Bennet added, apparently oblivious to what a horrible flirt Lydia was being. "My Lydia is an energetic, lively girl. You will enjoy dancing with her, Mr. Wickham, when Mr. Bingley holds his ball. Jane, brew the tea. Remind Mr. Bingley what an accomplished hostess you are."

"Yes, Mama," Jane murmured and set about the task.

"Is it not lovely weather for so late in the year?" Elizabeth said loudly before her mother or Lydia could speak again.

"You do not need to yell, Lizzy," Mrs. Bennet said. "We are all of us right here."

"Do you know, it is quite fine, and the roads are very clear." Miss Bingley looked directly at Mr. Wickham as she

spoke, her words precisely enunciated and overloud. "If one wanted to go on a journey, or had been thinking of doing so, I daresay now would be the precise time for departing."

"Right now?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow. "Not, say, tomorrow morning, to take advantage of the daylight?"

Lydia looked back and forth between them, her brow creased in annoyance. "I always prefer to go out walking after breakfast. Alone to Oakham Mount. Have you seen Oakham Mount, Mr. Wickham? I would love to show off splendid local sights to you."

He turned to her, but his expression was now pleasantly neutral, rather than the near leer he'd worn thus far when addressing her. "That sounds lovely, Miss Lydia. I daresay Miss Bingley would enjoy the walk as well. I would be loath not to have her with me, you see."

Lydia's lips pushed out into a pout, and she sat back in her chair. "If you want everyone to walk with you, I suppose."

Elizabeth took in Miss Bingley's now smug expression and tried to ascertain what she'd missed.

Whatever it was, tea proceeded more calmly after that. Lydia fell into a sullen silence, leaving Kitty nearly silent as well, and Elizabeth was able to draw Jane and Mr. Bingley into conversation. By the time their guests departed, Elizabeth dared to hope she'd smoothed over any unpleasantness, at least insofar as Mr. Bingley's perception went. Which was what Elizabeth cared most about as she would not have her relations ruin Jane's opportunity for happiness.

The following morning found Elizabeth seated beside her Cousin Collins at breakfast once more. In truth, she'd grown accustomed to his ways and could ignore him rather well. What she could not ignore, what made even her father lower his paper to frown at them, was the battle of whispers taking place between Lydia and Kitty. Their sibilant words were too soft to make out and yet their unceasing nature made normal conversation about the table difficult.

Finally, Papa folded his paper and set it down, his expression commanding. “What seems to be the trouble Kitty? Lydia?”

They turned to him with startled looks. Elizabeth raised her gaze ceilingward. Only Lydia and Kitty could be so self-absorbed as to not realize everyone at the table could hear them.

They exchanged a look, Lydia’s gaze intent and Kitty frowning, then Lydia whirled to Elizabeth. “I need to talk to Lizzy alone, Papa.”

Mr. Bennet raised his eyebrows. “During breakfast?”

“It can wait until after,” Kitty said quickly.

Lydia glared at her. “No it cannot. It is very urgent.”

“If it is urgent, out with it,” Mrs. Bennet snapped. “We are breakfasting, not gossiping.”

Kitty shook her head. “We cannot tell you, Mama. We are not meant to tell anyone.”

“We can tell Lizzy,” Lydia said.

Jane looked to Elizabeth, who shrugged her ignorance.

Mr. Collins cleared his throat. “Sir Lewis does not believe that offspring should hold any secrets from their parental figures. It is inappropriate for a young miss to withhold information from a parent.”

“It is not our information,” Kitty said earnestly.

Mr. Bennet unfolded his paper. “Elizabeth, please escort your younger sisters from the room and ascertain the nature of whatever calamity they plan to unleash on us.”

“Yes, Papa.” Elizabeth stood, looking at Lydia and Kitty expectantly.

They followed her to the front parlor, where Elizabeth was pleased to find the maids were done laying the fire for the day. Moving to stand before the mantel, she turned to face her sisters. “Well?”

“It would be wrong to tell,” Kitty hissed at Lydia.

“You heard Papa,” Elizabeth said. “Tell me.”

Her expression mutinous, Kitty came forward and proffered a folded page, the seal broken. “I was in the garden this morning and a maid from Netherfield Park came across the field. She gave me this and said we were to give it to Mr. Bingley this afternoon.”

Elizabeth accepted the letter, clearly labeled Mr. Bingley, but didn’t open it. “You read it?”

Kitty cast a quick look at Lydia. “I showed it to Lydia.”

Sardonically, Elizabeth turned to Lydia. “You read it.”

“How was I to know if it was truly for Mr. Bingley?” Lydia shrugged. “I mean, why would a maid from Netherfield Park bring Kitty a letter from Miss Bingley to her brother?”

“She ran off this morning,” Kitty blurted.

“With Mr. Wickham,” Lydia added sullenly. “And I say we let them go. If she is what he wants, let him have her. I don’t want a gentleman who thinks someone like her is fun, no matter how handsome he is.”

Alarmed, Elizabeth flipped open the letter, taking in a bold, strong hand.

*Charles,*

*By the time you read this, I will be too far away for you to intercede. Mr. Wickham arrived with the happy news that he has been named Mr. Darcy’s heir at last, and been awarded twenty thousand pounds. Unhappily, his godfather now wishes to decide whom he can wed. He is fearful that our connection to trade, and your seemingly unshakable obsession with Miss Bennet, who hardly deserves the standing of gentleman’s daughter and who also has connections in trade, will cause his benefactor to deem me unworthy of Pemberley.*

*My dear Wickham has therefore asked me to away with him to Gretna Green, and I have accepted. He assures me that once the deed is done and his benefactor meets me, I*

*will be accepted. Even if that is not the case, between us we have forty thousand pounds, which is no small sum, though I hope for so much more. I cannot see how, with my obvious superiority to most females and Mr. Wickham's charm, his godfather can fail to let Mr. Wickham remain his heir.*

*Please do not attempt to stop us.*

*This is what I want.*

*Your sister, the soon-to-be Mrs. Caroline Wickham*

Elizabeth stared at the page in shock. Could it be true? Was Mr. Wickham now heir to all that had been meant for Mr. Darcy? Did that mean that Mr. Darcy had finally confronted his patriarch? Over her?

Dizziness swept over her. Would he do that for her? Give up hope of ever claiming his birthright?

She read the letter once again. It seemed to confirm that everything Mr. Darcy had written to her was true. He was not mad. He was sane, and intelligent, and kind, and he loved her. She clutched the page to her chest, joy shooting through her.

“Lizzy?” Lydia said tentatively.

“What is wrong with her?” Kitty asked. “Why does she look as if a pigeon just flew into her face, and she liked it?”

“I think she looks like something heavy got dropped onto her head,” Lydia said, adding, “And that she liked it.”

Elizabeth blinked several times, clearing a vision of Mr. Darcy's smiling countenance. “We must go to Mr. Bingley immediately.”

“That is what I said,” Lydia declared triumphantly.

“You only said that because you want to get Miss Bingley into trouble and you are still hoping to win Mr. Wickham,” Kitty cast back. “I think them running off is romantic.”

Lydia tipped up her chin. “I do not want Miss Bingley to get into trouble. If she wants to go with Mr. Wickham and he wants her, let them have each other.”

“There is never a good reason for running off to marry,” Elizabeth said firmly, the truth of her words hitting her as she spoke them. “There must be more at work here than we know, and if Mr. Wickham is a good match for Miss Bingley, I am certain Mr. Bingley will champion the union. He is all things amiable and Mr. Wickham is his friend.”

Some of Lydia’s pique at being spurned left her as she became thoughtful. “That is true. Surely, Mr. Bingley would have given his blessing.”

“But the letter says they have to go fast before this Mr. Darcy finds out,” Kitty said.

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, but that is no reason not to include Mr. Bingley in the decision, even if that decision is Gretna Green.”

She left Lydia and Kitty contemplating that and returned to the breakfast parlor. Her parents, Jane, and Mr. Collins looked up when she came in. She handed the note to her father and declared, “Papa, we need to send word to Mr. Bingley immediately. He may still be able to catch them.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Darcy strode into the library, his mood grim. Anne and Richard had gone riding but he hadn't joined them, not wishing for company. Instead, he prowled the shelves searching for anything to take his mind from his worries.

Upon interrogation, Mrs. Younge had confessed the entire plot, which turned out to have been hatched long before the revelations about Darcy's father's will. Apparently, it had always been Wickham's plan that should he not be named George Darcy's heir, he would claim Georgiana's hand, and her dowry. Mrs. Younge had worked to get Georgiana to fall in love with Wickham for years. Fortunately, it appeared Wickham had been as a brother to her in Darcy's absence and she had, until his attempted abduction, viewed him as such. Darcy found it an ironic turn of fate for George Wickham to have been too kind, for too long, to the young woman he most wished to seduce, thus ruining his chance of her going willingly.

Mrs. Younge had also, in exchange for no formal charges being pressed, informed them who among the maids, footmen, and other staff had been paid to ensure no letters were exchanged between Darcy and his father or sister. All incoming and outgoing missives were to be given to Wickham, both at Pemberley and Darcy House. New riders had been sent, this time to see to the removal of the treacherous staff in London. At both houses, those who had conspired with Wickham were interviewed and then, if found guilty, discharged without references or pay. Matlock, Sir Lewis, and Anne had argued for more stringent punishment, but Darcy's father, still weak and utterly deflated by Wickham's betrayal, had simply let them go.

They had also interviewed Nurse Bell, recovered enough now to be coherent. She had confessed to the ongoing drugging of George Darcy. Even more nefarious, Wickham had paid her to spend hours each day whispering in George

Darcy's ear that he must name Wickham his sole heir or Pemberley would be lost.

But no one could find Wickham. They had his luggage and his carriage, at least the one he'd brought to Pemberley. They'd sent riders to London thinking he might try to retrieve a different carriage and attire from Darcy House before word could reach there to bar him, but Wickham hadn't been sighted. They'd scoured the roads north as well, knowing he might flee to Scotland, and west, in case he sought the coast for escape. Darcy had even sent word to the Hursts, for Mr. Bingley, in case Wickham sought succor there, but no reply had yet come. Wickham seemed to have vanished.

Darcy reached Shakespeare's works and sighed. With Wickham missing, Georgiana shaken, and his father not fully recovered, he could not go to Elizabeth. What must she be thinking? He'd written her that letter and then disappeared from London.

Had she noted his absence? She would be home by now, he could only assume, as December dwindled, and she and Miss Bennet were meant to spend Christmas with their family. Darcy's letter should have reached Mr. Bennet by now. Would he share Darcy's words with Elizabeth?

Did she even think of him? To her, he was a possibly mad bookseller who'd kissed her in the park. Still, at the very least, Darcy must come to mind when the volumes he'd selected for Mr. Bennet were presented by Elizabeth and her sister.

Her sister...Darcy frowned. Had Mr. Bingley not said he might take a country estate? Anyone could see how smitten he was with Miss Bennet. If she was at Longbourn with her family, would Bingley have remained in London?

Suddenly, Darcy knew where to find Wickham. He'd been correct to write to Mr. Bingley, but Bingley was not in London. Surely, he would have his mail sent on? But how often and how quickly?

Whirling, Darcy strode from the library and through Pemberley's wide halls. He sought his father's sitting room, the need for action reverberating through him. When he

reached the door, he took a deep breath, gathered his calm, and knocked softly. As much as he wished to be away to Hertfordshire, he should not wake his father if George Darcy rested.

“Enter.” His father’s voice sounded strong.

Darcy opened the door to find his father, Matlock, and Sir Lewis playing cards about the low sitting room table, Nurse Parker their fourth. He bowed to them all.

“Ah, Fitzwilliam,” his father greeted. “I would offer you Nurse Parker’s spot, but she plays better than you and she and I are winning.”

“That will not be necessary, Father. I have come to inform you that I must go to Hertfordshire with all haste.”

Sir Lewis played a card. “Is that where the young lady you are sweet on is located?” he asked without looking up.

Darcy frowned. Blast Anne and her habit of telling her father everything.

Surprise contorting his features, George Darcy said, “You told me you had made no offer to the young lady from Hertfordshire.”

“Then there is a young lady?” Matlock demanded, looking over his shoulder at Darcy. “Come, tell us about her. We will decide if she is suitable.”

Darcy ground his teeth together, mustering a reasonable tone. “I need to go to Hertfordshire because I believe that is where Wickham is hiding.”

“So it is not where the young lady is?” Sir Lewis turned to Darcy’s father. “It is your card, George.”

As much as lying would be simpler, Darcy refused to do so. “It is where Miss Elizabeth is as well. Mr. Wickham has an acquaintance there who I believe he may trick into sheltering him.”

“Miss Elizabeth what?” Matlock asked.

Nurse Parker kept her attention on the game but Darcy could all but feel her listening. Fortunately, he had nothing to hide. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet. She is the daughter of a country gentleman who holds an estate called Longbourn.”

Sir Lewis looked up sharply. “Longbourn? In Hertfordshire? That is the estate entailed to my rector.”

“You mean that fool, Collins?” Matlock asked. “I will never understand why you selected him.”

Stiffly, Sir Lewis replied, “I have told you, I wanted someone who would not tempt Anne from Darcy. I have always been very dedicated to holding up my end of the pact.” He leveled a flat look on Darcy. “For all the good it has done me.”

Darcy winced. Apparently, even if Anne wasn’t angry with him for not marrying her, her father was.

“Well, we will have to look into this Mr. Bennet and his relations,” Matlock said. “See if the girl is suitable.”

“No,” Darcy said in a quiet, firm voice.

All three patriarchs look at him.

“No?” his father repeated.

“No.” Darcy met his father’s eyes with calm surety. “I love Elizabeth. If she will have me, I will marry her. If you cannot accept her, you can leave Pemberley to Georgiana. Those are your choices. What you cannot do is tell me who to marry, or menace her relations in any petty, vindictive fashion.”

“Menace her relations?” His father appeared quite affronted. “What sort of gentleman do you take me for?”

“The sort who spent years warning off my customers so that my life as a bookseller would be as miserable as possible. The sort who drove me from my home rather than see his will thwarted. The sort who would rather believe a sycophant like Wickham over his own son.”

His father’s mouth gaped open.

Uncle Lewis coughed. “Ah, in fact, a lot of that was the two of us as well.” He gestured from himself to Matlock.

“I am aware,” Darcy said a touch coldly.

“Yes, well, marry the girl, then,” Matlock muttered.

“I intend to, if she will have me.” Darcy modulated his tone back to reasonableness and addressed Nurse Parker, who was doing her best to disappear into her armchair. “Nurse Parker, is my father’s condition dire any longer?”

Sitting up straighter she shook her head. “He is recovered from the dosing and from his ailment of this autumn. He need only exert himself now, in reasonable stages, to regain his usual strength.”

Darcy nodded. “Then I am going to Hertfordshire. I will inform you if I locate Wickham.”

“Good,” Matlock muttered. “I want to see him hang.”

George Darcy paled. “Surely, we do not need to be that extreme.”

“George, he paid a woman to drug you,” Sir Lewis protested. “He attempted to abduct Georgiana.”

“And he shot one of the grooms,” Darcy added when it became clear Sir Lewis either did not know, or did not care, about that transgression.

Darcy’s father looked down, shaking his head. “He is my godson. I have watched him grow from a babe.”

Matlock studied his brother-by-marriage, his gaze narrow. “You always said there was no truth to that rumor. The one about his lineage.”

George Darcy looked back up, shocked. “And there is not. I am not the lad’s father.”

“Well then,” Matlock said with a shrug. “I do not see what the trouble is. He hangs.”

“Whatever his fate, I am departing.” Darcy bowed to them again. “Uncles. Father. Nurse Parker.” He turned to leave.

“Son,” George Darcy called, halting him. “You are correct. You are a man grown, and a fine one at that, and able to make decisions of your own. My will is set. If you marry this girl, you will be my heir. Godspeed on your journey.”

Darcy nodded, any words he might say sticking in his throat, and strode from the room. He called for a mount and went to his bedchamber. With Patrick’s help, he stowed what few of his new garments were ready in a saddlebag. At least he now had one set of clothing suitable for the heir to Pemberley. Not that he would ride in his finer garb, but perhaps he would have the opportunity to don it before meeting Elizabeth’s parents.

Saddlebag slung over his shoulder, he strode down the hall to the staircase, to find Georgiana waiting at the bottom.

She watched him descend through watery eyes. “You are leaving.”

“Not for long. On my honor.”

“It is nearly Christmas. I thought, perhaps, this year...” She trailed off, her tears welling free.

Proffering his handkerchief, he sought to reassure her. “I go because I believe Wickham to be there. He must be made to pay for what he did to you, and to Father.”

“And to you,” Georgiana said through her tears. “But why must he pay now, before Christmas? I do not care if he escapes. I want us to be a family again.”

All impression of having grown up lost in her tears, Darcy’s sister stood before him, weeping, and he knew he could not leave her thinking he went simply for retribution. She was correct, that was not a cause worthy of abandoning her on the first Christmas he might have spent at Pemberley in years. “There is also a woman. A young lady, that is.”

Georgiana shook her head. “I do not understand.”

Darcy felt a smile break through the tumult within him as he conjured an image of Elizabeth. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I met her in London, at the bookshop, and now I have

disappeared quite abruptly from her life. I do not want her to spend Christmas believing I have forsaken her.”

Georgiana dabbed at her eyes. Her mouth turned up at the corners in a trembling smile. “Miss Elizabeth Bennet? That is a nice name. Is she kind? Does she return your esteem?”

“I hope very much that she does.”

“Does she know about this?” Georgiana’s gesture encompassed Pemberley.

“Only that it has not been my home for some time and, insofar as she knows, may never be. She does not know that Father and I have reconciled.”

“You have, then?” Hope suffused his sister’s features. “You will come back, and we will be a family?”

Dropping his saddlebag to the floor, Darcy embraced her. “I will come back, and we will be a family.”

Georgiana nodded, squeezing him tight for a moment. She let go, stepping back, and he could see the stain of her tears on his coat front. “Then you had best go discover if this Miss Elizabeth loves you,” Georgiana said, adopting a resolute expression and once again wiped away her tears. “And if George is there, you had best make certain he does not harm anyone else. Particularly her, if he knows you care for her.”

Darcy hadn’t considered that. Nodding, he scooped up his saddlebag and made for the door.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



Elizabeth paced the small front parlor, unable to remain still. She checked the mantel clock again. “Where is Mr. Bingley? Perhaps you should have ridden over, Papa.”

“John is perfectly able to deliver an urgent summons,” Mr. Bennet said in reference to one of Longbourn’s footmen, not looking up from his reading.

On the sofa near the window, Jane sat with her mending in her lap but her gaze turned over her shoulder, aimed at the drive. She worried at her lip in a rather extreme show of nervousness for her.

Elizabeth whirled back, agitation swirling through her. “What could Miss Bingley have been thinking?” Neither of the other two answered and her pacing continued in silence.

“It is snowing,” Jane said from her place by the window.

Elizabeth glanced out to see large, fat flakes but kept pacing. Rarely did she decry quiet, but the silence of waiting weighed on her. Mr. Bennet had sealed the letter inside another sheet, although John could not read and, even if he could, their footman would not be the one to spread the news. Elizabeth’s father had forbidden his family of speaking about what Miss Bingley had done but he had also allowed Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, and Kitty to take the carriage into Meryton to visit the Phillips, valuing his quiet more than the Bingleys’ privacy. Word of Miss Bingley’s elopement would fill the village in a matter of hours. In a day or two, all of Hertfordshire would know, even if most of Hertfordshire had no idea who Miss Bingley was. Then, word would reach London.

There would be no containing the scandal. Mr. Bingley would have every right to blame the Bennets for that. Could even he be kindhearted enough not to hold that against them? Would Miss Bingley’s elopement impede Jane’s and Mr. Bingley’s courtship?



“He’s here,” Jane said. “He is not alone. The Hursts are with him.”

The three were shown in. Elizabeth took one look at Mrs. Hurst’s white face and called for tea. Jane rushed across the room to her, taking both of the other woman’s hands as Mr. Bingley supplied introductions. Ignoring that formality, Jane brought Mrs. Hurst to the sofa to sit beside her.

“Mr. Bennet,” Mr. Bingley continued. “We cannot stay. The Hursts arrived as I was about to go after them. They took a carriage, so I am certain we can catch up if we change horses.”

“We?” Elizabeth’s father asked.

“I will accompany Bingley,” Mr. Hurst said.

Elizabeth, who had not met Mr. Hurst before, decided he appeared capable enough. A touch stout, perhaps, but no more than five and thirty with the ruddy complexion of an outdoorsman.

“That is good of you, Mr. Hurst.” Mr. Bennet acknowledged.

Hurst shrugged. “Aggravating as she is, she is my sister too, if only by marriage.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Hurst sobbed.

Mr. Hurst turned to her with a grimace, then back to Elizabeth’s father. “I wondered if Louisa might remain here for a time? With Bingley and myself out searching, she will be alone at Netherfield Park.”

“Certainly,” Jane said before Mr. Bennet or Elizabeth could reply. She caught back up one of Mrs. Hurst’s hands. “We will take every care of you. This must be a terrible shock.”

Mrs. Hurst raised hope-filled eyes. “Y-you do not want me gone?”

“Gone?” Jane looked from their father to Elizabeth with a frown. “Why would we?”

“I believe that Mrs. Hurst is worried that with the stain of an elopement on her relations, she will not be welcome in a

home full of impressionable young misses,” Mr. Bennet said dryly.

Mrs. Hurst nodded and began crying again.

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth said firmly, daring her father to disagree. “We are not so impressionable as that, and it is obvious that Mrs. Hurst should not be alone at this time.” And hopefully this kindness would be remembered when word of Miss Bingley’s scandal spread through the *ton*.

Mr. Bingley cast her a grateful look, the expression only intensifying as he turned to Jane. “Thank you. You are very kind, Miss Bennet, Miss Elizabeth.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Hurst added and gestured to the door. “Bingley. Shall we?”

Mr. Bingley scrubbed a hand over his face. “Yes. We’d best, if we hope to catch them. I don’t know what Wickham could be thinking. I wouldn’t have prevented their union, even if Mr. Darcy would have.”

“The best way to ascertain his motives is to apprehend him,” Mr. Bennet said.

“Yes,” Mr. Bingley agreed. “If we may, we will leave the carriage here for Louisa. We plan to ride.”

Looking past Jane and Mrs. Hurst, Elizabeth realized two mounts were tied to the back of the carriage.

“Certainly,” Mr. Bennet said.

Mr. Bingley nodded to him, then cast Jane one final, lingering look.

“Bennets. Nice to meet you.” Mr. Hurst dipped his head, adding, “Louisa. Buck up.” He jammed his hat back on and followed Mr. Bingley out.

Still holding Mrs. Hurst’s hand, Jane craned her neck to watch them depart. “I hope the snow will not hinder them.”

“It is a shame it did not fall earlier,” Elizabeth noted, then turned to the doorway as their maids entered with the tea things.

“Earlier?” Mrs. Hurst repeated, dabbing at her eyes.  
“Why?”

“There would be clear tracks to follow,” Mr. Bennet said.  
“But only if it snowed and then stopped. Otherwise, the tracks would fill in.”

Mrs. Hurst nodded, her expression miserable.

Elizabeth set to brewing the tea. “If the gentlemen do not return today, would you care to stay the night, Mrs. Hurst? Our sister Mary is visiting our aunt and uncle and so her room is available.”

“You do not believe they will find her before...that is, don’t you believe...” She broke off, shaking her head.

Elizabeth looked up from the tea service to find Mrs. Hurst appeared stricken. Jane frowned, an expression so rarely seen on her sister’s face as to make Elizabeth pause and consider her words. She winced as she realized what she’d said. “I am sorry, Mrs. Hurst. I am certain they will recover Miss Bingley before dark.” Elizabeth cast a look out the front window to find that, as if to mock her words, the snow had thickened, muting the light of day.

“There is no need to apologize for being practical,” Mr. Bennet said firmly. “We must concede to the reality of the situation. If needed, we do have room tonight, though hopefully things will not come to that. I must warn you, however, that although Mr. Collins will depart on Saturday, come Monday our home will be inundated with Gardiners. With Mary’s room available, they are bringing their children this year.”

Elizabeth suspected her aunt and uncle were also bringing their children because Aunt Gardiner had yet to settle on a governess.

Mrs. Hurst accepted a cup of tea with hands that trembled.  
“That is your aunt and uncle, Miss Bennet?”

Jane nodded. “Yes. And their four children.”

Mrs. Hurst attempted a smile. “I enjoy children. What are their ages?”

“Our female cousins are eight and six, and the boys are four and three,” Jane replied.

“How lovely.” Mrs. Hurst sipped her tea.

Elizabeth cast about for some topic on which to speak but all she could think of was Miss Bingley running off with Mr. Wickham, and how Mr. Darcy might fit into the tale.

Mrs. Hurst set down her teacup. “Mr. Bennet, you are correct. There is no hiding from the situation. If...if my sister is not returned by Monday evening, may I solve the problem of space by inviting Miss Bennet and Miss Elizabeth to reside at Netherfield with me?” She looked down. “That is, if you deem me a fit enough chaperone.”

“You had not even arrived when Miss Bingley left,” Elizabeth said quickly, worried her father’s reply would be unsympathetic. “You cannot be blamed.”

Mrs. Hurst turned stricken eyes on her. “Oh, but I am her older sister. I should never have left her alone here, playing at hostess like a woman grown. Charles is no fit guardian. He’s so lovesick, he can think of nothing but—” She broke off, looked at Jane, and flushed.

“Yes,” Mr. Bennet said dryly. “I have observed a certain propensity in Mr. Bingley to simply gaze on Jane without even attending to the conversation. It does worry me slightly as to his mental capacity.”

“Papa,” Jane cried, blushing.

“Charles is an honest, open, and good young man,” Mrs. Hurst said earnestly.

Elizabeth cast her father a repressive look. Mrs. Hurst was distressed and not accustomed to his ways.

“Regardless,” Mr. Bennet continued, “I will leave the allocation of my daughters to Mrs. Bennet. That is her province.”

“I am certain Mama will let us,” Jane said. “She will not want you to be alone.”

More likely, she would want Jane to be at Netherfield caring for his sister's wellbeing when Mr. Bingley returned, but Elizabeth forwent saying that.

"Is it true?" Mr. Bennet said with sudden intensity, studying Mrs. Hurst. "Is Mr. Wickham heir to Mr. Darcy of Pemberley as it said in your sister's letter?"

Elizabeth turned to her father, taken aback.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Hurst said, "He always assured us he would be named Mr. Darcy's heir. I have no reason to doubt him."

"And yet you do," Mr. Bennet said.

Mrs. Hurst nodded. "If it is true, why would they not simply inform us of their plan to elope?" She looked from Mr. Bennet to Jane, and then to Elizabeth, pleading. "Why not?"

Mr. Bennet nodded. "I suppose we will know soon enough, one way or the other." He reached for the book he'd set aside at the arrival of their guests and stood. "If you will excuse me." Without awaiting an answer, he strode from the room.

Mrs. Hurst stared after him, not alone in her shock at his behavior.

"Now, what can we do to distract you?" Elizabeth said brightly, embarrassed by her father's abruptness. "We have books aplenty to read, or I could read to you. We have a pianoforte in the next room, and I am happy to play, but I must warn you that when our mother and younger sisters return there will be little quiet. You may want to enjoy it while you can, and to accept the use of Mary's room so that you may retreat from them if they grow to be too much for your current state of indisposition."

Mrs. Hurst turned to her with fresh tears in her eyes. "You are being so kind to me."

Jane smiled at her. "You deserve our kindness."

Shaking her head, Mrs. Hurst said, "No. I do not. I have joined Caroline in attempting to persuade Charles of your lack of suitability. That...that he could do better."

Jane stared at her, then cast Elizabeth a helpless look.

Elizabeth passed Mrs. Hurst the plate of sweets she'd been compiling. "But as you can see, there is no one better than Jane."

Jane blushed.

"Yes. I can see that." Mrs. Hurst's smile was tentative.

"Good," Elizabeth said cheerfully. "Now that we have that decided, let us have our tea and do justice to these sweets so as not to offend the kitchen, and then I will find something to read aloud. Something soothing."

Elizabeth began assembling a plate for Jane, but her mind was not on the task. Nor did her thoughts turn to Miss Bingley and her plight, or Mrs. Hurst's distress. Allowed to wander, they sought Mr. Darcy, as they were wont to do. And perhaps, she began to expect, as they always would.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Darcy spent Sunday wishing he'd made better progress on Saturday before the snowstorm drove him to seek shelter, and hoping that the roads would be clear enough by Monday for him to finish his journey. He ate alone that evening in the crowded common room of the *Swan & Crown Inn*, dreaming of reaching Elizabeth on the morrow.

Not that he could go to Longbourn upon his arrival. As much as he longed to go to Elizabeth and reassure her that all he'd told her was true and that nothing would obstruct him from courting her any longer, he must first locate Mr. Bingley. The more Darcy thought on the matter, the more convinced he became that Wickham had run to Hertfordshire to seek Bingley's hospitality. That amiable young man would never turn a so-called friend away, no matter how abrupt his arrival or how many words of caution Darcy had imparted.

The west wind howled all Sunday night and Darcy gave thanks that the *Swan & Crown* had room for him. Come morning, the sun rose to reveal that the warm favonian wind had melted most of the snow. Streaks of pink and turquoise in the cloudless dawn promised a sun-soaked journey, so Darcy forwent breaking his fast and set out.

As he rode, it took all of Darcy's will not to let panic take him, worrying that Wickham would somehow harm Elizabeth. Wickham had been spying on him and had already used Elizabeth to rile up Darcy's father. Had he realized Darcy's attraction or simply alighted on Elizabeth by chance?

He had witnessed Darcy speaking with her in the park. Had Wickham read his esteem? Darcy had attempted to keep all traces of affection from his mien, but with the memory of Elizabeth's kiss so fresh in his mind, had he succeeded?

But Elizabeth may not be Wickham's new plan. He had also shown marked attention to Miss Bingley. Darcy could only assume she possessed a substantial dowry, or Wickham would not have troubled to attract her. Despite his use of his

pistol when fleeing the tower ruins, Darcy believed Wickham to prefer seduction over violence. Therefore, he would be with the Bingleys, plying his charm.

Darcy could also admit, as the day wore on and he alternated between riding and walking his mount, that a small corner of his vanity decried appearing before Elizabeth so bedraggled and mud spattered. When he met her, and presumably her other relations, he would prefer not to appear to have stopped first to wallow in mud.

Not recalling the name of the estate Bingley had selected, Darcy scanned the streets of Meryton as he rode in, seeking someone who appeared genteel enough to know Mr. Bingley. Although, in such a small community, he supposed he might ask anyone. He sighted a conservatively dressed lady on the arm of an officer and approached them.

Making certain his mount didn't kick up mud at them, Darcy halted a few feet away. "Pardon me, but I have an urgent message for Mr. Bingley. Can you direct me to him?"

The woman looked up, the face under her bonnet oddly familiar. "Mr. Bingley? The gentleman who let Netherfield Park?"

"Yes," Darcy said, the name stirring his recollection. "Can you direct me to Netherfield Park, please?"

"I can," the young woman replied and rattled off a simple set of directions, but then added, "But you will not find him there."

"Where will I find him?" Darcy asked, halting as he was about to turn his mount.

"I have no idea, but not there." She slanted a look at her companion, an amiable appearing redcoat. "There has been an incident. It would be inappropriate for me to say more. His sister is in residence, however. Mrs. Hurst."

Mrs. Hurst but not Bingley? "And Mr. Hurst?" Darcy asked.

"He went with Mr. Bingley," the redcoat replied. "That is what your mother said, is it not?"



The young woman smiled at him, again oddly familiar to Darcy although he was certain he had never set eyes on her before. "Yes. That is precisely what Mama said."

Darcy longed to ask more. What of Miss Bingley? More importantly, did this young woman know Elizabeth? Could she tell him aught of her?

He glanced about, taking in the single main street. He couldn't ask about Elizabeth in a village such as this. One question put to the wrong person could spark a sea of rumors. If Elizabeth did not esteem him the way he hoped, a thought which seized his heart in an iron grip, he would not damage her reputation by bandying her name about.

He tipped his hat. "Thank you for the directions." He turned his mount, seeking Netherfield Park with the strong suspicion that he was already too late. As much as he knew it to be wrong of him, he prayed that if Wickham had enacted one of his schemes, he'd involved Miss Bingley and not Elizabeth.

The young woman's directions sent him to a drive that cut through well-manicured grounds, lovely even in winter. The manor house was not quite as pleasant, being a bit severe, but stood tall and imposing, nonetheless. Darcy approached acutely conscious that mud coated him and his mount. His boots were invisible under a layer of churned Hertfordshire soil, his trouser legs nearly so. With the state of the roads, even his greatcoat was spattered, stray drops of mud visible even on his shoulder. He would be surprised if there were none on his hat.

Would they even admit him to Mrs. Hurst's presence?

He dismounted and handed his weary mount's reins to the footman who came out, then strode purposefully up the steps. His best bet was to give every impression that he belonged.

The door opened to his knock, a middle-aged butler frowning at him, his stance blocking entrance into the vaulted hall behind him. "Yes?"

“I have an urgent message for Mrs. Hurst.” Given the man’s unimpressed expression, Darcy felt compelled to add, “It is regarding Mr. Wickham.”

The butler’s eyes rounded at that. He glanced behind him at a short row of footmen, then at Darcy again. “A moment, please.” He closed the door.

Darcy stood before the closed door and refused to fidget. Looking down, he realized the outsides of his gloves were mud-spattered as well. He imagined he could hardly look less like someone who should be admitted into the grand house before him.

Time ticked past. Darcy pulled out his pocket watch, but he hadn’t taken note of what time he’d arrived, so he had no way to judge how interminable his wait had been thus far. He shoved it back away, hoping he hadn’t smeared too much mud on it.

The door opened, the butler stepping back to reveal...

Elizabeth.

Her eyes went wide, her surprise as acute as Darcy’s. His arm jerked, only force of will preventing him from reaching for her. She was here before him, safe and well, and suddenly it did not matter how he looked, for her eyes seemed to glow at the sight of him.

She opened her mouth to speak, glanced at the butler, marshaled her expression, and then carefully said, “Mr. Darcy. You look as if you have traveled a great distance to reach us.”

“All the way from Pemberley.”

Her eyebrows went up and he dared to hope she understood the significance of that. “Truly?”

“Truly, and I did not expect to find you here, Miss Elizabeth. If I had known I would, I would have ridden even harder.”

Pink tinted her cheeks. “We are staying with Mrs. Hurst to offer what assistance we can in this troubling time.”

The butler looked back and forth between them in confusion.

Elizabeth turned to the man. "This man is an acquaintance of mine and of Mrs. Hurst, and of the Bingleys, from London. If he has news for us, we must admit him."

The butler looked from her to Darcy and back again, his expression verging on horrified. "Mrs. Nicholls will have my hide, miss."

"I assure you, Mrs. Hurst will want to hear what Mr. Darcy has to say."

Darcy watched the wheels turn in the man's head. He was a butler and Elizabeth the daughter of a gentleman, but Darcy was very mud-coated. More than that, Mrs. Hurst was not mistress of Netherfield Park, a property Bingley only leased.

"May I assume that Mr. Wickham has already been and gone?" Darcy asked.

Gravely, Elizabeth nodded.

"Then my message is not as urgent as I may have hoped." To save the butler, he continued, "Perhaps I might enter through the back and be shown directly into a tub." He gestured behind him. "I have a clean set of garments with me."

Sagging with relief, the butler nodded. "Very well, sir, miss." He gestured a footman forward. "Show Mr. Darcy around to the laundry entrance. We will ready a tub in there, sir," he added to Darcy.

"My mount? He has traveled hard as well."

"He will be cared for, sir."

Darcy nodded then turned once more to Elizabeth, wishing more than anything that they were alone. He had much he wished to say.

Elizabeth met his gaze searchingly. "We will await your attendance in the drawing room. I will call for tea. You must require a warming cup."

Darcy bowed. "Thank you."

He went back down the front steps with the footman. He paused to collect his saddlebag, seeing no reason to make a member of the staff retrieve it. He then followed the footman around the ostentatious structure to the door the maids used to bring the wash out to dry on clement days.

Darcy assumed the large barrel tub they filled for him was usually reserved for laundry. It wasn't wide enough to sit in, but they provided a cloth and a bucket, so he scrubbed with the harsh soap and upended the pail over his head several times. They'd set the tub beside the fireplace, but the experience was still quite cold. By the time he was clean, he definitely wanted his cup of tea.

Finally dressed in a manner befitting the heir to Pemberley, he was shown into an airy room that contained Elizabeth, Miss Bennet, and Mrs. Hurst, all of whom he greeted with a bow. He straightened to take in Elizabeth watching him with eyes that held far more worry than he liked. The other two ladies appeared merely perplexed as they studied his fine attire. He was hardly seated when Mrs. Hurst leaned forward, her expression both haunted and eager.

"Mr. Darcy, why have you come?" she asked. "You said you have information about Mr. Wickham?"

He looked from her to Miss Bennet, who appeared rather confused, and then to Elizabeth. Though her features were arranged into careful neutrality, pain shone in her beguiling eyes. Darcy cleared his throat, uncertain at Elizabeth's unease and wishing he could go to her. "First, this is indelicate of me, but may I suppose that Mr. Wickham has absconded to Gretna Green with your sister?"

Mrs. Hurst flinched, but nodded. Her features pulled tight. "He has."

"May I also venture that he told her that he is heir to a great fortune, specifically the estate of Pemberley, and invented some urgent necessity for them to marry with all haste?"

Another nod.

“Lastly, I deduce that Miss Bingley’s dowry is substantial?”

Miss Bennet exchanged a look with her sister.

“It is,” Mrs. Hurst said stiffly.

Sympathy welled in Darcy. This was the fault of his family. Of his father, for providing Wickham with the means to masquerade as a gentleman, when he was nothing but a cad. Perhaps even of Darcy, for not confronting George Darcy sooner. “I regret to inform you that while Mr. Wickham has been willed a significant sum by my father, and enjoys my father’s patronage, he is not heir to Pemberley. Upon learning such, he attempted to abduct my sister. She was unwilling to accompany him, and he was readily thwarted, but he escaped us. You have my very sincere apologies that I was not quicker to comprehend that he would target your sister next.”

Miss Bennet gasped. “He tried to run off with your sister as well?”

“Yes. Hardly a week ago.”

Miss Bennet turned to Elizabeth. “I am beginning to fear that his motivation in departing with Miss Bingley is not love, or anything honorable.”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“I do not understand,” Mrs. Hurst said, her face white. “What have your father and sister to do with this? W-who are you, Mr. Darcy? Are you not simply a distant relation to the Pemberley Darcys?”

“I am not a distant relation, no. I am my father’s heir. Heir to Pemberley.”

“And Mr. Wickham is?” Mrs. Hurst asked, dread in her voice.

“*Only* my father’s godson and the son of his steward.”

Mrs. Hurst moaned, her hands covering her face. Behind them, she muttered, “Oh dear. Oh dear oh dear oh dear.” She squeezed her eyes closed.

Miss Bennet, who shared the sofa with her, reached to lightly touch Mrs. Hurst's shoulder. Elizabeth cast her a sympathetic look.

Mrs. Hurst dropped her hands, her eyes opening to reveal anger. "Why should I believe a word of this? You sell books. Why would the heir to Pemberley sell books?"

"You should believe him because Mr. Darcy has nothing to gain in coming all this way simply to lie to you," Elizabeth said softly. "And as you yourself said, if Mr. Wickham were truly heir to a great estate, even if his benefactor did not want the union, why would he not come to Mr. Bingley and explain his reason for wishing to marry Miss Bingley in Scotland with all haste?"

Mrs. Hurst burst into tears.

Miss Bennet gathered her close. The door opened and several maids bearing trays stepped in, then halted, appearing uncertain. Elizabeth gestured them forward.

"I should take Mrs. Hurst to her room," Miss Bennet said softly, looking over the weeping woman's shoulder at Elizabeth. "You will be well here for a moment?" She slanted a look at Darcy.

Elizabeth looked to him as well and said quietly, "I daresay I will be well enough."

With one final worried glance, Miss Bennet helped Mrs. Hurst to her feet, causing Darcy to rise politely, and drew her away.

Elizabeth stood as well and the moment her sister left their sight, turned to the far fireplace, away from the table where the maids set out tea. "Mr. Darcy, you appear half frozen. Let us go stand by the fire."

Ignoring the blaze near where they sat, he crossed the room with her. Indeed, it did feel nice to stand there, much nearer than the chair he'd taken had allowed him to get to the room's other fireplace, but he doubted that was why Elizabeth had maneuvered them across the room. He turned an expectant

look on her. She gazed up at him, impossibly more lovely than his imagination had conjured.

“Then it is all true?” she said softly. “Everything you wrote in your letter?”

He nodded. “It is.”

“And Mr. Wickham was not made heir, because you are reconciled now with your father?”

He nodded again. He longed to take her into his arms. To kiss away the worry that carved lines of care into her face.

“Then, you have agreed to marry her?” Her voice, the barest whisper, fractured. “This woman your father and uncles insist you wed?”

Pain ricocheted through him as he realized how she had interpreted his declaration that he’d come from Pemberley and was in good standing with his father once more. Uncaring what the maids saw when Elizabeth stood before him so vulnerable and hurt, he caught one of her hands. She trembled, her fingers ice cold. “No, I have not agreed to marry anyone. Everything I said in my letter is true. You are who I want.”

She drew in a deep breath, her lids dropping closed for a moment as she sought to master her emotions. When she once more met his gaze, she said calmly, “You should know, then, that I will not hold you to words you spoke in haste and while lacking full acquaintance with my circumstances and relations, which may soon include Miss Bingley and possibly,” she grimaced, “Mr. Wickham.”

“In fact, I believe you made your circumstances quite clear when you thought me only a bookseller,” he said a touch wryly.

“I made every attempt to. I did not want you to marry me for money.”

Darcy lightly squeezed her hand. “Your dowry, whatever its form, has never mattered to me. Not when I was a bookseller, and not now. Nor have I a single care for your connections, or the behavior of your relations, even if they come to include Mr. Wickham.” He could not issue the name in an even tone.

To make up for that, he raised her hand to place a light kiss on the back. "I care only if you will permit me to court you, as I wrote to your father."

"You wrote to my father?"

"He did not tell you?" That couldn't bode well for Darcy's chances.

She shook her head.

Darcy lightly squeezed her fingers, wishing he dared do more. "I wrote to your father explaining everything and asking his permission to court you."

A smile tugged at her lips. "He likely thought you mad."

"As you must have?" Darcy asked.

Her smile grew. "It may have crossed my mind."

He placed a second kiss on her hand, which was warmer now. "I assure you, I am not mad and I have every intention of properly courting you, but not until I find Wickham."

Fresh confusion filled her features. "Do you mean you will go after him?"

"I believe I must. My family is responsible for unleashing Wickham on the Bingleys."

"The only person responsible for Mr. Wickham is Mr. Wickham," Elizabeth said firmly. "He told Miss Bingley lies and he acted on them."

Darcy wished his conscience could see the logic of her words, but it could not. "Be that as it may, I feel responsible, and I will not be content until I do what I can to help put the matter right."

"Ah, miss," a maid called.

Darcy looked over to see the three maids who'd brought in the tea things in a row near the door.

"Yes?" Elizabeth asked calmly, slipping her hand from his.

The girl looked nervously at her companions. "One of us can stay here with you, if you like."



Elizabeth smiled reassuringly at them. “Yes. That would be very kind of you.” She turned back to Darcy. “When will you depart?”

“It is nearly dark. If Mrs. Hurst will allow it, I will stay the night and leave come morning.”

“But tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” she protested.

“I cannot help that.”

“No. Of course.” She mustered a smile. “I had merely hoped you might spend the evening with my family.” She gestured to the table. “Come. Let us have tea. I am certain Jane will return soon.”

Darcy followed Elizabeth back across the room, wishing he did not have to leave her. At least he could have the pleasure of sitting beside her on the settee, and of watching her deft, elegant movements as she prepared tea.

Looking up from the service, she asked, “Do you take anything in your tea, Mr. Darcy?”

“No.” He studied her face, every line, each curve, so precious and perfect. How he’d longed for them to engage in such simple activities as they now did.

She returned her gaze to the tea service, pink blooming in her cheeks. After handing him a cup, she ventured, “Tell me something of you.”

“Anything. What would you know?”

Elizabeth studied him for a long moment. Somehow, she seemed to have moved nearer on the settee. Or had he moved? All he knew was that he could so easily kiss her.

“Were you a cheerful lad? Rambunctious? Troublesome? Studious? I wish to know everything.”

As he did, as well, about her. “I daresay I was studious and well-behaved, except when under the influence of my cousins.” Or of Wickham, but Darcy did not want to think about him.

“Oh? Were they less studious?”

“I would say, rather, more mischievous.” Particularly Anne. “What of you? Have you always been a great reader?”

Elizabeth tipped her head to the side in that endearing way of hers. “I am not certain. I began reading to please my father, and I strove to please him in large part because I could never make my mother happy. I was not so tall as Jane, nor so fair, or as pretty, and my temper was far worse.”

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” The words were out before he could call them back. Not because they lacked truth but because they sat so near, their thighs almost touching, with only a maid in the room, and he should not be so forward.

A delightful blush rose in Elizabeth’s cheeks. Darcy set his teacup down. Surely, he might hold her hand in his? Or, just once, coil one silken tress about his finger. And if he happened to brush her cheek, and she kept looking at him as she was—

“Ahem.”

Darcy dropped his arm, only then aware that he’d reached for Elizabeth. They both turned to see Miss Bennet in the doorway, frowning.

She crossed to the table to join them, and he belatedly stood to greet her. Sitting across the low table from them, she pinned Darcy with her gaze. “You, Mr. Darcy, had best explain yourself.”

“Jane,” Elizabeth said, her sister’s name a reprimand. “He has.”

“What he has done is to don a fine suit and appear on Mr. Bingley’s doorstep claiming to be wealthy and attempting to seduce an innocent miss. How is that any different from what Mr. Wickham has done?”

Darcy recoiled slightly, not caring for that comparison at all.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Elizabeth stared at her sister, shocked. She had never seen Jane so firm and mistrustful. “Jane, Mr. Darcy truly is the heir to Pemberley.”

“So he says.” Jane shook her head. “I am sorry, but it is all too similar to what Mr. Wickham claimed and now look what has happened. He has run off with Miss Bingley.” She turned back to Mr. Darcy. “You should know that our father’s estate is entailed away, and we have no dowries, and I have not yet received an offer from Mr. Bingley, so there is no assurance of marrying close to his wealth by wedding Elizabeth.”

“Jane,” Elizabeth repeated.

“I am only attempting to protect you.”

“Miss Bennet,” Mr. Darcy said, his bearing so refined and proper that Elizabeth could not comprehend Jane’s lack of belief. “I laud your care for your sister, and you are correct, I have yet to prove myself in any meaningful way. Tomorrow, I will depart in hope of assisting Mr. Bingley with Wickham, but when I return, I mean to approach your father and ask his permission to properly court Miss Elizabeth. Nothing untoward will take place, and I will certainly not attempt to persuade her to abscond with me.”

“Tomorrow?” Jane’s frown deepened. “Do you imagine you are not departing this house this very evening?”

“I had hoped to prevail upon Mrs. Hurst for accommodations.”

Jane shook her head. “I do not believe that would be appropriate.”

“But Mr. Darcy came all this way to help,” Elizabeth protested. “You are being unreasonable.”

“I believe I am being perfectly reasonable in not wishing for an unknown gentleman to remain under the same roof with us, particularly when our chaperone is indisposed.”

Elizabeth grasped at that idea. “We should at least approach Mrs. Hurst on the matter. She should decide.”

“Mrs. Hurst took laudanum so that she might rest,” Jane replied.

Elizabeth looked about. She did not want Mr. Darcy to leave. He’d only just arrived. “Maybe we should ask Mrs. Nicholls? Or send word to Mama?”

Jane looked down. “I wrote to Mama about your infatuation with Mr. Darcy while we were in London. She will not be sympathetic.”

“You did what?” Anger shot through Elizabeth.

“Your sister is correct,” Mr. Darcy said before Elizabeth could martial her emotion into words. “I believe Meryton has an inn. I will stay the night there. That will allow for an earlier departure come morning, without disturbing this household.”

Elizabeth swiveled to face him. She did not want him to go to the inn. She wanted an evening talking, first in the drawing room and then over dinner, and perhaps late into the night. She wanted to be with Mr. Darcy, in his presence, and the notion of him departing now cut into her with actual pain.

He studied her face as if he would commit every detail to memory. “I will return as quickly as I am able, and go to your father so that all will be made proper and correct.”

Elizabeth nodded, her throat too tight for words. She knew she was being silly. He would not be away for long. When had she become such a ninny?

“Very well,” Jane said, her visage softening. She worried at her lip for a moment. “I think...I think you should go now, Mr. Darcy. And, I am sorry. I do not mean to malign you. I am simply looking after my sister.”

Mr. Darcy dipped his head, the calm understanding on his face making Elizabeth esteem him all the more. He stood. “I hope we will meet again soon.”

Elizabeth sprang up. “I will walk you out.”

Jane’s frown returned.

Elizabeth glared at her. "I am only walking to the door with him."

Jane's ire instantly turned to contrition. "I know. I am sorry. I will have some tea."

"Miss Bennet." Mr. Darcy bowed with practiced polish and Elizabeth again wondered how Jane could suspect him.

They stepped into the corridor and Elizabeth said, "I believe the staff will be laundering your things. I will have them sent over to the inn later." She spoke a touch loudly to ensure Jane could hear the practicality of her words, and that they lacked any hint of untoward insinuation.

"That would be considerate of you," Mr. Darcy replied as they neared their first turn. In a lower voice he said, "I am sorry that I must depart on the eve of Christmas. I hope you can understand that I must obey my conscience in this."

"As much as I wish you would remain, and as much as I disagree that you are in any way responsible for what has taken place, I do understand." She glanced at him, taking in his noble brow and strong jaw. She'd dreamed of being reunited with him for so long. Dreamed of the kiss they'd shared.

Which had done her no harm. And why should it? During the Yuletide, many kisses were exchanged under kissing boughs. Was it her fault none hung at Netherfield?

Despite the lack of decoration, a kiss was in keeping with the season.

"You admit to understanding, but you seem displeased with my decision," he said in quiet worry.

One single kiss, for both of them to think on while he journeyed. That would not be so wrong. "I am certain I will come to value your sense of duty as one of your most laudable traits."

"Will come to?" he repeated with a frown. "You do not now?"

Elizabeth sighted an open doorway ahead. The breakfast parlor, unused so late in the day. "I suppose I value it now, though your sense of propriety is vexing me."

He cast her a quick look, a line of confusion on his brow.

Mustering her courage, Elizabeth caught his hand and yanked him into the breakfast parlor.

He looked down at her, his features illuminated only by the light spilling in from the hallways. "Is this where you fear my sense of propriety will dismay you?" he asked, his voice a low rumble.

Elizabeth nodded, then worried he would not see the gesture in the near darkness. "It is, for I cannot permit you to depart without a token of my favor."

"Oh? Perhaps a handkerchief, as with knights of old?"

Reaching up, she placed her hands to either side of his face as she'd longed to do since the door opened to him, mud spattered and determined. "Perhaps a kiss."

He seemed to require no more encouragement, for his arms came about her and his mouth claimed hers. Nor was this the brief, almost frantic kiss she had initiated in the park. Mr. Darcy held her delicately, almost reverently, his lips exploring hers. Elizabeth trembled, feeling suddenly unable to stand without him, but his strength sustained her.

The world spun about her by the time he raised his head to study her face in the dim light. Slowly, he released her, his hands coming to her shoulders to steady her as he had in the park. Quick, shallow breaths filled her ears and Elizabeth realized they were her own. She brought a hand to her lips, dazed.

"Thank you," he said, his thumbs caressing her shoulders. "I will take your token with me as a source of resolve and strength."

Swallowing, Elizabeth nodded, not trusting her ability to speak.

“Perhaps I should see myself the rest of the way to the door?”

“That may be best,” she admitted, her legs still weak beneath her.

He raised a hand to caress her cheek. “I will miss you, Elizabeth. I hope this journey will not be long.”

“Then we are united in our hope.”

He withdrew his hand, and she caught his fingers, twining them with hers. How could he leave now?

“I must go,” he said, as if reading her thoughts.

“I know,” she whispered.

He brought her hand up for a final kiss, then dipped his head and left the room.

Elizabeth remained where she was for a long moment, mastering her breathing. When she returned to Jane, she was awarded one of her sister’s now-common looks of suspicion, but Elizabeth ignored it. She settled on the couch and poured a cup of tea. All the while, a thousand butterfly wings swirled in her belly.

The following morning, after an evening of enduring Jane’s scrutiny, Elizabeth departed Netherfield directly following breakfast and walked to Longbourn. She kept to the fields, certain Mr. Darcy would already have left and not wishing to be tempted into the untoward action of seeking him at the inn. Her forbearance quite pleased her, though she could find little joy in her success while missing Mr. Darcy so acutely.

Elizabeth did not depart early to vex her sister, although Jane did seem a bit leery to let her go, but rather to speak with their father. She, Jane, and Mrs. Hurst were to join the Bennets, Gardiners, and Phillippses that afternoon for supper and then church, but Elizabeth wanted a private word. Specifically, about the letter Mr. Darcy had sent.

She slipped into Longbourn through the kitchen, with warm greetings for the staff. Cook permitted her to filch a mincemeat tart, and Elizabeth was hit suddenly, poignantly,

with how, if all worked out, she and Jane would not live at Longbourn for much longer. She ate her tart slowly as she made her way to her father's study.

She knocked lightly and was unsurprised by the grumpiness of the "Come in," she received in reply. Without her or Jane home, her father must expect an unwanted interruption. She entered and quietly closed the door.

Her father, seated at his desk, looked up from his reading. "Ah, Elizabeth. I wondered when you would seek me out. I had thought sooner, but then events have been a touch hectic."

"Had you?" That must mean he had, indeed, received Mr. Darcy's letter. "And why would you think that, Papa?"

"Because I know you have been keeping something from me."

"I have been keeping something from you?" she challenged. "I rather think that to be the pot calling the kettle black."

Mr. Bennet raised bushy eyebrows. "How is that?"

"Mr. Darcy called at Netherfield Park yesterday. I know he wrote to you."

"Ah." Mr. Bennet grimaced. "Very well, then, I have been keeping something from you."

"Yes, you have." Elizabeth marched up to his desk. "How could you not give me the assurances Mr. Darcy sent that he is who he claimed? I have been worried he was a bounder or mad."

"How could you not tell me that my favorite bookseller wished to court you and claimed to be a wealthy landholder?"

Elizabeth stared at her father. He stared back.

After a long moment, she smiled. "I see we both have been remiss."

"It seems perhaps we have." Mr. Bennet cleared his throat. "You do, then, esteem Mr. Darcy?"



“I do, Papa. He is noble and intelligent and kind. I am afraid I hold him in very great affection indeed.”

Mr. Bennet sighed. “I knew this day would come, but I did not believe I would need to part with both you and Jane in such short order.”

“No one is departing, Papa. We are only being courted.”

“Which will inevitably lead to your departure, and you all the way to Derbyshire.”

To reassure him, though she did not believe her own words, Elizabeth said, “There is no guarantee either gentleman will make an offer.”

“If they do not, they are England’s greatest fools.”

“You only believe that because you are our papa.”

Mr. Bennet shook his head. “Not so. I firmly hold that whoever offers for your younger sisters will be as great of fools as men who would not offer for you and Jane.”

Recalling her sister’s, aunt’s, and uncle’s sentiments regarding the care her papa took of her younger sisters, Elizabeth replied, “They are young still, and teachable. If you would but impart a small amount of your wisdom to them, as you always have to me and to Jane, I am certain they will be made more sensible.”

Mr. Bennet regarded her for a long moment. “Perhaps I will try. I will have little else to occupy me with you and Jane both gone.”

Elizabeth shook her head, unable to regard her Papa without fondness. “Do try.”

He shuffled the pages on his desk, drawing forth a newspaper. “Your Uncle Gardiner brought me this from London. It is Monday’s paper.”

“You get the papers.”

“I do, if a few days late, and will receive this one soon I am certain.” Mr. Bennet folded the page back and slid the paper across the desk. “He wished me to see this article.”

Elizabeth leaned down to read: *The Heir to Pemberley Returned!*

The article went on to tell how Mr. George Darcy had announced that he and his son, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, were reconciled. He wished all to know that his son had not only his support, but that of Sir Lewis de Bourgh and of the Earl of Matlock, and that all should treat Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy as if he had never been estranged from his family. No indication was given as to why Mr. Darcy had been estranged, where he had been, or why he was now returned, but his virtues as heir to Pemberley were greatly extolled.

When Elizabeth looked up, her father tapped the page. "This is our bookseller?"

Elizabeth nodded. "It is."

"Do you know why he was estranged from his family?"

"I do."

"So he has been honest with you?"

"He has."

"Where is he now, then, if he called at Netherfield last night?"

"Mr. Darcy," Fitzwilliam, her mind added, and she felt a thrill to know Mr. Darcy's Christian name, "has gone after Mr. Wickham, deeming it his family's responsibility to assist Mr. Bingley and Mr. Hurst in this matter."

"So I am not yet to meet the gentleman."

Elizabeth shook her head, the pain of missing Mr. Darcy instantly replacing all other emotions. "Not yet, I am afraid."

Mr. Bennet nodded, appearing thoughtful. "His letter is quite well written and frank. Moreover, he has always selected volumes for me that I enjoy. That, and his affection for you, recommend him as intelligent. I daresay I will greatly miss him as a bookseller, but I may enjoy him as a son."

"I believe you will." Elizabeth could not help but smile, the idea of being wedded to Mr. Darcy filling her with joy.

Mr. Bennet studied her expression for a moment and sighed. “Very well, then, when our erstwhile bookseller returns, I will grant him permission to court you.”

“Thank you, Papa.”

“There is no need for thanks. I suspect I would fail in any attempt to prevent him seeing you.”

“But you would not want to prevent it.”

He shook his head. “No. I would not want to.”

Filled with happiness, Elizabeth went around his desk and kissed his cheek, then left him to his reading.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Darcy was pleased he'd stowed his good change of clothes once more, though they were becoming quite creased, and he wished fervently for Patrick and the remainder of the wardrobe he'd been measured for. Many of the garments would be ready by now, but riding up an increasingly muddy and snow-clogged road, a wardrobe at Pemberley did Darcy little good.

The weather had obviously been far worse to the north. The storm that had delayed Darcy for half a day had dropped several feet of snow on the region through which he now traveled, and many of the smaller roadways were still impassable. Wondering how far Mr. Bingley and Mr. Hurst had managed to get, Darcy checked every inn he passed, seeking signs of them.

As the afternoon wore on, he began to wonder how much farther he should travel. It was not that he was unwilling to search into the night, but he needed to know when he could expect to reach the next inn. He didn't fancy spending Christmas Eve sleeping in a melting snowbank.

He fancied spending it with Elizabeth and her relations, even if Mr. Bingley had claimed that the mother and youngest two sisters were, in his words, somewhat distressing. Darcy had to own to being curious what that might mean coming from someone as amiable as Mr. Bingley.

He rode into the yard of the next inn as a nondescript carriage came from the north. Dismounting, Darcy waved over the groom who came out, proffering a coin. His horse deserved a rub down while he made inquiries within, and Darcy wanted him seen to before the carriage team, who were likely remaining the night as the next inn was quite some way back south.

His mount in the groom's hands, Darcy turned, only to see Mr. Bingley climb free of the carriage. "Bingley," Darcy called out in greeting.

Mr. Bingley whirled, some of the strain leaving his face as he caught sight of Darcy, and started across the yard. "Darcy. Well met. What the devil are you doing here?"

Meeting him halfway, for their conversation wasn't the sort to shout across even an empty innyard, Darcy said, "I went to Netherfield Park, to warn you about Wickham."

"A little late with that," Bingley cut in sourly before Darcy could continue.

Behind him, Hurst climbed free of the carriage.

Darcy nodded. "I know. I truly am sorry." He gestured to the carriage. "You overtook them?"

Over Bingley's shoulder, surprise turned rapidly to curiosity on Hurst's face, and he joined them as Mr. Bingley said, "We did. They got stuck in the storm."

Relief filled Darcy. "I am happy to hear that."

"Don't know why," Hurst muttered. "Now she is ruined and unmarried."

"Yes, but now, if you do demand he marry her, you may do so with a contract in place to protect her dowry from him," Darcy said. "I do not know how much Miss Bingley has, but no amount is beyond Wickham's ability to squander."

"What do you mean, if we demand he marry her?" Bingley asked. "He must."

Darcy looked from one gentleman to the other. An innyard was not the place for the news he must deliver.

"Are we to understand that there is more to this?" Hurst demanded.

"We should go in." Darcy gestured to the building behind them.

"If it is bad news, I would have it now," Bingley said glumly.

Darcy nodded. "It pains me to tell you, but Mr. Wickham may be charged for kidnapping." Possibly even attempted

murder, depending on George Darcy's resolve and how persuasive Sir Lewis and Matlock were.

Bingley shook his head. "We won't charge him. Caroline went willingly."

"I do not mean his running off with your sister," Darcy clarified.

"Is no one going to assist me?" Miss Bingley's voice demanded from within the carriage before Darcy could say more. She stuck her head out. "And what of my poor Wickham? I cannot believe you are treating him so abominably. He has done nothing—" She broke off, sighing Darcy. "What is he doing here?"

Darcy stepped between Bingley and Hurst, and bowed. "Permit me to properly introduce myself, Miss Bingley. I am Fitzwilliam Darcy, George Darcy's heir."

She gaped at him for a moment, then snapped her mouth closed. Alighting, she marched up to Darcy. "I do not believe you. Charles, challenge him for telling such lies."

"He's telling the truth." Wickham's voice came from inside the carriage, the words a bit slurred to Darcy's ear. Shuffling sounded and he appeared in the doorway. His hands were bound before him, one eye blackened, his nose at an odd angle, and his lip split. "Darcy is my godfather's heir."

Miss Bingley whirled to face Wickham. "But...you said...you aren't?"

Wickham started to shake his head, then winced in pain. "I am not."

"Why did you lie to me?" Miss Bingley demanded. "Why tell me now?"

Wickham grinned, then winced. "I believe why I lied to you is obvious. As to why I have stopped lying, what is the point? After what we did, you're stuck with me."

Miss Bingley's mouth fell open again, her face nearly as white as the snow. She swallowed convulsively. "I did nothing with you. If I did anything, it was with the heir to Pemberley."

“Sorry.” Wickham shrugged as best he could in his restraints. “It was with me.” He cast Darcy a sneer. “The vaunted heir to Pemberley would never have behaved as I did.”

Beside Darcy, Bingley quivered with rage, his hands balled into fists. Darcy could easily imagine how Wickham had got into such a sorry state, but not why he was tied up. “Why is he bound?”

“He attempted to escape,” Hurst said shortly.

Darcy cast Wickham a questioning look.

“I did,” he admitted. “I need to disappear to Ireland, and from there to Canada. Your father may not be vindictive, but your uncles are, and that hoyden cousin of yours. Like as not, they’ll let her use me for sport.”

Hurst looked from Wickham to Darcy. “What were you saying before Caroline interrupted, Darcy? Something about kidnapping charges?”

“Wickham attempted to kidnap my sister, for her dowry.” Grimly, Darcy decided they should know the whole of it. “A case can also be made that he plotted to murder my father, and he shot and wounded one of Pemberley’s grooms.”

Miss Bingley gasped.

“Those are hanging offenses,” Hurst said softly.

Tears welled up in Miss Bingley’s eyes.

“Will your family seek to have him hanged?” Bingley asked.

Darcy shook his head. “I am uncertain.”

“They will,” Wickham said bitterly. “My godfather cut his only son from his life for years, and discouraged anyone in the *ton* from assisting him, all because Darcy wouldn’t marry his cousin. And he is the kindest of the three. Matlock and de Bourgh will see me swing.”

Miss Bingley let out a wail and buried her head in Bingley’s shoulder. He frowned, but put an arm about her.

“Well. This is a right mess,” Hurst stated.

“Indeed.” Darcy studied the four, Bingley and Hurst bleak, Miss Bingley snuffling, and Wickham watching sardonically. “Let us see if the inn has rooms. We can take turns guarding him tonight.”

Bingley nodded and Hurst went to collect Wickham from the carriage.

They took three rooms and hired a maid to assist Miss Bingley for the evening, the innkeeper and his wife notably surprised to have five new guests show up on Christmas Eve. Though they were not the only patrons, they more than doubled the count. If they could be, most people were already where they wanted to be on so notable a night.

With the inn nearly empty, they had their choice of rooms. Putting Miss Bingley on the end, they put Wickham in the middle room, reserving the next for their respite, though Darcy did not envision getting much sleep. After seeing Miss Bingley and Wickham into their chambers, Darcy, Bingley, and Hurst met in the hall.

“Who will watch him first?” Darcy said. “We dare not leave him alone for long, even bound. Particularly as there is a window.”

“Hurst, would you?” Bingley asked. “I would like a word with Darcy.”

Hurst nodded. “First is my preference, but if you find any food, send some up.”

Bingley nodded.

Leaving Hurst, they went down to the empty common room. Darcy took a table that offered a view of the staircase while Bingley arranged for a meal for them and for food to be taken up to the others. Soon enough, Bingley returned with two mugs of watery ale and sat. He pushed one across the table.

After downing half of his, Bingley met Darcy’s gaze squarely. “She’s well and truly ruined, I believe. Heaven



forbid, she may even be with child.” He looked at Darcy beseechingly. “What do I do?”

Darcy took a tentative sip of ale, finding it refreshingly bitter. “You get a solid contract drawn up to protect her dowry. I will negotiate with my relations. We will see them wed before he’s tried.”

“You mean, before she’s widowed,” Bingley said glumly.

“Better that than the alternative.”

Bingley stared into his mug. “What a mess.”

Darcy could not refute that.

“Do you think...that is, what will Miss Bennet think? And her father? I have not even asked yet if I may court her.”

“Miss Bennet’s affection for you strikes me as too genuine to be easily broken.” And Darcy didn’t think Mr. Bennet was in a position to turn away a suitor as wealthy as Bingley. Not over his sister’s behavior, at least.

Bingley looked up, hopeful. “Her mother seems quite enthusiastic about the match.”

“That is a good sign.”

Bingley nodded. The innkeeper came out with their meal, his wife and the maid going up the staircase with laden trays. Darcy and Bingley dined mostly in silence, each with enough thoughts to occupy them. Darcy could guess on what Bingley dwelled, but his own mind roamed many topics. His youth with Wickham. Elizabeth kissing him in that darkened parlor. His father and sister spending Christmas day without him yet again. Anne telling him that he should have been quicker to unravel Wickham’s plan.

Bingley insisted on taking second watch, seeming to feel that the burden of the worst stint should fall to him. That left Darcy to be shaken awake in the wee hours of the morning. He trudged into the room to find Wickham wide awake, sitting up on his bed, his hands still bound before him. Darcy settled into the room’s lone chair, Wickham watching him.

“I’ve done it this time, haven’t I, Fitz?” Wickham said softly.

Darcy considered not answering, but there was a distinct possibility that these next three weeks would be Wickham’s last, with his trial set for the day following his wedding and his conviction a near certainty. The idea that Wickham might hang made ignoring him seem rather petty. “Yes. You have.”

“Was it so wrong of me to want Pemberley?”

How to answer that? “Why could you not be happy with what my father offered? He paid your way for years. He educated you. He invested twenty thousand pounds for you, so you would never go without.”

Wickham shook his head. “I wanted more. I wanted to be you.”

“You had every opportunity to be happy being you, George.”

Wickham shrugged.

They fell into silence. Wickham seemed to doze. Darcy leaned back in the chair, his thoughts wandering to Elizabeth. The night was nearly over, and with it Christmas Eve. She would wake soon, to Christmas day.

“You have to let me go,” Wickham said, his voice low and intense.

Darcy jerked his gaze to the other man. “What?”

“I’ll leave England.” Wickham’s eyes held a frantic gleam. “I’ll see through my plan of going to Ireland and on to Canada. I will never trouble you again. I swear it.”

“There are two problems with that plan,” Darcy said quietly.

Wickham sagged back. “Your honor being the biggest?”

Darcy shook his head. “I would stain my honor to save you.”

Wickham cast him a sharp glance at that.

“But that is not one of the problems,” Darcy continued. “If you go, you leave a woman ruined. You have to marry her. You owe her that.”

“Then I’ll marry her,” Wickham said eagerly. “You can help me escape after the ceremony. We just need a plan.”

“That does not address the second flaw.” Darcy eyed his childhood companion sadly. “I do not trust you.”

“You don’t trust me?” Wickham snapped. “This is my life we’re talking about. I don’t need your trust. Only your help.”

“More specifically, I do not trust you to go and to stay gone.”

“I’ll go.” Wickham raised his bound hands, pleading. “I promise you. I will go to Canada and never return.”

“Oh? With what money?”

“I have some of the money left from the living your father sold. I can use that. It should be enough to book passage.”

“Should be enough?” As Darcy expected, Wickham had already spent the five thousand pounds George Darcy gave him earlier that year. “And I suppose it is in London?”

“Naturally.” Hope sparked in Wickham’s eyes.

“So you would not go straight to Ireland and then on to Canada. You would be off to London first.”

“Only to collect the funds,” Wickham said but that spark of hope died. He realized Darcy knew him too well to believe that once he was in London, he would follow through with leaving England.

Darcy regarded his onetime friend with sorrow. “As I said, I do not trust you.”

Wickham turned away with another shrug. He closed his eyes and settled on the bed. Darcy went back to studying the ceiling and contemplating his thoughts. He knew Wickham only pretended to sleep. What he did not know was whether he truly could let Wickham hang.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



The afternoon of Christmas Day found Elizabeth seated on the parlor floor playing a game with her young cousins, while her mother, Aunt Gardiner, and Jane conversed nearby. For once, no one mended or even embroidered, the day one for family and relaxation. In the hall, light, rapid footfalls sounded. A moment later, Kitty and Lydia appeared in the doorway.

“We are taking a walk before readying for Christmas dinner,” Lydia announced. “And Jane, I am going to borrow your new hat. If we meet anyone, I want them to see how splendid I look.”

“Oh, what a lovely plan.” Mrs. Bennet smiled at Lydia. “You will look excellent in Jane’s new hat.”

Jane frowned. “The hat Aunt and Uncle Gardiner gave me for Christmas? But I have not even worn it yet.”

Lydia shrugged. “Then you won’t know the difference.”

“Yes,” Kitty said with a giggle. “You won’t be able to tell that Lydia has stretched it with her big head.”

Lydia whirled to glare at Kitty. “I do not have a big head.”

“Do so.”

“Do not,” Lydia said, turning from the doorway.

“Do so,” Kitty repeated, following her.

Their chorus of ‘do not,’ ‘do so,’ followed them up the staircase.

Jane stood. “If you will excuse me,” she said to their mother and Aunt Gardiner.

“Do let her wear your hat, Jane,” Mrs. Bennet called after her as Jane left, but she gave no indication of having heard.

Elizabeth returned her attention to the game her cousins had invented, which involved moving pinecones along paths

made of ribbons.

“When I grow up, I will take any hat of yours I like,” Frances said to Madeline.

“You will not,” Madeline cried. “Mama won’t let you.”

“She will.”

Their brothers watched the exchange with wide eyes.

Not wanting a repeat of her sisters’ behavior, Elizabeth said, “When you grow up, and now, you will both be kind and polite to each other, as Jane and I are, so you can be the best of friends.”

“Yes, Cousin Lizzy,” the girls chorused and resumed moving pinecones.

A short time later the clattering returned. Elizabeth looked up to see Kitty and Lydia come down the steps, Lydia wearing Jane’s new hat.

Dismayed, Elizabeth called, “Lydia, why are you wearing that?”

Elizabeth’s youngest sister came to the doorway. “Jane said I could.”

Elizabeth looked her skepticism at her.

“She did,” Kitty said. “Well, first she said Lydia could not, but then I tried to take your cloak because it is much warmer than mine, and Jane grabbed it from me, and her face became very strange, and she told us to take the hat and get out.” Kitty added a shrug to convey her lack of further understanding.

“My cloak?” Elizabeth repeated, her mind going to Mr. Darcy’s letter.

“Elizabeth, dear, are you well?” Aunt Gardiner asked.

“Certainly, but I must check on Jane.” Elizabeth turned to her young cousins, who observed everything with avid interest. “My apologies. I will finish the game with you later.”

“I get Lizzy’s pinecones,” Frances said.

That started a new argument between the siblings, which Elizabeth ignored as she went to find Jane.

She opened the bedroom door to the sight of her sister seated on the bed, Elizabeth's cloak in her lap, reading Mr. Darcy's letter. At the sound of Elizabeth entering, Jane looked up with stricken eyes.

"Oh Lizzy, how could you?"

"How could *I*?" Elizabeth crossed to Jane and snatched the letter from her. "That is mine."

"I cannot believe you have been corresponding with him, and in secret. Can you not see that his story is no more believable than Mr. Wickham's?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "We are not corresponding. He wrote me a letter. But it would not matter if we were because Mr. Darcy is telling the truth. If you doubt me, you can ask Papa."

"Papa knows about this?" Jane gestured to the letter.

"He knows about Mr. Darcy," Elizabeth hedged.

Jane looked down, thoughtful. Finally, she raised her gaze to meet Elizabeth's. "I do not want to see you hurt," she said softly.

The worry on Jane's face dispelled Elizabeth's annoyance. She dropped to the bed to sit beside her sister. "I know, and I do not believe I will be. At least, I am in no more risk of being hurt by Mr. Darcy than you are of being hurt by Mr. Bingley, that being the usual amount of risk we all face when falling in love."

"You love him?" Jane repeated, her worry returning twofold.

"I do," Elizabeth said with quiet firmness.

Jane fell silent again, then reached to take one of Elizabeth's hands. "Then I truly hope he is the man you think he is, and that he cares for you as well."

“Thank you.” Elizabeth said and hugged her sister. Letting Jane go, she folded Mr. Darcy’s letter. “This is going in my writing box.” With a pretense of sternness, Elizabeth added, “And you are fixing that seam.”

Jane smiled. “I will.”

“Very well. Then let us ready for dinner.”

Later, when Elizabeth came down dressed for dinner, she found a surprisingly quiet house. Everyone was now above stairs preparing for Christmas dinner, and the staff were in the back of the house doing the same. The Phillips and Mary, who would be accompanied by Mr. Denny, had yet to arrive. Nor was Mrs. Hurst there yet, but she would be soon, for they would not permit her to spend Christmas alone. Hence, Elizabeth found she stood in a silent entrance hall.

Should she go back up to ask if anyone required assistance? Or enjoy this rare moment? In silence, she would undoubtedly find memories of Mr. Darcy’s kiss. Perhaps not an appropriate reminiscence but one she could hardly avoid, and did not wish to.

Elizabeth smiled. Silence it was.

A knock sounded and she sighed, but her good humor quickly returned. Some moments, apparently, were more fleeting than others. Knowing the staff were busy preparing for dinner and expecting either the Phillips or Mrs. Hurst, Elizabeth opened the door.

A well-heeled gentleman stood before her, vaguely familiar but unrecognized. At his side was a compact, upright woman with an assertive mien. Hessians peeked from beneath her skirt.

The woman looked Elizabeth up and down. “Unconventional beauty. Intelligent eyes.”

The man nodded his agreement.

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, uncertain how to take such an assessment. She squared her shoulders, ready to demand an explanation for the two appearing on their doorstep, then noted a line of carriages in the drive, each more magnificent than the

last. "I am afraid you have missed the Prince Regent's ball by about twenty-five miles."

"Witty, too," the man observed.

The woman smiled at Elizabeth. "You must be Miss Elizabeth Bennet."

"I cannot deny it." She scanned the carriages again, taking in the Hursts' at the end of the queue. "Have you all come from Netherfield Park?"

"That was our previous stop, yes," the gentleman said. "From which we were directed here."

"But why?" Elizabeth asked, bewildered. At the end of the drive, the Phillips' carriage trundled up, looking decidedly out of place with so many grand conveyances.

The woman bowed. "I am Miss Anne de Bourgh and this is my cousin, Colonel Fitzwilliam."

"Miss de Bourgh?" Was she, then, the cousin Mr. Darcy was meant to marry? Had she come with accusations for Elizabeth? Mr. Darcy may have reconciled with his father but what about this woman, who had expected his hand?

"Yes," Miss de Bourgh said affably. "Of Rosings."

"Mr. Darcy is not here." And if Miss de Bourgh had come in some attempt to claim him, Elizabeth would not be cowed by her surety or wealth.

"Oh, we know that." Miss de Bourgh waved that off. "As Richard said, we went first to Netherfield Park, where we made the acquaintance of Mrs. Hurst and learned that Darcy has gone haring off after Wickham rather than spend Christmas with you as any sensible man would."

Taking that as criticism, Elizabeth stiffened. "Mr. Darcy is doing as his principles dictate."

"Principles?" Miss de Bourgh's eyes went wide. "You two are perfect for one another."

Uncertain if she was being mocked, Elizabeth decided plain speech was in order. "Miss de Bourgh, Colonel



Fitzwilliam, it is pleasant to meet any relations of Mr. Darcy's, but may I inquire as to your purpose in arriving on our doorstep?"

Miss de Bourgh gestured to the line of carriages. "We hoped to have Christmas dinner with you."

Elizabeth raised her eyebrows at the woman's forwardness. "Who is we?"

"The colonel and myself. My father, Sir Lewis de Bourgh. Mr. George Darcy and Miss Georgiana Darcy. Oh, and the Earl of Matlock. That ridiculously large carriage with the team of six is his."

Elizabeth stared at her, uncertain what to say to that.

"Do not worry," Colonel Fitzwilliam added. "Mrs. Hurst has already agreed to put us all up at Netherfield. We do not intend to impose on you that greatly."

"Elizabeth, why are you standing in the doorway letting in the winter air?" her mother's voice called behind her. "If the Phillips are here, let them—" Mrs. Bennet broke off as she came to stand with Elizabeth. "What is all this?"

"Mama, this is Miss Anne de Bourgh and Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam." Elizabeth knew her voice came out a touch high, incredulousness coloring her tone. "It seems they, Sir Lewis de Bourgh, Mr. and Miss Darcy, and the Earl of Matlock, would like to join us for Christmas dinner."

Mrs. Bennet gaped at them. "T-the Earl of Matlock? Why?"

"We would like to come to know the woman who has captured our cousin's heart," Colonel Fitzwilliam stated.

"And we are here, and have nowhere else to enjoy Christmas dinner," Miss de Bourgh put in.

Elizabeth stifled a slightly manic laugh at that.

"Who has stolen whose heart?" Mrs. Bennet looked about, as if she might spot another person.

"Your lovely daughter, Miss Elizabeth, has captured our cousin, Mr. Darcy's," Colonel Fitzwilliam clarified.

Mrs. Bennet turned a frown on Elizabeth. “Mr. Darcy? Is that not the bookseller Jane wrote to warn me about? I will not have you marry a shopkeeper. You will ruin your sisters’ chances with Mr. Bingley’s acquaintances.”

Miss de Bourgh scoured Elizabeth’s mother with the same assessing look she’d leveled on Elizabeth. “We should add, Mrs. Bennet, that Mr. Darcy is also heir to a rather large estate and is a very wealthy man.”

Mrs. Bennet looked from Miss de Bourgh to Colonel Fitzwilliam, considering, then raised her gaze to the row of expensive carriages. At the far end, Mary stuck her head out of the window of the Phillips’ conveyance, confusion on her face.

“The estate he is heir to brings in ten thousand a year,” Miss de Bourgh added.

Mrs. Bennet rocked backward as if hit by a fierce wind. “Ten thousand a year? And he wants Elizabeth?”

Did her mother need to sound quite so amazed? Not that Elizabeth wasn’t. She could hardly comprehend such a sum, or associate it with Mr. Darcy and his worn coats.

“So we may join you for dinner now?” Miss de Bourgh asked sweetly.

Elizabeth cast her a quick, amused look. Miss de Bourgh winked.

“Yes.” Mrs. Bennet backed into the entryway. “Yes, do come in. We will add a table to the parlor. Oh, but who will sit with the earl? Come in. I must get to the kitchen.” She whirled, raised her voice and called, “Mrs. Hill? Mrs. Hill, I need you,” then hurried deeper into the house.

Elizabeth stepped back, throwing the door wide. “Well then. You had all best come in.” And she had best send a bottle and sweets out to the stable. Their staff had expected two carriages and two teams, the Phillips’ and the Hurst’s. Now the number had more than doubled.

A predictable amount of chaos ensued as their six extra guests were shown in and Elizabeth’s relations streamed down the stairs. For once, Mr. Bennet seemed as flummoxed as his

wife, bowing awkwardly to each gentleman he was introduced to. An effort was made to relegate the children back above stairs, their status as guests revoked by the need for space, but the earl said he would not hear of it, and so they remained.

Then it came out that Colonel Fitzwilliam was the earl's son, though not his heir, earning him the dubious honor of sitting between Kitty and Lydia, and of the bulk of Mrs. Bennet's attention. As Colonel Fitzwilliam seemed quite capable, Elizabeth did not intervene. She only hoped her sisters would not be too demanding.

Dinner was a rather informal affair, there not being enough room at any one table, or even in one room, for all the guests. Elizabeth made no effort to claim a seat. Nor, in truth, to eat much. There was far too much to see and hear to be distracted by the mundane act of dining.

In no time, their three most august guests had put Mr. Bennet, Mr. Gardiner, and Mr. Phillips at ease. Sir Lewis, the earl, and Mr. George Darcy turned out to be rather boisterous when it came to Christmas toasts and celebrating, and the six eldest gentlemen took up position in the front parlor.

For Elizabeth's female relations, the dinner did not differ far from normal, except that Kitty and Lydia had the colonel to torment, and Jane seemed rather discomfited. A state which suggested to Elizabeth that her sister still hadn't believed her about Mr. Darcy. Mrs. Hurst appeared content to sit quietly among Elizabeth's chatting mother and aunts, and Mary and Mr. Denny seemed pleased to corral the children into various games. This, Miss Darcy watched and could occasionally be drawn to participate in. All in all, the atmosphere was festive and familial and not at all filled with the stiff awkwardness Elizabeth had feared.

"They seem to be getting on well," a voice said beside Elizabeth as she watched the six older gentlemen swapping tales and guffawing.

She turned to take in Miss de Bourgh, a glass of brandy in hand. "Yes, they do."

Miss de Bourgh waggled her glass. "It doesn't hurt that Uncle Matlock brought this."

Elizabeth adopted a look of innocence. "Who would imagine a peer would travel with illicit French spirits on hand."

Miss de Bourgh snorted. "Insofar as I have ever been able to ascertain, the higher a man's rank, the more laws he has broken."

A sudden worry went through Elizabeth. Would her considerate, thoughtful bookseller become more like his three elder relations now that his fortune was restored? "But not Mr. Darcy."

Miss de Bourgh cast her a quick look. "You mean Fitz?" She shook her head. "It's all a person can do to browbeat him into having any fun, what with his vaunted principles. Did he ever tell you about the orangery and the rooks?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "I am afraid we have had few conversations, and those mainly about books." She fought down a blush as she recalled what else they had shared. "In truth, this is all a bit overwhelming. We do not even have an understanding."

"No?" Miss de Bourgh's eyebrows shot up and she gestured to the gathering of gentlemen. "He told that lot that he is going to marry you, if you will have him."

Elizabeth stared at her, stunned.

Colonel Fitzwilliam, who at that moment passed by with a bottle of brandy in hand, swung around to look at them. "Anne, what have you said to Miss Elizabeth?"

Miss de Bourgh shrugged. "I believe I have just proposed to her on Darcy's behalf."

The colonel nodded. "You have always been one to give him a hearty push in the right direction."

"Are you drinking that brandy or dancing with it, Richard?" the earl called across the room.

Colonel Fitzwilliam saluted Elizabeth and Miss de Bourgh with the bottle and continued on his way.

“I am sorry,” Miss de Bourgh said, a touch sheepish. “I tend to be a bit blunt.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “No. It...well, it is not as if it is unwelcome news.” She looked about the crowded room. “I do believe I require some air, however.”

“Certainly.” Miss de Bourgh dipped her head, a gesture Elizabeth returned before slipping away.

Elizabeth went out into the garden, the festivities dimmed by Longbourn’s stout walls. A shawl about her shoulders, she walked the familiar paths, well illuminated by the nearly full moon, and wondered if Mr. Darcy truly meant to offer for her. A part of her labeled it too soon for an engagement, but a much greater part rejoiced.

How long she meandered, her thoughts on Mr. Darcy, she did not know, but eventually, cold through, she turned back for the house. She’d nearly reached the garden door when a tall, upright figure strode around the side of the building, from the direction of the drive.

“Mr. Darcy,” Elizabeth cried, the night’s chill vanishing.

She rushed to meet him, and he her. Coming together they halted on the garden path, moonlight bright around them. Elizabeth looked up at him, suddenly at a loss for what to say.

“I was worried when you were not within,” he said.

“I wanted air.”

“Yes.” He grimaced. “Anne told me what she said. She is not one for nuance.”

Worry shot through Elizabeth. “Was she wrong?”

“She spoke out of turn, but not inaccurately.”

Joy replaced all other emotions but as Elizabeth studied him, taking in his subdued mien, her happiness dimmed. She reached out a hand. “You are troubled.”

Mr. Darcy caught up her fingers, his strong and warm. “You are frozen through. We should go inside.”

She shook her head. “Not yet. Tell me what troubles you.”

“At least take my jacket.” He shrugged free of the garment, fully revealing his white lawn shirt and waistcoat, and held it out to her.

Elizabeth permitted him to drape his coat over her shoulders, the garment warm and smelling faintly of soap and sandalwood. She fought down a blush and reiterated, “Will you tell me what is troubling you?”

He nodded and offered his arm.

Feeling quite scandalous at twining arms with a man in such a state of undress, but unquestionably safe with Mr. Darcy, Elizabeth permitted him to set a course away from the house once more.

They walked in silence, Mr. Darcy studying the garden about them. Elizabeth longed to ask if they had found Mr. Wickham. If Miss Bingley was well. If Mr. Bingley and Mr. Hurst had returned with Mr. Darcy. But in view of his somber mood, she kept her peace.

“We secured Mr. Wickham and have handed him over to your local magistrate for safe keeping until he can be transported back to Derbyshire,” Mr. Darcy stated.

Elizabeth cast him a quick look, finding his expression distant and cold. “And Miss Bingley?”

“She is by all measures compromised. Wickham will be made to marry her before departing for his trial.”

“Trial?”

“For attempting to kidnap my sister, for his role in my father’s recent ailment, and for shooting a man.”

Elizabeth digested that. “I did not realize his attempt to abscond with your sister had progressed to the level of kidnapping.” She shook her head. “All three charges sound quite dire. Poor Miss Bingley.”

Mr. Darcy nodded. "I wish I could have arrived sooner, to prevent this outcome."

She shook her head, recalling the strange, silent disagreement between Miss Bingley and Mr. Wickham the day he'd come to Longbourn. "I am not certain you could have. He had her completely convinced. She ran off with him voluntarily."

"Perhaps you are correct."

Elizabeth wished he sounded more certain. Hoping time would be a better cure than any argument she might make in this moment, she sought about for a different topic. "May I assume that Mr. Hurst and Mr. Bingley are within?"

"They are."

"Your relations seem..." Loud. Boisterous. Affable, if domineering. "Accepting of mine. I did not think such august men would be so pleased to sit in our parlor telling stories with my father and uncles while children ran about."

Mr. Darcy smiled slightly. "They used to hold such large, grand Christmas gatherings."

"What happened?"

He shrugged. "Many of them grew too old, or left us too soon. I suppose the onus is on my generation now. We are meant to refill the halls of Pemberley, Rosings, and Matlock with a new gaggle of in-laws and children."

"Oh?" Elizabeth ventured when he stopped speaking.

He turned to her, halting their progress through the garden. "Anne spoke very decidedly out of turn. It is not my family's place to decide who I will marry." Tension rippled along his jaw.

Elizabeth's heart sank. Surely, he would not be so stubborn as to refuse to wed her because his cousin made a precipitous remark? That truly would prove him mad.

He caught both of her hands in his. "But while I resent the continued interference of my relations, she was not wrong in what she said. I told my father and uncles that I will marry you

if you will have me.” His gaze searched hers. “All that remains to be discovered is whether you will.”

Elizabeth’s heart lodged firmly in her throat.

Her hands clasped in his light, warm grip, he dropped to a knee on the pebble-strewn path. “Elizabeth, you have filled my every sense since the moment I first saw you. Your voice, your visage, are my constant companions, awake or asleep. Please free me from this world of endless longing and hope. Bring me into one of warmth, love, and companionship. I entreat you, be my wife?”

“I can think of nothing I want more,” she said, her voice nearly choked with tears.

He sprang to his feet and gathered her to him. “Tell me those tears are joyous.”

“They assuredly are,” she murmured, and kissed him.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Darcy strode through Netherfield Park, seeking his father. George Darcy hadn't been in the sitting room he and Darcy's uncles had claimed as their own. Nor was he in his chambers. In fact, no one had seen him since the church, where they had all grimly watched Wickham and Miss Bingley marry.

There was no celebratory breakfast. Everyone simply filed back to Netherfield in a long line of carriages, the atmosphere more that of a funeral procession. Darcy had changed out of the suit he'd worn to stand up with Wickham, half inclined to ask Patrick to burn the garment, new as it was. Darcy was not certain he ever wished to don it again.

Darcy's relations would finally depart Netherfield and cease imposing on Mr. Bingley. For over three weeks, the Fitzwilliams, Darcys, and de Bourghs had settled into Meryton society; Darcy and his father to see Wickham wed. Darcy's uncles, Richard, and Anne to ensure he returned to Derbyshire to be tried, and undoubtedly sentenced to hang.

Bingley had been a gracious host the entirety of the time, the Hursts remaining to assist him as Miss Bingley had not been up to managing his household. Darcy truly appreciated the kind, easy nature of his new friend, for he now deemed Bingley such. Not that Bingley had been at home as much as a host might, for he and Darcy almost daily visited the Bennets, with Georgiana, Anne, and Richard accompanying them.

The following Sunday, the banns would be read for the first time not only for Darcy and Elizabeth, but for Bingley and Miss Bennet as well. Then, a little over three weeks hence, both couples would marry in a joint wedding. Darcy heartily approved, certain that in Bingley he had discovered a lifelong friend such as his father had in his uncles. He silently vowed, however, that no matter what children either couple might be blessed with, no pacts would be made about his offsprings' futures when it came to matrimony.

Darcy could admit, as staid as he normally was, he wished he and Elizabeth did not have to wait so long to marry. But he would not have any part of his union with her overlap with the weeks leading up to Wickham's nuptials. Or with his trial and sentencing.

Darcy finally located his father in an obscure corner of the vast garden, Netherfield's warranted claim to distinction. George Darcy sat on a bench from which the snow had been cleared, staring down at a miniature he held cupped in his gloved hands. Darcy did not need to look to know the small painting was of Wickham as a boy. Quietly, he settled onto the bench beside his father.

"He was such a joy as a child," George Darcy said softly. "It was difficult not to spoil him. Your mother always warned me I was. She said I was worse than a great lady pampering her pug."

"Pampering her pug?" Darcy repeated. "That is oddly specific."

"She had a distant relation who doted on hers."

"Ah." Darcy sat, uncertain what more to say. He had a thought. The shadow of an idea, or perhaps a suspicion, or a hope. For the first time in years, Darcy sought the counsel of his father.

George Darcy let out a long sigh. "I should have prevented this."

"I do not see how you could have," Darcy disagreed. "But if I had been less stubborn, maybe I—"

"Nonsense," his father cut in sharply. He cast Darcy a hard, fierce look. "You were right to be stubborn. When I see you with your Miss Elizabeth, and the way she looks at you and you look at her..." He shook his head. "I have been a fool. Why did I devote my resolve to the notion of you having Rosings when I should have dedicated it to encouraging you to find the same sort of love I shared with your mother?"

Darcy looked away, across the snow. "Perhaps because Anne and I wedding was what Mother wanted?" *Or perhaps*

*because she left us too soon*, he added silently.

“Perhaps.” George Darcy stared down at the miniature again. “Tomorrow he will start the journey to Derbyshire, in chains. His trial is set for Friday.”

“He will be found guilty,” Darcy stated.

His father nodded. “I know.”

Darcy cleared his throat. “Many an English criminal has disappeared into the Americas.”

His father cast him a quick, assessing look, then shook his head. “What you are hinting at would be wrong. Besides which, your uncles and I took a vote.”

Sardonically, Darcy realized that his father respected the outcome of that vote more than the law of the land. “You are correct, certainly.”

“I am,” George Darcy said stoutly.

“Then why did you bring in your man from London to go over the contract Mr. Phillips drew up to protect any and all assets Miss Bingley has or ever may have from being claimed by Wickham?”

His father looked away. Standing, he shoved the miniature in his coat pocket. “One can never be too cautious. I am cold. I am going in.” Turning, he tromped away.

Darcy watched him go, uncertain what he had said to so fully offend.

The day passed slowly and, for once, Darcy did not call on Elizabeth. Instead, he went to the local gaol to visit Wickham. His onetime companion ignored him, but Darcy remained for several hours, regardless. Sometimes he sat in silence, but others he read from *Richard III*, the first half of which was Wickham’s favorite of Shakespeare’s works. He did not care as much for the end, but Darcy didn’t imagine that would be an issue.

Finally, Darcy closed the book and stood to leave. Wickham lay on his cot on the other side of the bars, his hands

folded beneath his head and his eyes shut, but Darcy knew he was not asleep.

“Darcy.”

Wickham’s voice halted him, and he turned back.

His eyes open now but his gaze fixed on the ceiling, Wickham said simply, “Thank you.”

“You are welcome.” With nothing more to say, Darcy left.

Dinner was a somber affair as well, with the new Mrs. Wickham keeping to her room and her relations quiet. Matlock and Sir Lewis were their usual selves, as were Anne and Richard, but even they seemed to sense the disquiet and behaved with restraint. They all went to bed early and Darcy was happy to have the day over.

He started awake some time later, a hand shaking his shoulder. Blinking, he discovered Anne, fully clothed and holding a shuttered lantern.

“Get up,” she ordered.

Darcy stared at her, the dim light and grogginess of sleep combining in a disorienting way with childhood memories of Anne doing the very same thing.

But they were not children and her expression was more grim than mischievous. He sat up. “What is wrong?”

“Your father sneaked out. He met up with a group of men and they freed Wickham.”

Darcy stared at her. Surely, he was still asleep?

“Get up,” she repeated. She crossed to his wardrobe and began rummaging, coming out with a pair of trousers. “Come on. I’m certain they will make for the coast. We have to stop them.”

He took in Anne’s garb, that of a young man, and her muddied boots. “Where have you been?”

“I told you. Following your father.”

Darcy flung back the covers, his mind reeling. “Turn away.”

Anne rolled her eyes but complied as he went to his wardrobe and pulled on clothing, not troubling with a waistcoat or cravat.

“This isn’t a fashion show,” Anne stated from where she stood facing the wall. “Hurry up.”

“Should we rouse Richard?”

“I already did. He’s readying horses.”

Darcy followed her from the room, still trying to comprehend her news. His father had sneaked out and freed Wickham? Would he truly go against Matlock and Sir Lewis that way? Against English law, as well. Why, his father was now a criminal.

He and Anne hurried down the hall to the staircase, Darcy earning several glares for his inability to walk as silently as she did. As they started down the steps she glanced back and hissed, “Why not play the bagpipes while you’re at it.”

“Not all of us spend our time sneaking about,” he cast back.

They reached the bottom and started for the back of the house, only to come up short as Richard and Darcy’s father came down the hall, Richard with a lantern.

George Darcy sighted them and gestured left, to an open parlor.

Darcy exchanged a look with Anne, shrugged, and followed his father and Richard in.

“What is the meaning of this?” Anne demanded as soon as she’d closed the parlor door behind them. She unshuttered her lantern, filling the room with flickering light.

“I met Richard on his way to the stable as I was returning,” Darcy’s father said calmly.

Anne glared at him. “You freed Wickham. Uncle Darcy, how could you?”

“In fact, I oversaw his freeing, and him being bound and placed in a wagon for transport to the coast. I did not, in actuality, free him myself.”

“I am certain you paid the men who did.”

Darcy looked from his cousin to his father and back. “Father, what have you done?”

Some of the determination left George Darcy’s face. “I could not let him hang. I have arranged for him to be taken to the Americas. He will do well there, I believe.”

“My father and Uncle Matlock will never forgive you for this,” Anne stated.

“They will never have confirmation that I have done this. They will suspect, but they will not know for certain, and so our relationship will continue unchanged.”

“Not have confirmation?” Anne sounded incredulous. “I will tell them.”

“No. You will not.”

Anne glowered at Darcy’s father. George Darcy glowered back.

Darcy exchanged a look with Richard, then turned to Anne. “Perhaps, this one time, we could ignore our principles and let this go.”

She whirled to him. “Could we? What of Mrs. Wickham? So long as he is alive somewhere, she will be unable to remarry. Would you consign her to a life alone simply to spare a man who so cruelly tricked her?”

Darcy had not considered that.

“In fact, the very next time a ship bound from England sinks, I will have a man look into it and discover paperwork confirming that George was onboard and is now dead,” Darcy’s father said softly. “The documents already exist. They wait only for the ship’s name and the date. So, you see, Mrs. Wickham will be widowed soon enough, and without the stain of her husband’s public trial and hanging on her.”

Anne stared at him, her fists balled.

Darcy could see her mind whirling, seeking more arguments. He lightly touched her shoulder. "Anne. Let it go."

She turned to Richard. "What are your thoughts?"

"That going after Wickham and the dozen men hired to escort him and see that he sails from these shores seems like a great deal of work to go to in the dead of night."

Anne threw up her hands. "I cannot believe that the lot of you are willing to let him get away with all he has done."

"He is not truly getting away with anything," Darcy said quietly. "He has been removed from everyone and everything he has ever known. He will never again set eyes on the places and people he cares about most."

"Or be able to keep taking Uncle Darcy's money," Richard added wryly.

Anne let out a huff, looking about at them. "This is truly what you want, Uncle Darcy?"

Darcy's father nodded. "It is."

"Fitz?"

Out of respect for Anne and for those Wickham had wronged other than him and his father, Darcy gave her question careful consideration. Finally, he nodded. "I do not believe it was right to help him go free, but I also do not have it in my heart to bring him back to die for his crimes."

"I do," Anne muttered but her voice had lost its vehemence. She looked around again. "And I must keep this from my father?"

"As I said, he and Matlock will suspect me," George Darcy replied. "But so long as they can leave their suspicions unconfirmed, we can all remain as we are. I am afraid that if you do tell him, we can expect approximately seven years of feuding. I would rather avoid that."

Anne nodded. "Father can be stubborn when he feels he has been wronged." She let out a long, slow breath. "Very

well. This will remain between us, but you make sure Wickham drowns soon. It's not right to leave Mrs. Wickham married to such a cad."

"I will," George Darcy promised.

Still not appearing pleased, Anne shuttered her lantern and led the way from the parlor. They all returned to their rooms as quietly as they could, though Darcy had no thought that his uncles weren't aware of all the activity. He lay in bed for some time thinking about the law, and Wickham, and a father's love. Finally, he turned his thoughts firmly to Elizabeth and their upcoming union. A smile on his face, Darcy went to sleep.



## EPILOGUE



Arm in arm and followed by a footman, Mrs. Darcy walked through the great market in Cheapside with her husband. It was their first trip to town since their wedding a month ago, that month having been spent at Pemberley. Elizabeth had never seen so lovely an estate, nor a house so well situated, and she'd fallen in love with Mr. Darcy's home, her new home, immediately.

But grand as Pemberley was, and as much as her new father and sister-by-marriage attempted not to infringe on their newly wedded state, Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam had decided some time at Darcy House was in order. Even with the Season drawing more and more people back to London, and the *ton's* predictable obsession with Fitzwilliam's return, Elizabeth had already found that they were better able to enjoy each other's company secluded at Darcy House than while living with her new relations.

Today, however, they were on a particular mission. They followed Fitzwilliam's erstwhile path through the market, collecting his once usual purchases while paying ridiculous sums to stunned shopkeepers. His gift to those who had shown him kindness when they thought him only a bookseller.

As they passed a snuff shop, Fitzwilliam halted for a moment, frowned, and then returned to walking.

On his arm, Elizabeth looked a question at him, for he did not partake of snuff.

"For a moment, I thought I sighted Mrs. Younge," he said quietly.

Elizabeth sought through recounted tales of before her time at Pemberley. "She was Georgiana's companion?"

"She was."

Neither mentioned, in this crowded place, that Mrs. Younge had also joined in Wickham's attempt to abduct Georgiana.

“And she and that nurse were permitted to go,” Elizabeth silently added, *without charges being brought*.

“Yes. In exchange for information.” Fitzwilliam looked in the direction in which Darcy House lay. “Mrs. Younge named every fellow conspirator both at Pemberley and Darcy House, and after questioning, all who were found guilty were let go without severance or reference. She appeared to be quite honest in her pursuit not to be held accountable for her role.”

“You did not keep track of where she went?”

He smiled slightly. “You know me better than that.”

Elizabeth squeezed his arm, very pleased that she did. “Very well. Where did they go?”

“Mrs. Younge now manages a boarding house not far from here, and Nurse Bell signed on for duty on the Continent.”

“That is very brave of her,” Elizabeth allowed.

“Yes. I believe she feels a great deal of guilt for her part in my father’s ailment of last autumn.”

“He seems perfectly hale now, even if he insists on keeping Nurse Parker on.”

“He enjoys her company.”

“Hm,” Elizabeth murmured, deciding there would be a different time for dissecting that. They went next to a tea merchant, where her husband purchased a lovely porcelain canister for her and paid the confused and grateful merchant ten times the value.

Back outside, she sighted a display of lace in the next window. “I doubt that is a shop you once frequented, but may we go in? You know I have yet to find a gift for Mary and her wedding is only weeks away.”

Fitzwilliam dipped his head, seeming to have no qualms about shopping with his wife. Elizabeth suspected it pleased him greatly to be able to spend as he would again, rather than purchasing only what he most needed.

They looked about until she found a lovely table runner. She ran gloved fingers over it, taking in the artful design. "Do you believe this would be too fine for Mary and Mr. Denny?" Elizabeth did not want to purchase her sister a gift she would never have occasion to use.

"I thought you had decided to give her several collections of sheet music?"

"I had, but I learned she will not have a pianoforte, so doing so seemed cruel."

"Perhaps one of those carved writing boxes we saw?" Fitzwilliam suggested. "It would please me to further support the gentleman who supplied me with paper and ink, and I have already been considering going back to purchase one for Mrs. Reynolds."

"She will say it is too much," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"Miss Mary or Mrs. Reynolds?"

Elizabeth looked about the lace shop. Fitzwilliam was correct. A writing box would be a much better gift for Mary. "I meant Mrs. Reynolds. You already doubled her pension."

"That is not the same as a gift."

"I know, and a writing box is a lovely idea, for both Mary and Mrs. Reynolds. Perhaps even for Edwards and Patrick Sr. and Jr. as well." Fitzwilliam had also added to the accounts his father had set up for them, explaining their loyalty and perseverance to Elizabeth even though she required no assurance other than her husband's say-so that they deserved the funds. She would never begrudge their dedicated staff a penny. "Come. We are nearly to the Watsons' booth. We will go there and then circle back."

Eager for what she and Fitzwilliam had planned, Elizabeth ushered him out of the lace shop. They wended their way through the open stalls until they reached the Watsons. Mrs. Watson settled up with a customer and turned to them. Her eyes flew wide.

"Why, Mr. Darcy," she exclaimed. "And you found him, did you, Miss Elizabeth?" She looked them up and down

keenly. "Although I daresay it must be Mrs. Darcy now, mustn't it?"

"It is." Elizabeth could not suppress a wide smile. She adored being addressed as Mrs. Darcy.

"Well, this is a cause for celebration." Mrs. Watson craned her neck, looking over her shoulder. "Mr. Watson, have you fresh sweet buns ready? Mr. Darcy is back, and he married that bonny miss who was searching for him, right enough."

"Did he?" Mr. Watson appeared from the back of their stall, wiping flour-coated hands on his apron. "Well, that is something. And what a splendid couple you make. The buns are nearly ready."

"We'll make a gift of them to you." Mrs. Watson beamed at that.

"That will not be necessary," Fitzwilliam protested. "I am happy to pay for them."

Mrs. Watson shook her head. "Not for a wedding gift you will not, and don't think I don't know how much you enjoy them." She turned to Elizabeth. "Always bought a couple whenever he had aught to celebrate."

Fitzwilliam's eyebrows shot up. "How did you know that?"

Mrs. Watson shrugged. "You only bought them when you were in an extra fine mood, lad."

Elizabeth turned her smile on her husband and gave his arm a squeeze, then turned back to the Watsons. "Mr. Watson, did you mean it, when you said you would rather be a bookseller?"

Mr. Watson blinked at her.

"Oh, he did," Mrs. Watson answered for him. "Had to hear about it for days, didn't I? And now, with our daughter and her man wanting to take over this stall, have to hear about it all the time. How much easier the life of a shop owner is than that of a baker and how we should retire from baking, but who can afford to do that, I ask you?" She shook her head.

"We could if we returned to Scotland," Mr. Watson said.

Mrs. Watson turned a glare on him. “And never see our grandbabies?”

Glee filled Elizabeth.

Fitzwilliam cleared his throat. “Yes, well, that is what I have come to speak with you about.”

Mrs. Watson narrowed her eyes at him. “Do you know, Mr. Darcy, you sound much more the lord than usual, and that is a very fine suit.” She wagged a finger at him. “You haven’t gone and spent all your lovely wife’s dowry on clothing just to impress, have you? I thought you a great deal more reasonable than that.”

Mr. Watson scrutinized him as well. “Mrs. Watson is right, lad. We are right pleased with you coming up in the world.” He gestured to Elizabeth. “Marrying this pretty lass and all, daughter of a gentleman, I wager, but you cannae be spending so frivolously.”

“Have to save for a rainy day,” Mrs. Watson said sagely.

“Tell them,” Elizabeth urged with a laugh.

“Tell us what, lass?” Mr. Watson asked.

Fitzwilliam pulled a folded packet of papers from his pocket. “I am gifting you the bookshop and all of its contents.”

The Watsons stared at him.

After a long moment, Mr. Watson said, “I beg your pardon, lad?”

“My shop,” Fitzwilliam reiterated. “As much as I came to enjoy my time there, I am afraid I no longer have use for it. I have signed the deed over to you, which includes the building, the shop, the books, and the upper room.”

“I don’t understand.” Mrs. Watson sounded faint.

“Elizabeth told me what you said about wanting to own a bookshop, and I can think of no one I would rather give it to.”

“You are giving us a shop?” Mr. Watson reiterated.

“I am, and I also vow to patronize your establishment.” Fitzwilliam proffered the documents.

“We hope you will be very happy there,” Elizabeth said. “Although unless your daughter and her husband are as skilled as the two of you, London will miss your bread.”

“The buns,” Mr. Watson exclaimed. Whirling, he returned to the back of the shop. “They’re well. Baked to perfection,” he called.

Tentatively, Mrs. Watson accepted the papers Fitzwilliam held out. She studied them for a moment, her expression tinged with awe. “You are truly giving us this, lad?”

“I am.”

“And if you do not want a shop, you may sell it,” Elizabeth said earnestly. “We mean to make your life better, not more difficult.”

Fitzwilliam cast her a slightly grumpy look for that, but they had agreed that if they gifted the Watsons the shop, the couple must be free to do as they pleased with it.

“Sell it?” Mrs. Watson hugged the papers to her chest. “We have dreamed of owning a real shop for well-nigh thirty years, lass.” Her eyes misty, she added, “And you had best be taking some buns for free, and I won’t hear another protest about it.”

“Yes, Mrs. Watson,” Elizabeth agreed with a smile, which she turned to share with her husband.

After making plans to take the Watsons to his man to sign the paperwork the following day, Fitzwilliam handed over the keys. They left the deed with the shop’s new owners and accepted an entire basket of sweet buns as payment. Mrs. Watson thanked them through her tears, and Mr. Watson continued to stare at them as if they were quite mad.

Alone in their carriage after purchasing several quite lovely writing cases, Elizabeth set the basket of buns on the backward facing seat and moved to sit beside her husband. Fitzwilliam took up her hand and kissed the back, then slipped his arm about her.

“We did a good thing today,” Elizabeth murmured, snuggling close.

“I will miss my bookshop.”

She glanced up at him but he appeared serene and slightly thoughtful, not distressed.

“We can visit whenever you like,” she said. “You know I am always happy to find a new book.”

“I do. It is one of the many things I love about you.”

Elizabeth pulled away slightly, so she could turn to study him. “The Watsons will love the bookshop as much as you did. Perhaps more. It will be a lovely place for them to work and live.”

Fitzwilliam met her eyes. “Would you truly have married me when you thought me only a bookseller, and come to live above the shop with me?”

“Yes. I would have married you as a bookseller. I would have married you as a streetsweeper, or a lord, or a bricklayer.” She threaded her arms about his neck. “I love you, no matter what you are.”

“And I love you,” he said and, as she’d hoped, he gathered her into his arms and kissed her.



I hope you enjoyed this tale of Darcy and Elizabeth finding love. If you would like to enjoy another, this one with Darcy as master of Pemberley, try [Once Upon a Time in Pemberley](#), a story of how Darcy learns to forgive and understand himself, and to accept Elizabeth’s love.

If you would like to post your thoughts on *Mr. Darcy’s Bookshop* in the form of a review, that would be very kind of you and you can do so here: [Review on Amazon](#)

And for more about the version of Anne de Bourgh seen in *Mr. Darcy’s Bookshop*, be sure to check out this short story prequel; [The Adventures of Anne de Bourgh of Rosings](#). You

can look for more of Anne's adventures in the future and perhaps, someday, even the tale of how she ignores George Darcy's wishes and hunts down Wickham.

Thank you for reading!





## THANK YOU FOR READING!

I truly hope you enjoyed *Mr. Darcy's Bookshop*. If you had fun and want to let me know, or even if you didn't have fun and feel like sharing that, I'd love to hear about it. Let me know on:

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## ABOUT SUMMER



Summer Hanford is an author of sweet, adventure-filled Historical Romance, *Pride and Prejudice* retellings, and Epic High Fantasy, and writes her *Pride & Prejudice* Variations under Summer Hanford. She lives in the Finger Lakes Region of New York with her husband and compulsory, deliberately spoiled, cats. The newest addition to their household, an energetic setter-shepherd mix, is (still) not yet appreciated by the cats but is well loved by the humans. For more about Summer, visit [www.summerhanford.com](http://www.summerhanford.com).

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Thank you!

